

Interview with Keith Delderfield, June 2011

In 1969 I was living on Bedgrove near Stoke Mandeville Hospital and working in Tring. I had always been interested in sport; in fact I was something of a failed sportsman having played basketball and cricket at U18 county level, but had never quite been good enough to make the grade. And then there was this job advertised for an admin assistant at what was then called the 'Stoke Mandeville Sports Stadium for the Paralysed and other Disabled'. This was the new stadium at Stoke that had just opened earlier that year. Well I got that job and started in the December; there were just nine staff and a mighty big band of volunteers. I stayed at the stadium until 1992 by which time I was deputy director responsible for all the site management.

They were pioneering days back then. "Poppa" Guttman, he was a real fireball. My office was next door to him and Joan Scruton and they were two of the most dedicated and inspirational people I have ever worked for. They totally believed in what they were doing and in the importance of sport in rehabilitation. Working alongside them I became totally indoctrinated into their beliefs and the spirit of the place. "Poppa" could be a bloody hard taskmaster, and occasionally unreasonable in his expectations; but you always knew where you were with him. And then at the end of the day he would turn around and say "8 o'clock tonight at my house; bring your wives," and we would go and have a party in his garden. He knew how to get the best out of people.

Each year at the stadium we would hold the National games in June and what were then known as the International World wheelchair games in July - except for every fourth Olympic year when the International games would normally be held at the Olympic venue. There wasn't the professionalism back then. Any paraplegic in a wheelchair could enter and were encouraged to 'have a go' at anything and everything. In 1969, as a patient, they would put a table tennis bat into your hand whether you liked it or not; you had no say, it was part of rehab.

It was much more of a huge family back in the 70s, almost a 'gathering of the clans'. The sports clubs attached to all the spinal units around the country would send their teams and the all got to know each other. Places like Pinderfields in Yorkshire; in their team there were always a lot of former miners or lads who had got injuries working in heavy industry. There was a good social side to it then; it was seen as a means to an end rather than the huge focus on itself that it is today when sport is sport, not just rehabilitation. Nowadays that sort of entry-level participation in sport takes place at the inter-spinal-unit games; by the time they are participating nationally or internationally they have been through a whole process of refinement and selection.

The level at which sport is now practised at and its status has improved hugely. The whole thing is now much more focused. The athletes who now take part in the Paralympics today are sportsmen who happen to be disabled; previously they were disabled people who happened to do a bit of sport. The Paralympics have aligned themselves with the able games; they are now driven by national sports associations as much as they were formerly by disability sports groups.

1984 Olympic Games at Stoke Mandeville

After the US organising committee backed out of hosting the Paralympics at the University of Illinois in 1984 through lack of funding and the British Wheelchair Sports Foundation board took the decision to go for it and to host it at Stoke Mandeville instead, we just all thought "What do we do?"

What made it even more depressing was the fact that I had been to Champaign Illinois earlier in the year as part of the planning process. The facilities there were absolutely world class. There were 66,000 resident students (the university site was a small town in its own right) and people went there on athletics scholarships. The basketball stadium seated 35,000 people; the athletics stadium could fit 70,000; their track had ten lanes whereas ours at Stoke only had six. How were we going to match all that? We had a bit of money to spend on the track and other facilities, but it was mostly cosmetic. In the end we knew that this is what we've got and we would just have to make the best of it.

The logistics of it were quite frightening. Where was everyone going to go? We mopped up all the hotels in town, all the schools, all the church halls. Just about anywhere you could fit beds into, we took it over. And once we had got the athletes housed, then there was the question of finding places for the national officials, families, the administrators, the trainers and the staff; they all had to be put up further out in places like Thame or High Wycombe.

Some of the teams arrived to find a support network waiting for them. For example the local Jewish community, led by David Gertler - a great guy - who owned the Bucks Bullion jewellers shop in Aylesbury, organised barbecues and parties for the Israeli team so that they were very well looked after. It was the same when the British team travelled abroad to any venue with a large 'ex-pat' community who would all turn out to help and support the team.

I remember that back in the 1970s competitors would arrive at Stoke Mandeville for the International Games in the same chair that they would then go on and compete in. There were no 'sports' wheel chairs then; you just competed in the same chair that you wheeled yourself around in. But by 1984 sports wheelchairs had really come on and each competitor was bringing one or maybe two sports chair in addition to the one he or she arrived in. And of course they all took up more space, had to be fitted in.

Transport was one of the biggest headaches: moving all these hundreds of athletes and equipment and wheelchairs around what was still a small market town on a daily basis. Some of the sports had to take place outside of Stoke as well – it just couldn't all fit in one place – so we were taking people out to the Grammar School playing fields for the archery and of course the Marathon began way out at Gerrards Cross.

We knew this chap Brian to help us with the transport. He was the "Arthur Dailey" of the second-hand bus world, a real fixer – white suit, cowboy boots, drove a white Rolls Royce. Anyway he thought he could source us a load of ex-Heathrow airport transport buses and he took us out to some bus graveyard near Gravesend. Of course the men from the Ministry of Transport had to come too with their bowler hats and briefcases to check on the regulations and health and safety. So there we were out near Gravesend looking at these airport buses and they had these large projecting indicator lights that stuck out from the sides, really visible. The men from the Ministry got out their tape measures and pronounced that because of these large lights the buses were four inches too wide for the regulations and therefore – despite the fact that they were otherwise perfect for the job, with almost no seats – we couldn't use them. I remember then Brian picked up an old starting handle and walked along all the buses and smashed off the indicator lights, then he turned to these civil servants and said, "OK, try measuring them now!" But they weren't having it. But Brian came

good in the end; he found us a load of ex-Leicester Corporation buses that we stripped all the seats out of and they were perfect for wheelchair transport.

Volunteers

There had always been this extraordinary tradition of volunteers at Stoke Mandeville. I remember back in the 1970s the only reason we had a rifle range was because Tony Higgs, Chairman of the Supporters Club who had a keen interest in shooting and, conveniently, an trained joiner, took it upon himself to build us one in one of the huts, using his own wood, in his own time, for free. Without people like him and their enthusiasm lots of things like that just wouldn't have happened.

Again back in the 1970s at the swimming pool, at one stage every life saver at the pool was a volunteer; they were all qualified and trained – we saw to that – but they were also all unpaid volunteers. The subsequent change in management style and the professionalization of the operation means that is no longer the case. Just as the duty managers no longer work 24 hour shifts on call throughout the games as we used to, divided up between just three of us. Nowadays I understand that there are paid lifesavers and separate shift managers – and the fundraising requirement to pay for it all has trebled!

In 1984 the Supporters Club did all sorts of jobs. They ran the reception and they organised all the social stuff for the games. They booked the bands and ran the bars and got the fish and chip van parked up outside. It was all done by them and funded by them. Without all these local volunteers and people from Aylesbury it just couldn't have happened. Wives and families mucked in. Even the local police helped; when they were off duty they used to drive the buses to carry the athletes around. It was just an incredible atmosphere and it couldn't have happened otherwise.

For me it was just an incredible buzz that you lived on. For the week of the games we worked every day from 5.30 in the morning until around midnight: all day I was dealing with the unplanned and the unexpected, solving problems, making things work. And of course there was a good social side to it – not “all work & no play”!! Once it was all over it was terribly deflating. But I look back on it now with a huge amount of pride.