

1 EARLY DAYS

Well right from school days I got together with a group of lads and used to play wheelchair basketball. We were all disabled from different disability groups - Spina Bifada, Cerebral Palsy. We were all much faster in wheelchairs and took part in wheelchair basketball. We used to do a bit of power lifting as well. That was just lifting the bar up in those days because we all had strong upper halves, we were all quite easily lifting our body weights. We also used to go, this was when I was living in Kent Bexleyheath, to a swimming club called the Bexley Beavers. We used to meet there once a week, swim around. We were all quite good swimmers and that was the start of it there. We used to take part in galas - although they were NASH galas - they used to have a handicap system so if I was to swim a length in 30 seconds and you were to swim it in 60 seconds, then you would go 30 seconds before me, then I would have to go 30 seconds after. And that could be 6 of you in a race all with different start times but with the idea that you all ended at the same time. I went onto BSAD events - British Sports Association for the Disability events - mainly held at Stoke Mandeville. My wife Rosemary got us into those - although she wasn't my wife at the time - but she is now. We got into those and I was quite good and did quite well at the swimming, won quite a few medals. My peak in swimming was the 1981 cross channel swim, that's how I actually met my wife. Just minding my own business on holiday in Deal with a friend near Dover and Rosemary recognised me from swimming gala days which she used to help organise along with her father Geoffrey Keys as the official starter. And Rosemary was organising in 1981 a cross channel swimming event because an Egyptian team had come over - because 1981 was the year of disabled people. Lots of events were going on for disabled people. And one of the events was the Egyptians had come to swim our channel and I think it was a Lord Selsdon said to Rosemary - "We don't want those damned Egyptians swimming our channel without giving them a fight. Organise a competition." So she wanted to organise 6 swimmers to swim across, disabled swimmers, she had 5 - she was one short. With my walking pattern having polio I am quite noticeable on the beach walking about. She spotted me a mile away and recognised me and came up, said, "Are you still swimming?" I said, "Yes I am." "Can you swim to the end of Deal pier and back?" "Yes I think so" And bearing in mind I was only 21 years of age then in 1981 and had been on the sherbet with my friend for quite a few days and the night before. But my fitness - very fit in those days, I managed to swim to the end of Deal pier and back. My friend that was with me gave up halfway through - it was too cold for him. So I got selected to go and swim the channel in 1981 and we did it in a time of 14 hours 15 minutes. The Egyptians beat us unfortunately by one hour, but they were there 3 weeks having training all the time and trained right up to the event. After that we did actually get invited as a re-match against the Egyptians - this was in the August of 81. We were invited to go and swim the mouth of the Suez canal. The Egyptian team invited us to swim the mouth of the Suez canal, a 19 mile swim and they said just one drawback - it's not as cold as the channel, it's actually quite warm but the drawback is that it's shark infested. So we had to swim in a shark cage if we were going to do it. So we all trained like mad and got ready and one week before the event - Rosemary who was our main organiser - got a telex in those days to say that the event had been cancelled, as the event over that side had been organised by Lady Sadat, the President of Egypt's wife. And they had warnings, the British Embassy had warnings, that there was going to be a bit of political unrest - do not go out. We were not allowed to go out and that was literally a week before the event was going to take place. We were very lucky we didn't go out because that was when the bombings happened over there and hand grenades were thrown on the stage where we would have been up with President Sadat and his wife. I think our disabilities would have been worse than they actually are, or we wouldn't be here at all. But the team did stay together, the cross channel team, and we did swims like Grimsby fish docks - not as romantic as the Suez canal - but I did a 2 mile swim in 59 minutes, the fastest disabled swimmer, so I was pleased with that. We swam

from Greenwich pier to Westminster Bridge and back, did that, and that was all 81. I thought I was the bee's knees of swimming. In 1982 we did England to France and back again - a 24 hr swim. In 1983 joined the Les Autres, people like myself with polio, cerebral palsy, spina bif they did not have an organisation to go to so Les Autres was set up meaning I think "the others" in French and we all became members of that. When I actually started to compete in that although I was a good distance swimmer I was no good at sprint swimming. My bench pressing - that I took part in - I was able to lift then one and a half times my body weight. I weighed about 60 kilos, so I was able to lift about 90. I got chosen for the power lifting and took part in the 1984 Games where I won a bronze medal with a lift of 110 kilos. I weighed 63 kilos at the time. It was actually the first medal for the British team in 1984 so I was really pleased with that, going there not expecting, just to be taking part was good enough.

