

Conversation with Terry Willet, June 2011

When I was a young lad I was very athletic; I played a lot of football and I loved cross country running. Like my dad, I went into coal mining, first training as an electrician, and then I got on this Potential Management apprenticeship with the Coal Board; as part of that you did six months working on every aspect of mining including working on the coal face. Easter Saturday 1963 I was offered an extra shift. I was keen for the money as I was engaged and just about to get married; I was 22. I was on a team inspecting the coal face to check it was safe and secure over the Easter break. Well we were going along the coal face when the roof just caved in and I was buried by coal and rock. The two men I was with managed to dig me out and put me on a canvas stretcher and managed to carry me out and get me back up to the pithead; it took ages and of course it didn't do my broken back any good. Up at the top they didn't realise the seriousness of it. "Oh you've just badly bruised your back. That's why you can't feel your legs". I got put into an ambulance and taken to Mansfield Hospital. I don't think the chap doing X Rays took me very seriously either, in fact I think he thought I was putting it on because he even made me try and sit up to take my clothes off; it was only when I fell off the table that he realised it was serious. Then I got sent to the specialist Sheffield Spinal Unit out at Lodge Moor.

I was in Lodge Moor for four and a half months. Nobody actually told you that you were going to end up in a wheelchair, but it slowly dawned on you as you are surrounded by all these other people who were in the same boat as you - and you could see what was happening to them. They used sport as rehabilitation at Lodge Moor; I was paired off with another patient Johnny Tanner; he was professional motorcyclist who had crashed while racing at Mallory Park; we worked together in the gym. And it was there that I discovered wheelchair basketball and fencing, but first off it was swimming that I enjoyed most. After Lodge Moor I got sent back home to my parents' bungalow which they had converted for me. It was a difficult time; all my mates from before found they couldn't cope - they might come and visit me the once, but it was awkward and they didn't know what to say. I was a bit lost too; I had become quite happy in the hospital and got used to the environment; now I was out and it was difficult to adjust back. So I started drinking, going down the pub at lunch time with a lot of older men. Then after a while I realised that this was not doing me any good and it was upsetting my mother. So I thought I would go back and try sport again.

I was lucky. Lodge Moor and the sports centre were miles out of Sheffield up in the moors along the road out towards Glossop; but my brother had a job as a travelling salesman and two or three times a week he would drop me off there on his way to work and come and get me at the end of the day. And so I used to train there and I just went from strength to strength; after a while I got one of those AC three-wheelers and then I could chug out there on my own maybe four days a week. It was just sport, sport, sport for me. Financially I was ok as I got a Coal Board disability pension; others, like my mate Johnny Tanner had to go back to work to support their families.

In 1964 I qualified at the National Games at Stoke Mandeville to swim for the Great Britain team at Tokyo at the end of the summer, but then in the end I didn't go. My first international was the following year at St Etienne in France where I did quite well in the fencing and the basketball. I remember also doing this new sport they were experimenting with which was a sort of off-road

wheelchair riding, traversing across hills and things like that; it was quite fun, but in the end it never took off as wheelchair sport and soon disappeared.

I started to specialise more and more in fencing; épée and sabre, but not the foil. As a sport it was changing rapidly. There was the introduction of clamps to hold the chairs in place in the 1960s, replacing the old system where you were kept stationary by someone holding your chair at the back. Then you got all sorts of rules, properly agreeing the distances between competitors, the allowed height of arm rests on chairs – things like that. Originally it was all a bit amateurish and undefined. I was a bit of an amateur mechanic; I used to play around with my chairs, hacking a bit off here, slotting something in there, customising them. I remember when I was in the 1968 Olympics in Tel Aviv I had got a mate to help me modify my fencing chair by attaching a metal bar below the front castors; it lifted them about half an inch off the ground; it might have given me a tiny bit more reach and it certainly created a more stable platform. Anyway it took the judges about four hours to decide that it was legal and I could use it.

One of the best things that happened to me was getting coached by Les Veal, one of the finest fencing coaches in the world, at the Sheffield Sports Club, he was one of the very first to coach disabled athletes alongside able-bodied athletes; it's the norm now but back then it was highly unusual. Anyway we just clicked and I would say I probably owe 60% of my subsequent success to him. He went on to become International Director of technique for the sport.

In 1966 I went to the Commonwealth Games in Jamaica. We did well; the gold medal for basketball, golds in all the team fencing, plus I got an individual bronze in sabre and two silvers for relay swimming. At the time I thought it was amazing: exotic foreign travel, as much food as you could eat. The only bad thing was the horrible woolly green team blazers we had to wear and the stupid hats. Of course we were very proud of them, but they were terribly impractical in the 30 degree heat in Jamaica; the other teams used to laugh at us in them. It was said that either Joan Scruton or Guttman had designed them because green was supposed to be his favourite colour. When I came home to Edwinstowe in Nottinghamshire they treated me like a superstar: the whole village laid on a reception for me, bought me a new wheelchair and I still have a desk with a silver plaque they must have given me.

In 1968 we competed in Tel Aviv. That was dreadful as they had very poor accommodation; we all ended up in tower blocks and the lift could only take a single wheelchair. So you can imagine the queues to get out in the morning. You used to have to get down for breakfast about 6.00 a.m. in order to start fencing at 8.00. We ended up coming backwards down the stairs in our wheel chairs as it was quicker!

