



The XIV Summer Paralympic Games, from August 29 to September 9, will bring together 4,200 extraordinary athletes from 165 nations competing in 20 sports, each one pushing the boundaries of their own physicality. Great Britain is one of the leading Paralympic nations, having finished second in the medal table at the last two Games. (The GB team returned from Beijing with 42 gold medals; China were the leaders with 89.) Athletes will compete in the same stadiums as the able-bodied athletes, yet the nuances of this unique sporting event are more complex and varied than the Olympics. With six disability groups, classified according to the athletes' impairments, it means that in many events there are multiple finals. In the 100m sprints, for example, visually impaired, cerebral palsy, amputee and wheelchair athletes compete in 13 different finals. The Paralympics draws as much attention for the compelling human interest stories as for the physical feats of the competitors, as the following interviews prove. For that reason, the Paralympic movement has a duality: it is about sport, but it is also about educating the world that disability concerns what we can achieve as human beings, and not what we can't.

Nathan Stephens (left) Javelin

Everyone has strong memories of a particular childhood birthday. For Nathan Stephens, a Cardiff University graduate, it was the day he turned nine, on April 11 1997. He was playing with his older brother Andrew, cousin Josh and friend Ricky at a fishing pond near his home in Bridgend, south Wales. Bored, the boys slipped through a fence to play on the nearby railway track, part of the Swansea to London Paddington line, and saw a slow-moving freight train approaching.

'The train was coming to a halt, and I decided I was going to climb on to it,' Stephens, now 24, remembers. 'But I slipped and was dragged under the train. The next thing I remember is being pulled up on to the bank by Ricky. The train never stopped. My brother ran to get an ambulance, and I was drifting in and out of consciousness. As I tried to sit up, I saw one of my legs on the track.'

As he was taken by air ambulance to Morriston Hospital Burns Unit in Swansea, Stephens recalls thinking that the helicopter ride was quite a birthday treat. 'Bizarre, surreal,' he says. His left leg had been shorn off at the hip; surgeons fought to save his right leg, but were forced to amputate it just below the knee. He was in intensive care for two weeks and had several skin grafts as doctors repaired his leg, yet within eight weeks he was ready to leave hospital in a wheelchair.

'My parents were brilliant. If it wasn't for them I wouldn't have achieved what I've done since. They

helped me through my rehab, as I learnt to get about in a chair. I just wanted to return to normal life. In school, they didn't know how to integrate me into PE lessons, and when we played football I'd just get out of my wheelchair and sit in the goal, throwing myself about.'

His adventurous spirit quickly returned. 'A wheelchair was like a bike to him,' his mother, Helen, says. 'He went off-roading, bounced down steps, wore tyres down. Same old Nathan.' He took up sledge hockey (a version of ice hockey for disabled players) at Cardiff ice rink, pitting himself against 18-stone adult males. He was 10.

In secondary school he continued to play sport. 'I played wicketkeeper for the school cricket team. That was where I learnt I could throw the ball a long way. I'd basically sit on my backside behind the wicket, and dive around after the ball on my hands and knees. When I batted I had a runner, and I'd slog the ball as far as I could.'

Sport had become his outlet. When he was 13, Stephens was spotted at a junior athletics meeting by Anthony Hughes, the national performance manager for Disability Sport Wales. Hughes could immediately see Stephens's potential as a field athlete. 'He took me to one side and got me to throw a ball for him. He saw that I had a good arm, but no technique whatsoever.'

Hughes began coaching Stephens, working with him in evening sessions for 18 months, throwing balls and rings to develop a basic technique. 'Nathan had all the natural physical attributes for a field athlete,' Hughes recalls. 'We put him on a programme of core strength training and flexibility, but he had the attitude to go with it, too. He started competing, and within a few months he was winning gold medals everywhere.'

At his first national junior championships in 2003, Stephens won gold in javelin, discus and shot. A year later he became the men's champion in javelin and shot, taking silver in the discus. 'After that comp, Anthony sat me down and said, "You'll be best in the world",' Stephens recalls. 'It scared me at that age, but I liked it, knowing I was throwing that well that young. But he told me, too, that I had to get the discipline, and that without it I wouldn't get there.'

