

1 EARLY DAYS

When I first went for swimming lessons I wasn't a natural talented swimmer and a couple of weeks into swimming lessons the teacher took my armbands off and I sank and had to be rescued. So clearly there was no natural talent. I wasn't put off by it at all. I wasn't scared. I guess I knew that it wasn't right that I was under water but my sister was actually more traumatised by the whole experience - my older sister. And she refused to go back to the swimming club because she thought they had tried to kill me. And so my mum then taught my sister and I to swim. But I absolutely loved it. So swimming really was my love from a very, very early age.

One of the other reasons that swimming was so important to me as a child was that my doctor recommended that I take up swimming or do swimming a bit more when I was diagnosed with asthma. I was seven when I was diagnosed with exercise induced asthma and he always says that he told me to go swimming he didn't tell me to do the kind of training I was doing. But he was right. Being a swimmer - that although it did bring on my asthma doing the amount of training I did, I was allergic to chlorine, its not great, its actually given me a much better quality of life because the strength that I have in my lungs just from all the swimming that I've done.

2 TRAINING

I was swimming at my local swimming club to me which was in Hove. It was called Shiverers and as I started to get better I started to have problems with the coach and the rest of the team. There was quite a lot of jealousy. My coach I guess wasn't really experienced for the level that I was starting to swim at and in addition I was having to travel from Brighton to Crystal Palace twice a week to train in a 50 metre pool.

I meet a coach there called Dave Champion and I started doing sessions with him about twice a week and just loved them. They were so different and innovative, challenging a lot of it was science based. He had done a lot of research on the science behind training sessions. And it was all about every thing we did for a reason. Every time I did something in the pool pushing myself really hard there was actually a reason for it and to me that made sense, rather than someone saying to me do it cause I say so. I like to know why and what the plan was and what we were aiming for and sort of I like to know the detail. Dave used to, he was still based in London and he would send me session down, he would ring me the night before. I would then go to Brighton college to a 25 metre pool, my mum would take me she would wait for a little while, while I did the warm up and I would swim on my own in the pool with the session that my coach had given me the night before. Swim on my own, she would pick me up, have breakfast I'd go to school and she'd go to work. And that's what I did six or seven mornings a week just swimming on my own and then twice a week in the evenings I would go up to Crystal Palace and train with the squad up there. But I just loved the sessions and it was really difficult swimming on my own, but I was enjoying the sessions and I was doing well. Then we got to the point where Dave was looking for a new job he wanted to move from London and was looking for a swimming club and the job in Ipswich came up this was about 1988. Ipswich swimming club head coach came up, came for the interview, got the job and he came here. He's been the head coach here ever since and done an amazing job, I moved here, sort of half moved here in 1988 - and was still flitting between school and being here. And then once I left school did my A levels, finished my school work and came here full time and this has been my second home ever since.

The training is very, very hard, I was doing ten sessions a week in the pool behind me in lane 8, that was my lane, the furthest lane that was my lane. Ten sessions a week of 2 hours in the pool so I was up at 5 o'clock six mornings a week and then weight training 3 times a week for an hour and a half. I used to finish every gym session with 900 sit ups straight, had a good 6 pack though and then we used to do press ups, swiss ball, gym ball or everything. It was hard work, its not just about turning up and swimming up and down for 2 hours, you have to push yourself to absolute extremes if you want to swim fast. Its going to hurt if you want to race to you have to practice going through that pain in a training session.

(broke back) It took me three years to get back to full training and I'd no idea whether I was going to be able to compete again whether I was even going to be able to swim properly again. So it was incredibly tough and there were lots of people who said to me that I should just give up. People involved in swimming because I was old 24, so I was considered old anyway and I'd already won Commonwealths, been world champion so people just thought just give up, go quietly you know you are never gonna get back to what you were. But I sort of sat down with my coach and I said I just need to know, I don't feel like I've achieved everything that I can achieve. So I would rather try and fail spectacularly and have everyone say I told you so than actually just walk away and never know whether I could have made it back. So we decided that I was gonna come back and work towards it. So it was literally from doing 6 thousand metres in a session to I was down to doing 4 lengths then having to get out and I built up from that over the 3 years to get back to full training.

3 SELECTION

The selections for the Great Britain teams and going to Olympic games is very simple. Its not like a team sport where its very subjective, someone watches and they might like you, you might be very good but you don't fit into the programme. In swimming its all about touching the wall first. Its all about times and hitting that touch pad first, so its very simple. In 1986 I made my GB junior debut and swam at various competitions for England and GB junior team that year and because I was swimming well and swimming fast times, by the end of the same year still the same age at 14 I went straight onto the GB senior team.

And then for major championships you have the trials. So for most people you literally have to turn up on a day and do the time or win the race. Sometimes you have to win a race in a set time so its double pressure its not just about winning, you've got to win in a fast time. But its all about turning up on a day and performing, so its quite a lot of pressure but then that's what you have to do at the championship, you have one day, you've got to get it right on that day. My race the 100 metres lasted 55 seconds, the 200 was less than 2 minutes and that was it. So I had 55 seconds to get it right on a day the same as everyone else. But the beauty of it is I think the thing that I like about my sport is that generally it really does come down to touching the wall first.