2 TRAINING

With our sport of power lifting for Para Olympians, it is only the one lift, which is bench press. The term power lifting means 3 lifts for able bodied, which is the deadlift, the squat and the bench press and if you can do all of those then the 3 totals get added up for the overall total. With ours it is purely the bench press. Lots of the Para Olympians actually out lift the able bodied lifters pound for pound, so a 67 and a half kilo lifter - Para Olympic total might be something like 225 kilos, the able bodied lifting on the bench press wouldn't be anywhere near that. But in terms of Guinness book of records we cannot hold the Guinness book of records for Para Olympic lift because you can only hold it in the Guinness book of records if you can do the 3 lifts - the squat, the deadlift and the bench press. In the early days - prior to 84 and it sort of changed between 84 to 88 - they used to actually make you off a rack. And the rack was set at your chest height and the way they would do it was to put a one inch square timber baton - you would put your inflated chest up as high as you could go and then they would fix the racks that moved on a cog on either side and the bar would be set onto these racks and then you would lift from that position. So the actual bar would be in a stationary position and you would lift from that stationary position up and down and the idea with that was that they thought it was safety for the disabled lifters because if they did drop the bar it would hit the racks first. But people like myself with polio that were competing against paraplegics and amputees, we found that some of the paraplegics were able to enhance their chest because their spinal cords - I don't know it was almost like they could stack them in two and were able to get great big elevated chests - and some seemed as if they were only lifting the bar one or two inches and getting a gold medal. Ours were right the way up. So in terms of that we also had a big beating and it was felt by a lot of lifters that they wanted to go nearer the power lifting of the able bodied side. One it made it fairer for all - not just the person that could inflate their chest the highest, the who had the biggest spinal injury that could almost cheat really because you are only doing a part of the lift, but we felt that if everybody brought the bar down to their chest the same way the able bodied did it would make it a much fairer lift for everybody all round. A lot of the paraplegics argued about it. I even went to a meeting where I thought I was going to get lynched, because there was about 300 paraplegic lifters - all in their wheelchairs and great big guys. I actually explained to them that I think what they are doing is inferior and they should actually start to do it the proper way. They actually wanted the able bodies to change it and do it their way. They eventually came round, they saw the ways that it wasn't fair and now lots of them are enjoying it and wouldn't ever go back to the way they were doing it. We have 10 body weight classes, the ladies are very similar but sort of 4 kilos off each body weight class but the same sort of number. The rules are much like the able bodied. From the time your name is called we have 2 minutes to actually start your lift, the able bodied

have one minute. For us, the extra minute is allowed because it takes somebody with a disability to wheel themselves or to use their crutches to get up on the platform and position themselves. Our bench is a full size bench - its about 7 foot long, it's in the shape of a cricket bat so that the narrow bit is at the head where you are laying down, the wider bit is for your body. You are allowed to use 2 Velcro straps that go right the way underneath the bench and right the way around your legs so you have the Velcro straps about 4 inches wide above your knee, just below your knee and one around the ankles because the rules state that when you are actually lifting - you have 3 referees, a head referee and 2 side referees - you have to take the bar, you hold the bar at arms length, you say "My bar", everybody's clear of that so it's clear, you have to hold it so it's actually horizontal. The chief referee will then say "Start", you bring the bar down to touch your chest and then you have to hold that on the chest until it's stationary. One way that I used to do it was to count for 2 seconds, so bring it down to the chest 1000, 2000 and push back up. When you are pushing back up it has to go up parallel, if your pushing back up like this, and it doesn't actually lock out correctly it's no lift, if you bring it down and you actually bounce the bar that's no lift. It has to be in strict accordance all the way up. If your head comes off while you are actually lifting it's a no lift, if your buttocks come off when you are lifting it's a no lift, if your leg comes off it's a no lift. A lot of disabled lifters suffer from spasm. Their legs could come off automatically - you know not voluntary - so they are allowed to have these straps to assist in that and that also allows you to assist a bit in actually taking that strain. With able bodied they can actually have their feet on the floor and push through their feet. With ours - some people say it's a harder lift because you haven't got the assistance of the thighs and the pushing through the feet. Poland were one of the leading lifters in those days. The top winning silvers and gold's etc. One of the lifters asked me, "Ali how much training you do?" I thought I'd impress him by training 4 days a week, 2 hours every time and swimming once a week - thinking that would impress him. And I said, "How much training do you do?" He gave me a funny look. He said, "Well that is the amount I rest!" "You rest how?" He actually trained every day, he stopped work as well, his government pulled him out of work and they gave him funds. They supplied him with his own physio, dietian and he was almost in a training camp really but they did produce the results. Some of their top lifters if they got gold they were almost given an apartment block back in Poland, this was in the 80's.