By 16 he was junior world champion in those three events. Beijing four years ago gave him his first taste of the Paralympics: he competed in three events, finishing fourth in the javelin, eighth in the

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shot put and 11th in the discus. At the London Games this year, he may focus his efforts solely on the javelin, even though he was ranked fifth in the world in discus in 2011. Javelin is his strongest discipline: he set a world record last season, throwing 41.37m from his wheelchair. In March this year a rival, Mohamad Mohamad of Syria, set a new world mark of 41.84m, but Stephens is still going to London with confidence. 'I want to throw over 42m in London, win the gold, and set a world and Paralympic record.'

He is superstitious about the Games. He did not compete in a test event in early May. 'I don't want to see the Olympic stadium until the Paralympics starts,' he says. 'I want to wait until we parade at the opening ceremony. I want the impact to hit me then, when 80,000 people fill it with light. I get butterflies thinking about it. Good ones.'

Danielle Brown (overleaf) Archery

Danielle Brown grew up in an active family in Yorkshire, where hill-walking, canoeing and fell-running were often on the menu. When she was 11 she noticed that her feet would hurt after she had been running. Eventually the pain spread to her legs, worsened and became excruciating. At 16, nine years ago, doctors at Great Ormond Street diagnosed Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy, a progressive disease of the nervous system, which leads to muscle atrophy. Her prognosis is uncertain.

'We can't even pinpoint what made it start,' Brown says. 'I'm in incredible pain all the time, which impedes my concentration. The other ramifications are that my balance is terrible, I've got little movement in my feet and the muscle wastage is quite extreme.' She has tried medication, but with little luck. 'The side-effects weren't worth the small amount of pain it took away.'

By 13 she was unable to do any sport that involved moving her legs; when she was 15, as a birthday treat, her father took her and her two younger sisters to a local archery club, and Brown took to it instantly. She practised for 10 hours a week, and won the able-bodied national junior championships in 2004 and 2005. 'When I first took up the sport I didn't consider myself disabled because I hadn't been diagnosed at the time.'

In 2007 she embarked on a law degree at Leicester University, but archery was becoming her first love. That same year, she won two gold medals at the able-bodied world archery championships; and then took a break from her degree (she would go on to get a First) to go to the Paralympics in Beijing. She won gold there too, in the open individual compound event. (The compound bow, much stiffer than a recurve bow, uses a levering system, with cables and pulleys, to arch the bow.)

Test of ability

For the men and women hoping to compete for Great Britain in the Paralympic Games, the traumatic events that might have destroyed their lives have instead propelled them to extraordinary feats of resilience and determination. **Gareth A Davies** meets six athletes who continue to push their own physical boundaries. Photographs by **Simon Norfolk**



She uses a wheelchair and shoots from a sitting position, and sometimes competes leaning against a stool. Both are permitted in Paralympic sport.

Two years ago, in her customary pink floppy hat, she won Commonwealth team gold in India with England's able-bodied crew, making her one of a tiny number of athletes who have successfully straddled Paralympic and able-bodied sport. She thinks a lot of fuss was made in the media over her success in Delhi. 'I think people tend to stick you in a box and look at you as disabled and think you can't compete on the same level as able-bodied people. But it's just a matter of perception.'

'I was shooting in Arizona earlier this year and there was an American guy there, Matt Stutzman, shooting a bow with his feet. He doesn't have any arms, yet he was shooting on a par with the able-bodied. Disability sport shows the world what the word "ability" can really mean, I think.'

Brown is favourite to win gold in this year's Paralympics. She would have tried to qualify for the Olympics too, but there is no compound bow event, only recurve. Now 24, she lives in Shropshire, a short drive from the National Training Centre

at Lilleshall, with Heidi, her Yorkshire terrier/shih tzu cross ('she comes everywhere with me'). Earlier this year she met Margaret Maughan, Britain's first ever Paralympic gold medallist (in 1960). Maughan, also an archer, had broken her back in a car accident. She also went on to win Paralympic golds in swimming and lawn bowls. 'She was really inspirational,' Brown says. 'In her day it was vastly different, and it shows that the Paralympic movement has come a long way.'