4 THE GAMES

In 88 I was left off the team and at 16 felt that, that was it. I'm never gonna go to any Olympic games the next one I'll be 20, I'll be far too old for swimmers because swimmers are so young. And I just honestly thought that was my Olympic dream over. But you know got back in the pool, was swimming and things got better and better and I went to the

Olympic trials in 1992 and was absolutely determined that there was no way they could leave me behind so I had to touch the wall first. I was the first race on the first day and I broke the British record and as soon as I touched the wall I knew I was going to the Olympic games. And from thinking back to four years ago when I thought that was it I was never going to do an Olympics and here I was, the first person to be picked for the '92 Olympic team. It was just the best feeling ever I was so excited.

Even with all the experience and all the advice and all the help that you get nothing can prepare you for when you first arrive at the Olympic village. Because you kind of hear about the village and think that you know you don't really know what that means, but it literally is a town that is just for people taking part in the Olympic games and there's sort of gates all the way round. And in Barcelona the village was on the beach so we had our own private beach just for athletes and competitors, with a pier, and there was McDonald's and Pizza Hut, big vats of ice cream, and coke machines and everything in this village that maybe you would expect if you walked around a town, it was all free. There was a cinema and a bowling alley and arcades, shops, we had to pay for souvenirs, the dining hall was probably about twice the size of maybe you know a huge Tesco's, Sainsbury's supermarket something like that, twice the size of that was the dining hall. And literally you could just spend all day sitting in there like star struck at like all the famous athletes walking past. And I remember queuing up for my dinner and turning round and Boris Becker was stood behind me holding his tray queuing up for his dinner and you think this is really surreala cycle team just go past training and then you kind of look out the window and a little row of gymnasts were all walking along and practising their routine on the grass its just the weirdest thing - its just not normal. But its just athletes and the best athletes in the world at every sport gathered in one place.

5 FUNDING

I was funded by the Royal Bank of Pickering to begin with, it was literally down to my Mum and Dad they had to buy my swimsuits they had to pay for my training, they had to cover the cost of petrol or train fares for me to go to competitions from a very young age I had to travel all over the country to take part in the big competitions. And so the expense really does add up, not to mention the fact that I ate like a horse probably eating two or three times as much as anyone else in my age so it cost my Mum and Dad a fortune in just food every week.

It wasn't until I moved to Ipswich that I really felt very, very supported. When I came to the town they just took me under their wing and adopted me as an Ipswich girl and gave me so much more support than I had ever had in my home town. And I had a lot of help writing to different sponsors and different companies just asking for little bits of help, who would help me, so many people were great, but one of the first ones in Ipswich was a butcher called Bob Jay and he gave me £15 of meat free every week. £15 in money not weight. And he had a little butchers shop in town and he just wanted to do his bit to help. So I used to go up their every Friday and I'd get chicken, steak, he did cheese and eggs, so I would just get my selection of food and take it back and it made such a big difference because it meant I could eat well.

I think so often in sport there are people who think I haven't got twenty thousand pounds to give an athlete so therefore I can't help. But actually it's the little things like that can make such a huge difference and if everyone did a little bit for someone it would just make such a big difference to them. And I will never forget Bob, he will always be someone who is really special because he had no reason to do it he just decided that's what he'd do and I got my meat free every week.

Originally I was on housing benefit, I was relying on handouts, my coach used to pay for a lot of things for me, and my Mum and Dad. That is generally the story of the majority of athletes. Now with lottery funding it has eased the problems quite a lot and they do support more athletes coming through. But still even the top, top athletes who are ranked you know number one in the world winning Olympic medals they probably would still be earning or getting a lottery grant of about £25 thousand pounds a year. And from that they would still have to pay for training, they still have to pay for a lot of travel and hotels within the country. So it's not the millionaires and it's not the thousands and thousands of pounds that are going to athletes that maybe people think. There's still the majority of athletes still do struggle.

6 LONDON 2012

I sit on the board of the British Olympic Association as an athlete voice which is good because there are times when people forget that it is about the athletes. And I guess most exciting of all is that I am on the Sports Advisory group for LOCOG who are the organising committee for 2012. The group is made up of mostly athletes and anything that happens to do with 2012 whether it's how the village is going to look or what's going to be in every room, the venues, the opening ceremony, the food. All the minute details to do with 2012 come in front of this group of people for the athlete's view, so we can say actually "You know the athletes wouldn't like that, they would like that. That's not a good idea." So we can give the real athlete view for it. And watching 2012 develop is just the most exciting thing and if I honestly thought that I could still swim I would be back in the water training for that, but I'd be way too old. But it's just so exciting to know that they are going to be coming to London and such a motivation to all our athletes over the next few years.