

## Conversation with John Harris, 25 May 2011

I had my accident in 1964. I fell off the Big Wheel at Butlins; it was a 40 foot fall and I landed on my back across a brick wall. It broke my fall and saved my life - but it also broke my spine. They flew me direct to Stoke Mandeville. When you came onto the ward as a new patient they put you by the sister's office and as you gradually improved they moved your bed further down the ward. I remember my first night there outside the sister's office and that sister (and I cannot remember her name) sat with me all night to comfort me. I was just a scared kid, eighteen years old, and in such pain and she just wanted to reassure me and comfort me. Every couple of minutes she would adjust the two sandbags that were holding my spine in place against the bed; or she would move me or wipe my brow. I can still remember every moment of that night. And I think that you would just not get care like that now.

But it was strange place to be then. Oh, bloody hell, it was a strange regime. The main ward sister was Sister McElhinney and she just ruled the place; no one came on the ward, nothing moved, without asking her permission. When Sir Ludwig (then just Dr.) Guttmann would come round his ward rounds on a Monday everyone jumped except her. And he was pretty extraordinary too. I remember for the ward rounds, as soon as we blokes were fit enough and able to, we were expected to stand by our beds, each holding a bottle of our pee from the night before. And the first thing Guttmann would do was to sweep down the ward like a major at a military parade and inspect every man's pee. And if it was clear you were OK and if it was cloudy then you had to get back into bed. At the time I assumed that all hospitals were like this. I have seen many since and they are not. Stoke was totally unique and peculiar. And I just can't thank them enough; it was a fantastic place to be.

As a teenager I had always been into sport: I used to do gymnastics, rugby and boxing - a bit of everything. So my accident was completely devastating for me. They fixed up my body, but they couldn't fix my head. I thought I might just as well have been dead. In fact if someone had slipped me the tablet back then I think I would have taken it. It was bloody hard; as a kid I had always fought to prove myself. Now I thought blokes were no longer afraid of me and women would no longer find me attractive. It was all very tough and it took me a long time to sort myself out.

When I got out of Stoke I went home to my mum in Wales and went to pieces. For the next five years I did nothing; I just used stay in bed all day and get up in the evening and go down the pub drinking too much beer, whisky rum....Finally my mum couldn't take any more; she told me I was not a nice person; that I had got to change my ways. I was 23, with a 49 inch chest and a 39 inch waist and all I knew how to do was to drink and smoke too much.

Of course they had made me do sport as part of physiotherapy at Stoke. I was there in 1964 when the team came back from the Tokyo Games. But as far as I was concerned archery wasn't a fucking sport. I never related sport to firing a bow and arrow or indeed to being in a wheelchair. Anyway, five years on I needed to do something and my mate Tony says, "Why not come down the gym with me and do some training?" Of course it was a big deal going down the gym in a wheelchair; loads of people there were looking at you. But I stuck with the weight training, stopped smoking, stopped drinking, I started to like myself again. Anyway there were a bunch of body builders in one bit of the gym, this was at the Cwmbran Stadium, and one of them from time to time would come over and offer advice, tell me if I wasn't doing a lift correctly. He was a bit careful first of all, worried about me taking offence, but I said, no, I'm happy to take all the help I can get; I wanted to learn. So then Brian

Taylor, for that was his name, said why didn't I come across with the body builders and train with them. And it was great; I was part of their little gang and I used to bench press with these guys; I still remember the first time I pressed 100 kilos! And they did all sorts of ingenious things to get around my disability; for example doing decline bench presses where I would have my feet strapped to the ladder of an abdominal board to hold me in place.

From that I went on to join the Welsh Para and Tetra Sports Association and I took part in my first National Games back at Stoke Mandeville in the early 1970s. By that time my main sport was discus. I remember seeing this much older guy I didn't know at that games; he had a moustache and was smoking a cigar! I was a bag of nerves, but then I threw 22 metres in the first round and I was convinced I was going to beat this old guy. And when he came to throw he wheeled himself past me with his cigar in one hand, put it into the spokes of his wheelchair, really casual, while he took his throw; and he threw 26 metres. I found out he was Graham Smout, the former European [champion]. That incident taught me so much. First of all I couldn't work out what made him special, this old man with a moustache; he didn't look a strong man. It taught me a bit about the psychology of sport and about not being judgemental.

In 1979 I was selected for the UK team in the Super Challenge in Canada; I was one of 4 from the UK. In the field events there were 50 competitors and I came 49<sup>th</sup>; I was rubbish. Then in 1980 I went to the Olympics at Arnhem (because Moscow refused to host the Paralympics alongside the Olympics). I came 6<sup>th</sup> there, but my mate got silver. I came home from that and I cut out a circle of gold foil and stuck it on the wall; that was my substitute medal. Now I had to get a real one.