Maughan told of how paraplegic athletes were carried by police and soldiers to their quarters, and how BBC editors felt it was unsightly to show wheelchair sport on television. 'What I do now is funded almost like a job,' Brown says. And a more fulfilling one than the law career that never was. 'I reckon playing with bows and arrows is more fun than sitting in an office preparing a case.'

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David Clarke Football

Of all the men who have ever pulled on an England football shirt, no one has scored as many goals as David Clarke. The Wigan-born 41-year-old has hit the net 126 times in his 134 appearances for the national side, and has won the Golden Boot award (for the tournament's leading goalscorer) in five European championships. Clarke, who is a senior partner at Clydesdale Bank in St Albans, and coaches a children's football team at weekends, is also totally blind.

He was born with congenital glaucoma, a build-up of fluid inside the eyes which puts pressure on the optic nerve. It meant many childhood journeys to Moorfields Eye Hospital in London as doctors tried to restrict the damage to his sight. 'By the time I was nine, it had gone completely,' he says, 'but I never had that much to begin with.'

Clarke grew up in a football-mad family and 'was kicking a ball around for as long as I can remember'. His earliest memories are of listening to commentary of Liverpool matches on the radio. 'I met Shanks and Paisley [Bill Shankly and Bob Paisley, Liverpool's most successful managers] when I was seven, and I knew then that they were great people.'

Despite his lack of sight, he says he was never treated differently by his parents. Nor at school, where he took part in a variety of partially sighted sports. 'I was lucky. I had a very good teacher at primary school who made a ball that made a noise.' But he says there weren't the same opportunities for blind children wanting to participate in sport as there are today. 'There was nothing for blind footballers.'

He completed a degree in politics at Manchester University and then a masters in diplomatic service at Lancaster, 'flirting with the idea of becoming a

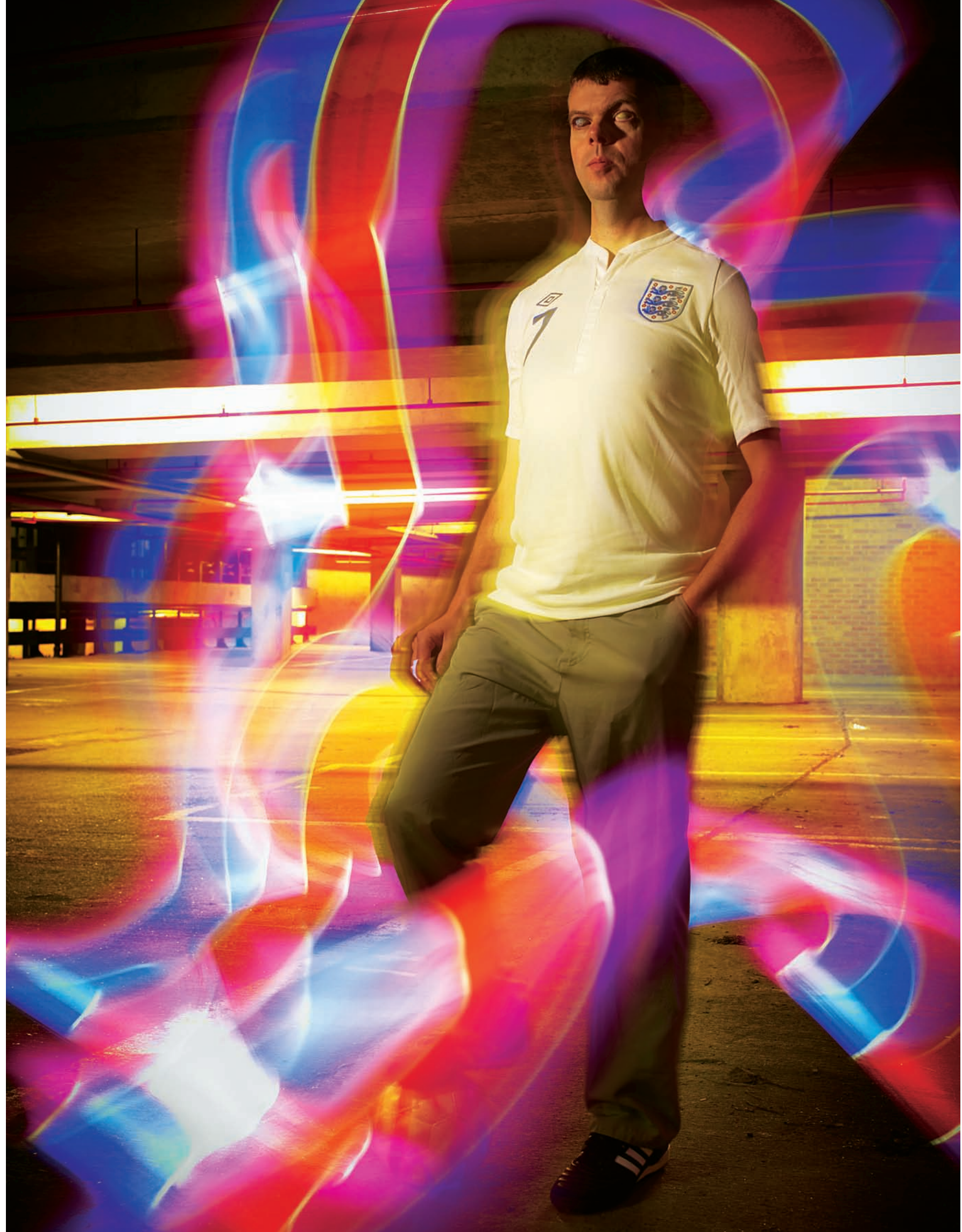
'SPATIAL AWARENESS IS VERY IMPORTANT, AND YOU USE THE SOUND BOUNCING OFF THE BOARDS TO GAUGE WHERE YOU ARE'