3 SELECTION

To get into the team quite strict, they had limited spaces so had to choose only medal potential winners, so you had to be 10 kilos off bronze medal position. They would look up all the charts, what the bronze medal went for - in lifting it was 10 kilos, in other events it had to be 10%. As a guide you had to lift one and three quarter times your body weight - for the qualifying entry. So my body weight I went into the 67.5 kilo body weight class I had to lift a minimum of 115 to 120 kilos as my minimum standard entry. If you got selected you had to sign up and agree that you went to squad weekends and our squad weekends were held - with the Les Autres team at the time - at Sutton Coldfield army barracks near Birmingham. We had to go on average once a month there and you had to attend. We used to sleep in the army barrack places with 6 to a room, slept in army beds, army blankets. It was very strict. You also had to fold those blankets in the exact way that the army have to do it, and they would be checked. If the blankets weren't to the required way the whole team would get a warning. If there were sufficient warnings laid out we may be asked to leave the barracks, so our British training would go out the window. But on a serious note, the army were brilliant. Also sometimes they signed up one or two of their PTI's that would put us through our paces. We used to - at some of our squad weekends - liven it up a bit and rather than do just one complete bench we'd see how many times you could bench press your own body weight. I was quite good at that, I normally used to win

that competition because I used to weigh under 67.5 kilos class. I used to bench press 67.5 kilos 37 times. Which often, I used to get the first for that. My colleague, Nick Slater, big heavy guy at 110 kilos, lifts 237.5 kilos he is a complete monster, that's like getting to lift a mini up in the air almost. He weighed 110 but he could only bench press that, I say only, but 15, 16, 17 reps then he would collapse. It's a lot but it didn't match my 37 reps so in terms of that I was fitter and more powerful.

4 GAMES

On the opening ceremony when each country is called out we all had to be searched because it was President Regan opening the games. He arrived in a helicopter but it wasn't just a standard helicopter it was the equivalent of the Apache type attack helicopter. Five helicopters arrived, four of them were armed gunships, his body guards were in there and one the President was in but nobody knew which one it was and that was to avoid terrorist attack. There must have been 40 or 50 FBI snipers, marksmen all up the flood towers looking down at the Olympic stadium watching out for anything and we all had to go through the metal detectors that you have to go through when you go through airport control. And that was a sight and an experience because lots of us i.e. like me with calliper metal, artificial limbs and going through these the guards were actually making people take them off, walk through - much the same way you would do in the airport - check that you didn't have any more metal on you and then there were people trying to put their artificial limbs on, callipers back on whilst trying to catch up and go round the stadium. It's got a lot more sophisticated now and they don't actually put you through that embarrassment, but in those days they did. Well in 1984 what they put us in was student accommodation - like a big university complex. We stayed in - I think it was 10, 10 or 11 different nine storey blocks, apartment blocks. Which was ok as long as the lift was working. When the lift wasn't working we were stuck. So that was really a university campus that was turned into a Olympic village. But the standards in Seoul, Korea we actually used the same Olympic village as the able bodied and that was purpose built. You had the proper Olympic pools, so you had the proper rifle shooting range, it wasn't a make do event anymore. I mean our event was just held in their big hall - you know the big sports stadium hall - rather than a purpose built lifting event in 84. In 88 it was all laid out fantastic.