All through the 1970s I went back to Stoke Mandeville for the annual National Games and every other year I think it was they held the "Inters", the International Games, there too. Back then all the sports came together to compete for a week. Nowadays it's more specialised, each sport is separate, and maybe we have lost something in that. Anyway, each year Stoke Mandeville was our pilgrimage. We would travel up in cars, the Welsh team, ready to thrash our mates from Yorkshire or wherever.

For the next three years I just kept my head down and trained like a banshee; I got better and better. Then there was all the uncertainty about the 1984 Olympics when the USA cancelled the Paralympics. I was completely shattered by that; I seriously thought about packing it in and retiring from wheelchair sport. Stoke Mandeville offering to host the games at the last moment felt like a poor substitute. It was partly the British coach Roger Ellis who talked me round and convinced me that I should still take part. But I was absolutely adamant that I was only going to compete in the discus. At that time all athletes were still supposed to offer several sports – and I used to do javelin and shot as well but I was really no good at them in comparison. And Roger agreed with me and said yes, do that; just train for the discus.

OK, Stoke Mandeville might not have been the best place in the world. Of course there were larger and better-equipped stadiums, but in the end when it came to finding a way of staging the Paralympics at such short notice, this was the only place in the world that could have done it. It was the only place with the staff, the networks, the attitude and belief of the people there, born from those years of staging the National Games and the "Inters" – this huge history of putting on big games - that could possibly have pulled it off. No one else could have done it.

I was selected to read the athletes' oath. It was a fantastic honour, only one competitor from the host team gets to do it at the opening ceremony and I was picked; I am not still not quite sure why – possibly because I was Welsh and the games were opened by the Prince of Wales. Maybe I had just achieved a certain 'notoriety' within the British team as a loud-mouthed Welshman. Anyway, I got to do it. They gave it me on a sheet of paper and I had learnt it by heart in a couple of hours. There I was wheeling myself up to the stage to make the oath in front of the crowd and I still had the sheet of paper on my lap. I remember thinking, 'I don't need this' and crumpling it up and throwing it away and then I went up and delivered it word perfect.

That was the Sunday, the next day Monday I was back; I can remember wheeling myself over from the school we were staying in, crapping myself; it was so scary. There were five or six guys there I had never beaten before. First round I threw really badly and at the beginning of the second I was lying fifth out of six. My first throw that round went straight out of the sector but my second went 28.5 metres and that was probably going to be good enough for the bronze. On my last throw I just let everything go. When I looked up I saw this big smile on my mate Kevin McNicholas' face and I knew it was a good one – but there were still four other guys to throw. In the end it held; I had thrown 31 metres 88 and that was it – the gold medal and the world record!

It's really hard to explain the feeling: to know that at that moment you are the best, not just in Pontypool, not even just in Wales, but in the whole world. It was quite fantastic. I had wheeled myself over to the stadium that Monday morning a nobody, but I came back as John Harris, world record holder, gold medallist, and the best in the world at what I do. And of course as soon as you say the words 'Olympics' or 'Paralympics' it changes. I had always competed for Wales in the National Games, but to be in the British Paralympic team, whether you are English, Welsh or Scottish, there is just no comparison. There is nothing quite like it. It is the ultimate accolade. Every now and then I fetch my old GB team kit out of the cupboard. I wouldn't put it on; I no longer feel entitled to. But I'll get it out and show it to my boys. And when I do I just get the goose bumps. Just talking to you now about it I am getting them; I can't feel anything in my legs. I was just so proud to be able to represent my country -so few people have that opportunity.

That was the high point but it didn't finish there. I was back for the 1988 games at Seoul where I took silver for discus and bronze for the pentathlon. Then in 1992 at Barcelona even though I didn't win a medal I still broke the British record in the pentathlon. I really didn't want to stop. My last games were at Atlanta in 1996.

Seoul was strange one; in a way I was cheated out of the gold there. In Paralympic sports you are classified according to level of disability; for discus the variables are to do with the amount of abs and quads muscles you can use. I was classified F7 and only competed against other F7s. Of course it was always the case that competitors would try and swing it to get into a lower classification if they could; there was going to be a huge, and unfair, advantage in your favour if you were competing against other athletes who were slightly more disabled than you were. Anyway in the discus at Seoul it was an Egyptian guy who took the gold; but he had arrived at the games late and there hadn't been time to classify him beforehand, so he was placed according to his own estimate as an F7. After he had won they tested him and found he was actually in the next classification up. They sort of fudged it; they let him keep his gold medal, but because I had thrown 35 metres 76, that became the new world record for my class. So I came away with a world record but no gold medal!