diplomat', but then chose banking. Until 1995 his sport of choice was goalball – rather like handball for blind athletes – and he excelled at that too. In 1995 blind football became a recognised international sport. 'I went to the Paralympics in 1996 with the goalball team, and afterwards made the switch to football.'

Blind football is a five-a-side sport that takes place on a 40x20m pitch, surrounded by boards, using a ball containing ball bearings so that players can hear where it is. Goalkeepers are fully sighted, and teams have three coaches, on the pitch and on the sidelines, barking out instructions. 'Communication is absolutely key,' Clarke says. 'You live and die in football from your communication skills.'

He says his other senses are heightened during a match. 'We use them more because we don't have the distraction of vision. It doesn't necessarily mean your touch is much better, but you process the information you have in a much more incisive way. Spatial awareness is very important, and you use the sound bouncing off the boards to gauge where you are.'

Clarke can hear if a ball has been hit sweetly or



scuffed; whether it has been curled or blasted off the laces. 'I'm always having a go at my 10-year-old son – he'll tell me he has tried to curve it, or has done this or that with his left foot – but I can hear when he miskicks it. "Just bloody hit it," I'll tell him. "Don't try all the fancy stuff, do the basics first." He gets really wound up because I know when he's hit the ball in a certain way.'

It is much the same when Clarke coaches his son's fully-sighted under-10s football team. 'What was interesting was that when I started coaching them a few years ago, the kids had 100 questions during the first five minutes about my sight. Once we were established, I didn't get a single question. We did drills and not once during that time did they say, "You can't see what we're doing."'

Clarke thinks the public 'will be surprised how remarkably skilful our sport is' this summer. It is very technical, and very competitive, as a blind-folded David Beckham found when he joined Clarke for a training session last October. 'He was actually very good,' Clarke says. 'Which tells you a lot about the technical aspect of our game. It is about ball control, and if you have a natural ability for football you'll be able to do it, blind-folded or not.'

He says it's tough to juggle his football with his day job and his young family, but he trains in the evenings and at weekends, and meets up with England and Great Britain teammates a few weeks before big tournaments. The Paralympic blind football tournament will take place at the Olympic Park hockey centre in September. 'I'll be staying in the village,' Clarke says. 'My guide dog, Ned, won't be there. Dogs and Athletes' Villages don't really mix. You don't want the responsibility of having to find somewhere for him to do his business.'