5 FUNDING

When I started lots of people like myself would be having to go with training and trying to fit it into work. I mean me in 84 as I say - I was working full time trying to get it in there. 88 by then had 2 children, 3 mortgages, 1 wife and it was full time work trying to actually do it all in there no sponsorship had to fund raise ourselves. If you were lucky you'd write to your own employer and if your employer was good you'd actually get the time off free. If you weren't you have to take it off as your annual leave even though you was representing the country. I'll tell you how hard it was some of the athletes took nearly 3 weeks off when we went to Seoul, Korea and their mobility allowances, their disability living allowance was actually stopped by the authorities because they were out of the country more than 2 weeks, that's how hard it was in England. Not only did they not get sponsorship they also had any benefits stopped. Fund raising was by our own and some of the diet, lots of meat etc, Rosemary used to get us Dewhurst meat vouchers, even though that was only £50 that was one of the biggest amounts that I got in. Another event on the fund raising was my sister-

in-law organised a fund raising campaign at the local WI in Dover and that was where a group of ladies raised about £50 for me, but for that I had to give a little talk about the Para Olympics. What the event was about and I had to demonstrate the event. And in those days they used to ask somebody to sit on a chair and whilst sitting on the chair, I would lay underneath the chair and bench them up like that, hold the count 1, 2, 3 and then bring them down. That would give them an idea of what the bench press would involve in very rough terms. On that particular occasion they did actually find a lady that must have weighed about 22 stone and that was very, very hard to do but I did manage to get her off the ground, got applause and got my £50 - so that was good. In 84 when we competed, as I said the event wasn't called the Olympics, it wasn't called the Para Olympics, it was called the International Games. We weren't actually allowed to have the Olympic rings either - it was five tadpoles or we called them tadpoles because they looked like five tadpoles, that represented the Olympic rings for us. When we actually asked why can't we have the Olympic rings we were all called to a meeting and it was the British Olympic Association would not allow us to have the rings because that was going to encroach, they felt, that would also stop sponsorship going towards them, and we were also told that if we tried to fight that in court we would lose all the small amount of funding that we had as the Para Olympic Association and it wouldn't be worth it. The majority of us actually wanted it to go to court, because we felt it would be the best publicity we would ever get but it never actually did so we just had to carry on with these 5 tadpoles until I think it was probably Barcelona where we were allowed to have the rings. In Seoul Korea you will see pictures where the 5 tadpoles appear against the 5 Olympic rings that's where they were starting to give us permission to use the Olympic rings. In 1984 we weren't allowed to use it at all, but in 88 the Olympic rings were alongside our five tadpoles. We were told that these 5 tadpoles represented peace and tranquillity amongst all nations. Yes, sounds nice doesn't it and in 92 we were allowed to use the Olympic rings and nowadays it's always considered that Para Olympics run parallel to the Olympics for people with disability. In 92 we only had to raise half of the funds because Para Olympic Association, the British Para Olympic Association managed to raise sufficient for half and you were asked to just try and get half of that amount. Even in 92 lots of people were starting to take it to the extent where they were packing up work, getting sponsorship from companies and almost becoming full time athletes.

6 LONDON 2012

The medal for power lifting is also classed as one of the hardest in the whole competition because you only have one gold medal per body weight class. So with 10 bodyweight classes just 10 gold. 67.5 kilo class I've only got one chance to get a gold medal. I'm not putting swimmers down, but if I was a swimmer and I took part in the hundred metres, 200 metres, 50 metres, the medley, the relay - five, six seven chances whatever of getting a gold medal. With the power lifting one chance and only one disability group. I don't think we have got any medal hopes, I think probably 84 we would have come back with half a dozen medals, 88 with the 3 medals, 92 sort of 2 and then probably after that just one and now I don't know I think the standard, we don't actually..... Prior to that we used to do a lot from grass roots level, Rosemary and I used to go to touting them from school days, trying to encourage them once they had almost left school to take it up as a sport. And we would actually meet on a regular basis outside squad weekends and even organise international events, friendly competitions against the German team, French team, Belgian team - little friendlies and that would also then encourage anybody who wasn't a Para Olympic standard because if you're not within that medal potential you are not going to go. So how do you actually encourage people that are strong but need development? There's very few classes, I believe, around now to do it.