I competed at the 1970 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh. The memorable event for me there was the basketball final against Australia. They were a very hard team. Some of the older members were still using old-style 'travaux' chairs, the ones with the large wheels at the front and the smaller ones behind. They might have been ancient and heavy, but those Aussies could spin them on a sixpence; they were actually far more manoeuvrable than our Everest and Jennings chairs. There was one older man on their team, Mather Brown, who was the 'hit man' for the Aussies. He was a nice enough guy, but definitely a bit of an animal. His tactic was to come in close to an opposing player and then deliberately spin his chair up against you; he did it so fast that unless you got your hands off your own pushing rims then you would lose your knuckles. It was one of those

questionable tactics in the early days before the rules cleared it up; when challenged, the player would claim it was just accidental. Well our star player in that match, who was playing at Point, was Cyril Thomas. He was a good friend of mine, another former miner, big chap, six foot four and knuckles like a dust pan. And this Mather Brown kept trying to knobble Cyril; he had nearly chopped his hand off on a couple of occasions in the match and eventually Cyril just wheeled up to him and shouted, "Do that again and I'll flatten you!" And what do you know? Five minutes later Mather Brown did just that. So Cyril went up and laid him one, right on the nose, knocked him out cold. Cyril was sent off with a smile on his face, Brown was out of the match too; and we went on and won it and took the gold. It was one of the hardest games I ever played.

The Commonwealth 'Paralympic' Games were phased out in about 1974; the last one was at Dunedin in New Zealand in 1974. We were told at the time it was because there weren't enough of the other countries taking part, many of them had really not yet developed wheelchair sport, and because Britain was just so dominant in these games; apart from Australia there was really no competition.

Back then I did loads of fundraising for the team. I was one of Guttman's blue-eyed boys because I was helping raise the money to send his teams abroad. I used to do collections on the street, sponsored pushes like the one from London to Brighton in 1976 to fund the trip to Toronto, and another in 1980 for Arnhem when I did a 156 mile push from Buckingham Palace to Stocks Bridge above Sheffield. Prince Charles set us off from the palace and in each town we that passed through the Lord Mayor would be out in his regalia to greet us and sign the book of remembrance. We even ended up on Blue Peter! I guess my philosophy was that I should put something back. I had always felt very privileged to have been to the places that I did.

First of all, when it happened, I thought my disability was the end of the world. But later on I realised that it opened many doors; that it wasn't any way as bad as I had first thought possible. It sounds a bit corny, but it's true; I have had a very full and satisfying life.

In 1984 at the Stoke Mandeville Olympics I was selected to carry the Olympic torch at the opening ceremony. I'm not sure why; perhaps because I had been involved in the British team in all the games since since 1964, both as a fencer and as team captain.

There I was in my chair with a gas bottle down my side pocket and pipes running up my arm inside my tracksuit. And then I had developed this wonderful gadget that allowed me to appear to be holding the torch in one hand and wheel my chair at the same time. Because I had to go a good distance, round the track and then over to the far corner of the sports field to light the flame. Now normally you can't use a wheelchair one-handed, or at least you can't make it go in a straight line. So I came up with this idea of mounting the torch on a four foot metal pole that was welded to one of the front wheel castors on my chair. So by turning the pole I could simultaneously be holding up the torch and steering my chair while I propelled myself along with the other arm.

The Olympic flame was a large bowl over in the far corner of the sports field. Under the base of the bowl there was a man crouching down underneath the frame with a ruddy great gas bottle. I could see him, but he was hidden from all the dignitaries and the crowd. So I came up in the chair with the torch and he said, "When you're ready Terry", and I held up the torch and he turned on the gas and that was it: Olympic flame lit; it burned for the entire week of the games.

were good then you tended to stay on in the team because there weren't that many younger people coming up.

Look at the chairs we played in; the backs are so low, there are no side guards. I am sitting on a big thick cushion and I have got blocks on my footrests to raise my height and give me an advantage. You couldn't change the height of the footrest; they had to be a standard clearance from the ground; but you could get round your height in the chair with foot blocks and cushions.

Coach photo. This is the Hong Kong team being loaded, so it can't be a Commonwealth, must be an Olympic Games, maybe Tel Aviv in 1968. I remember those coaches; they had all the seats stripped out and you entered them along a ramp. Once you were in you were lined up four chairs abreast with a bloody great bar like a scaffolding pole pushed across in front of each row for you to hang onto when the coach was cornering or braking; it was like a cross between a cattle truck and a fairground ride – a bit amateurish, but it worked.#

Aeroplane, I think this is one of the Commonwealth Games, probably Jamaica in 1966 (check BOAC dates). I remember those silly hats that we were made to wear all the time.

Fencing, this is Toronto, 1976 when I won gold in epee. You can see the metal frame that I had fitted to the front of my chair. It stopped the fight for an hour while the judges decided that it was in fact legal. I am on the right; not quite sure who I am fighting, maybe the Frenchman, Benamar. He is on the left and has just lunged at my body and I have decided, rather than defending myself, to just pick him off on the helmet. I have left myself wide open and I know I have to go for it. I have got the hit; you can see the light showing it on the far left.

You can tell by the way his body has fallen flat in the lunge that, like me, he was 'complete'. In the 1970s the two fencing classifications were 'complete' or 'incomplete': i.e. you either had complete lesions, meaning that you had no abdominal muscles, or 'incomplete' where you still had some abs. If you were complete then you hold yourself in position in the chair with your left arm as you have no stomach muscles to do the job; you can see how I am doing that in the right of the picture. But when you go for the lunge as he has then it's all or nothing; you can't easily recover from that; afterwards you have to push yourself back up with your arms.

Parade Photos, this is Dunedin in 1974; I was the British men's team captain and the woman to my left was the ladies captain

Float, this is the Lord Mayor's parade in Sheffield, probably 1976 after Toronto where I had won gold; I was bit of a local superstar then, on the float with all me medals.