Being an England footballer, Clarke has several stories of international near-misses; he scored four goals at the last Paralympics, but the team finished fifth. 'We've lost in the European final five times,' he says, 'and each one comes with its own painful story of how it should have been gold.'

Although the London competition will include eight very talented teams (including the semi-professional Brazilians, gold medallists at the last two Paralympics), Clarke thinks Great Britain can go all the way this time. 'We know we can beat anyone on our day. You just have to believe. If we didn't think we could win it, we wouldn't be going to the Games.'

Jon Butterworth Cycling

On August 4 2007, Jon Allan Butterworth was working as a weapons technician in Iraq. He was on his way to work at Basra Air Station when, at about 7am, an alarm sounded, warning troops of an imminent attack. Butterworth got down on the ground as a rocket exploded nearby.

'My left arm was hit by metal from the explosion,' he recalls. Suffering significant arterial bleeding, he reached into his pouch and applied a tourniquet – such quick thinking saved his life, but not his arm. At the battlefield hospital, it was amputated above the elbow. Luckily, he explains, he was right-handed.

Then the hard work really began. Butterworth, who joined the RAF in 2002, spent two months at the Headley Court rehabilitation centre in Surrey,



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where he learnt to use a prosthetic arm. 'I felt really depressed,' he says. 'I would be in the gym for five hours a day, and grew to hate it.'

He says he spent several months eating unhealthily and feeling sorry for himself before deciding it was time to get really fit again. Unable to return to his old job, Butterworth, from Sutton Coldfield, was told about an MoD initiative, Battle Back, which encourages injured servicemen to take up sport. He attended a Paralympics GB talent ID day in Loughborough where his cycling ability was spotted. By 2009 he had started to set world record times, benefiting from the integrated programme that sees Olympic and Paralympic squads rubbing shoulders at the Manchester Velodrome.

There is a great deal to live up to. Britain's Paralympic cyclists, even more so than their

Olympic counterparts, rule the world. The GB paracycling team returned with 14 gold medals from the Beijing Games, a third of Britain's overall total. Butterworth is helping to raise the standard further and is the current world champion in the 1km time trial in the C5 category (there are 12 categories of Paralympic cycling, including events for tricycles, and they are graded one to five according to the participants' level of impairment, five being the least impaired).

Last March Butterworth set a new world record in the 1km sprint. 'Two years ago, after my pie-eating days, I got down to what I thought was a quite reasonable weight. I was around 88 kilos. I looked pretty trim compared to what I was before, but now I'm around the 75 kilo mark. My body shape's completely changed. I have to buy stretch jeans now. My thighs are huge, and I have a 30in waist.'

As he has been involved in track cycling for only three years, he has worried that this year's Games may have come too soon for him. 'The great thing at this point is that I'm on the shortlist for the



Games. But it's very, very competitive in cycling. Until June 6, nobody knows for definite if they are in the team.

'I feel I've got everything in place to succeed and I think I'd do pretty well if I get selected, but I think I will be at my strongest in Rio in 2016.'

The integration of the British squads, which share not only the same facilities but also many of the support staff, including coaches, has made a huge psychological difference, for the Paralympians and Olympians, Butterworth believes. 'When I first started I didn't have a clue about all these people, such as Sir Chris Hoy and Jason Kenny. But to be part of the same team and hoping to imitate their success in London and help promote the sport is pretty amazing. Likewise I think the Olympic team has benefited from being around us as well. *You* try to ride a bike around the track with one hand! I know they have drawn inspiration from what we do.'

Butterworth, 26, who is married with a six-year-old daughter, uses a hook for daily use, but when cycling has a ball and socket joint on his handlebars. If selected for the Paralympics, he aims to compete in the 1km time trial, the 1km pursuit (both in the C5 category, which is mainly for

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amputees), and the team sprint, an event involving three men with different impairments. 'I hope what has happened for me will inspire other ex-service personnel who have been injured,' he says.

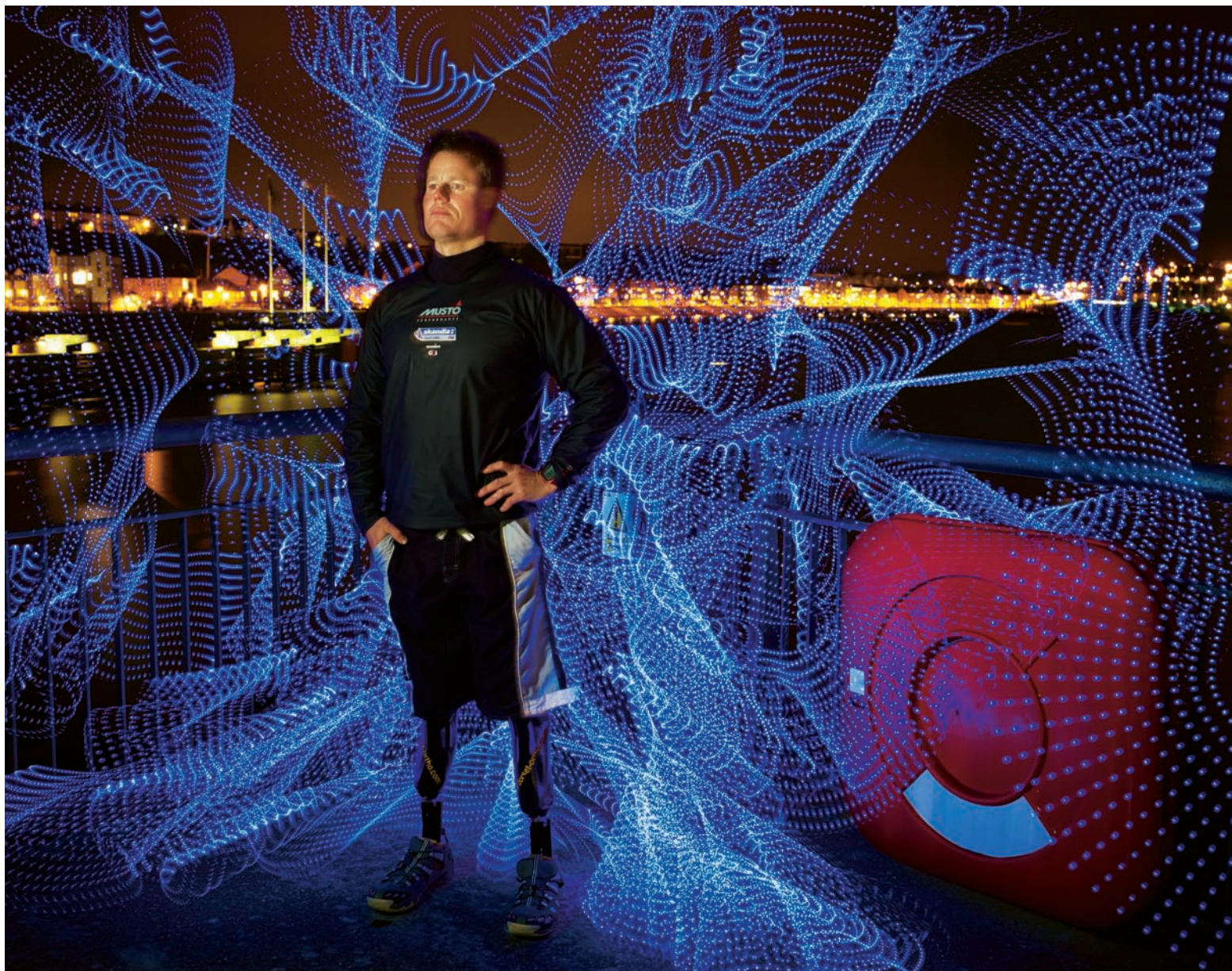
The Paralympic Movement has its roots in the rehabilitation of injured servicemen. Sir Ludwig Guttman, the founding father of the Paralympic Games, used sport as a means of both motivation and rehabilitation as the head of Stoke Mandeville Hospital's spinal unit in 1948, where he worked with men injured in the Second World War.

'I know what I'm doing does filter down to other groups – such as [the charity for wounded service personnel] Help for Heroes – to help people starting their journey or wanting to get into sports,' Butterworth says. 'You get people following you on Twitter, asking you questions. My motto is "Never give up". If someone turns around to me and says, "You can't do something," or "It's impossible," that makes me want to do it to prove them wrong.'

Martine Wright Volleyball

'Two huge things have happened in London in my lifetime,' Martine Wright says. 'And it's strange that I've been involved in both of them.' This month she hopes to be selected as a member of Great Britain's Paralympic sitting volleyball team. But on July 6 2005 she was watching television with work colleagues as London was named the host nation for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The following morning, running 20 minutes late, she decided to take a quicker route from her home in Stroud Green to her office in St Katharine Docks. Instead of taking her usual overground train, she jumped on the Circle Line. Sitting about six feet away from her was Shehzad Tanweer. Between Liverpool Street and Aldgate, at 8.50am, Tanweer detonated a peroxide-based explosive device.

The bomb killed seven people, including Tanweer; 52 people died in London that day. Wright was thrown to the floor and trapped in the mangled metal of the carriage. She was the last person to be evacuated – doctors later told her that she had lost 75 per cent of the blood in her body. Had it not been for another passenger, off-duty police officer Elizabeth Kenworthy, who helped tie a makeshift



tourniquet around one of Wright's legs, she believes she would have died.

She was taken to Whitechapel Hospital, where both legs were amputated above the knee, and over the following months she underwent further operations. Wright learnt to use prosthetic legs, each of which weighs a stone. Rehabilitation was tough, and she admits she was often reduced to tears at the sight of herself with no legs. She had loved shoes, dresses, dancing. Gradually she alternated between using prosthetic limbs and a wheelchair.

In 2006 she went back to her job as a marketing executive, but the bombing and its aftermath had changed her perspective on life. London held dark memories. She quit, and began looking for new experiences. She learnt to fly light aircraft in South Africa, on a Douglas Bader Foundation scholarship – she qualified in six weeks. She learnt to ski on a mono-bob, a single-ski vehicle for amputees.

In 2008 she married Nick, her photographer boyfriend whom she had met in 2003 at a mutual friend's birthday party; a year later she gave birth to a son, Oscar, and the family now live in a specially adapted bungalow in Tring, Hertfordshire. Nick and Oscar are the rocks in her life, she says – plus a group of like-minded women who all share

lower-limb impairments. Two and a half years ago she determined to become a Paralympian, having attended a try-out day at Stoke Mandeville, the Paralympic Movement's spiritual home.

'I tried several wheelchair sports, including tennis,' she says, but she settled on sitting volleyball. 'I like it because it's not in the chair [participants sit on the floor], and it's a team sport. I like the camaraderie.' Three members of the current 14-woman squad will not make the final team. Wright says that, while close, they are all very different. 'There's a huge array of people who have gone through something traumatic or who have congenital conditions. There's Emma Wiggs, who got a disease when she was 18, in Australia. She woke up paralysed one morning and now she can't use her lower body; Sam Bowen was injured in Afghanistan when shrapnel from a bomb went into her leg; Jodi Hill fell off a balcony – I was in hospital with her.'

Everyone has an extraordinary story, and Wright thinks that is what makes the Paralympics 'a lot more interesting than the Olympics. You've got people who are committing their lives to a sport they love and competing at an elite level, but who have also come through some huge things in their lives. These are people with a very positive outlook,

no matter what they have had to overcome. There is definitely a powerful, optimistic life-force inside me, and I want to achieve as much as I can.'

She says there is sometimes a patronising view of Paralympic sport among the wider public – 'It's that attitude of "Ah, bless 'em", or "She's a trier, isn't she?"' – but she believes things are changing. 'I feel we're entering a new age now and that London is going to change attitudes completely.'

Wright, 39, is a true Londoner, 'born within the sound of Bow Bells,' she says. Having lived through one of the capital's darkest days, she is now looking forward to seeing it at its best. 'I know it sounds a bit corny but I can't look at those two events [the bombing and the Games] and think they're unrelated. Things are connected in life. The place where I now train, in Roehampton, faces both the hospitals where I was treated and operated on after the bomb. That can't be a coincidence, can it?'

Stephen Thomas Sailing

Stephen Thomas's Paralympic dreams began with a chance encounter in a supermarket car-park 10 years ago. 'I was parked up, and was about to go and do some shopping when this chap pulled up alongside me and asked for some help to get out of

his car and into his wheelchair,' Thomas says. 'He was quite a big chap, so I pulled him up by his belt and braces, yanked him in his chair and walked off into the store. Unbeknown to me, he was the performance manager for Disability Sport Wales.'

Six weeks later, Anthony Hughes tracked Thomas down, in a gym where he was lifting weights. '“You're the guy I've been looking for,” he said. In that time, he'd had a phone call from British Sailing saying they were looking for a big, strong double amputee. Anthony had remembered me but didn't know where to find me. All he'd seen were my two prosthetic legs as I walked off to the supermarket.'

Thomas had always been sports mad. 'I grew up in a Welsh valley, and you get given an egg-shaped ball as a boy and you go into a field and play with it. I wanted to be a professional sportsman.' His aspirations were progressing well – he was a hooker in the front row for Bridgend Youth, and had junior trials for Wales. He was 5ft 10in, 17 stone, pugnacious and powerful. Then in April 1996, aged 18, he contracted meningococcal septicaemia. He had recently had a bout of glandular fever, and one night, after a few beers in the pub, went home feeling unwell, assuming he was still suffering the after-effects of the Epstein-Barr virus, or that he had flu.

'At first I thought it was just man flu, but I actually had all the symptoms of meningitis. I felt progressively unwell through the night and started having hallucinations. Even then I was stubborn and didn't really think there was anything wrong. My girlfriend's family finally called the ambulance late on the Sunday afternoon. The paramedics took one look and knew exactly what was wrong and rushed me in. I lost consciousness in the

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emergency room and I woke up a month later, really, in an intensive care unit with a ton of machines attached to me.' At one stage Thomas had been given a 30 per cent chance of survival.

Doctors had diagnosed meningitis, 'but I had a complication where poison affects the limbs and the toes. They basically die off, as with frostbite. Unless the doctors take the limbs off, you'll die from infection. So they amputated my left leg and the toes on my right foot. They'd hoped to save the right leg, but further down the line they found that the foot was absolutely rotten. So they had to take that leg off as well. They amputated halfway between my ankle and my knee, so I've got the full range of movement in my knees.'

At first Thomas was angry, but acceptance soon set in. 'I still had my hands, my knees. One doctor said I'd be able to play wheelchair basketball.' But that wasn't enough for Thomas. 'I wanted to be able to get up and run and walk again, so from that day I went to the gym, got fitter, stronger and progressively recovered.' He emerged from hospital after eight months, on Christmas Eve 1996, and walked into his mother's house aided by crutches.

'I don't really think about it any more,' he says now. 'At night my legs are by the bed. I just throw them on when I wake up. Unless I have a different function that day, my shoes are already on the legs so I just click myself into my sockets and I'm off.

I have different legs for different activities. My daily legs make me 6ft 2in – four inches taller than my old height. But with my sailing legs I'm 5ft 8in, and I'm probably going to go a couple of inches shorter, because it helps with balance on the boat.'

After meeting Anthony Hughes, Thomas was given a new outlet for his sporting ambitions and an avenue for his immense upper-body strength. A year later, in 2003, he won bronze at the world championships in the Sonar class – a three-man keelboat class for Paralympic sailors. He went to Beijing in 2008 with high hopes of a medal, but his team finished sixth. He thinks things will be different this summer. He says there is a strong chemistry between his colleagues: former RAF weapons technician John Robertson, from Sunderland, is the helm and the skipper (he was paralysed from the chest down after a motorcycle accident); Hannah Stodel from West Mersey, an arm amputee, is the front bow. 'She's the organiser,' Thomas says, 'John's the cheeky chappie, and I'm the muscle.'

The team moved to Weymouth after Beijing, where they train alongside Olympic gold medallists Ben Ainslie and Iain Percy – before Beijing, such integration did not exist. 'We get the same services and the same back-up support as they do. It has had a massive impact on performance, being around those guys.'

Thomas believes the Paralympic Games are 'on a par with any great sporting event in the world' and is determined to make every moment count. 'My motto is "Be the best you can be". I've visualised myself on the podium,' he says. 'I think that's healthy.' ■

An advertisement feature by Thomas Sanderson



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