

## Year of the Coach

# ANTHONY HUGHES INTERVIEW

**1984 Olympic javelin silver medallist Dave Ottley experienced Anthony Hughes' perseverance at its best. "I really wanted - and needed - some advice on my throwing...I knew vaguely where he (Ottley) worked and I got his number from the Sports Development Unit at Telford and Wrekin Council," admits Hughes. "I continued calling him and eventually he agreed to meet up with me - he gave me some really good advice and technical tips on how to progress in the sport and came to see me at my training base."**

Self-coached Hughes had been selected to compete in the javelin and shot putt in the Seoul Paralympics in 1988 and in the absence of suitable coaching material, was looking for guidance to improve his seated throwing technique. Through Ottley he was introduced to javelin expert John Trower who was coaching Steve Backley towards his own Olympic goal, Barcelona 1992, and also Mick Hill. He spent a number of days at a throws training camp in Albufeira, Portugal working alongside Trower's elite group and maximising the opportunity to take on board advice and technical detail which also extended to conversations with Wilf Paish, who, amongst others, coached Olympic gold medallist Tessa Sanderson.

In the end he didn't actually make it to South Korea, but it was no fault of his own when his classification (F52) was removed at the last minute from the Games. He'd actually been waiting to pick up his kit when he got the news. "I then started to question the infrastructure and how things worked and made a decision not to trust a system which wasn't entirely transparent," say Hughes. "I realised at the time that disability sport at this level had no clear structure and visible protocols, and it was then I decided I would have to build a unit of people I trusted with the necessary skills and influence to help me move forward."

"I went to my first IPC World Championships in Assen, Holland in 1990 where I took the silver medal in the shot putt, so undoubtedly parts of my methodology had started to work. However, in my opinion, the GB Paralympic athletics set up was far from perfect at that time. The one coach I'd really begun to trust was not selected for the Paralympic Games in Barcelona (1992), so while I made the final, I didn't actually have a great Games. I decided to continue through to the next World Championships in Berlin (1994) but I had a young family and wanted to spend more time with my sons and to concentrate more on my teaching - I was in the middle of doing my Certificate in Education to enhance my career prospects.

"Over that period my physical impairment (Becker's Muscular Dystrophy) unfortunately deteriorated to a point where I didn't want to just end up making finals in major events, and on reflection, I decided to quit international competition after Berlin while I still felt good about it."

Perhaps it was the teacher in him - he'd qualified as a bespoke tailor pattern cutter and design and went on to teach Textile Design at a Further Education College in North Wales - but he was determined to initiate change within the structure of Disability Sport. "I was inspired by some of the coaches I'd met," he says. "I spent a lot of time people-watching which gave me an understanding of the infrastructure and dynamic of international disability sport."

"There was a young wheelchair user who was a new student at the college where I taught who asked if I could give him some advice to help him with this shot putt; he had found out

from some of the other tutors that I'd competed at the Barcelona Paralympic Games. I wrote him a basic programme and set him some exercises to get him through the summer and that was the beginning of my coaching career...I went on to establish a group of 6-8 athletes based in North and Mid Wales."

As his coaching career took off it was complimented by a change in career direction as he moved to Cardiff to take up a position as Performance and Excellence Programme Manager with the Federation of Disability Sport Wales.

He soon established a training group, and David Dudley - who went on to take a silver medal in the F55 shot putt in Atlanta (1996) - was the first athlete he worked with in the Welsh capital.

"I realised then that it wasn't just about power and size and I started to look more at speed and biomechanics," he says. "There wasn't a lot of technical information for Paralympic athletes let alone seated throws specifically. I took the decision to try and record as much film footage as possible and take general principles from non-disabled athletes and published papers. The key factors I needed to understand were power, speed and explosion; the technical models I would have to build myself."

"I now coach nine athletes weekly with varying degrees of impairment," he says of a squad which includes 2010 IWAS World Junior Championships medallists Nathan Stephens, Aled Davies, Vicky Silk and Owain Taylor. "My input is everything from technical delivery to individual management. This varies a significant amount and is certainly a challenge. I've coached Nathan, Aled and Owain as young athletes and from their very first sessions in athletics. Owain, more recently, has definitely benefited from the knowledge and study that went into Nathan's development. As a whole the group are really competitive yet supportive of one another and they push each other on a weekly basis and all have an intrinsic desire to achieve."

Evidencing that in practice, four of his athletes, Stephens, Davies, Kyron Duke and 16-year-old Hollie Arnold, have been selected onto the Aviva Great Britain and Northern Ireland team for the IPC World Championships in New Zealand in January 2011. It says a lot about Hughes, but it's a huge credit to his athletes who have shown the commitment to make senior teams at global level at such a young age, all of them immensely driven by the prospect of a home Games in London in 2012.

"It's about commitment and positivity for all of us," he says. "For me, when you know a good technical model along and you have vision and throws knowledge you can build a great athlete one stage/phase at a time. The key to success in my book is being passionate about everything you do. My young athletes are passionate and committed and they can certainly tell if I'm not."

Hughes hasn't so much overcome adversity as he has worked around it. He explains how he planned his life around how physically able he could be and that when he was younger, everything he did came out of research, information gathering and finding an adapted version so he could become as good as he possibly could be.

"That hasn't changed now I'm coaching," he admits. "I've watched and learned from many of the European world class throwers and coaches...there's so much knowledge out there, the key is to capture the very best and adapt your own model. For example, I've had the great pleasure of watching some of the world's best athletes train and throw at Monte Gordo on

the Algarve and I've built up a good relationship with some of the Polish and Eastern European coaches even though I've had to use have to use a physio to translate at times as I sadly don't speak a word of their language.

"I think if you're respectful and polite there is always a way to communicate on a technical level as coaching is all about communication. I used to watch events, video them and take as many photos as I could...that was for me to gain visual resources that just weren't there in Paralympic sport. While I saw some great practice I also saw some poor practice so I'm always guarded of how I put over my point especially to young and often vulnerable people."

"There's a huge amount of information out there but so few coaches are actually willing to learn; I watch and learn and always ask questions – some of it is specific to an athletes' impairment and some of it is just general track and field principles. With internet and social networking opportunities including YouTube there's a huge free online resource ready available, that's where I capture some very specific and more fundamental movement patterns. More recently I have used this for one my javelin throwers, Nathan Stephens, who has watched many hours of Jan Zelezny in training and competition."

While in Portugal at a warm weather training camp earlier this year Hughes spent time with Derek Evely, coach to IAAF World Junior Championships hammer gold medallist Sophie Hitchon and Centre Director at UKA's National Performance Centre in Loughborough. He hopes that the level of technical conversation they had together helped to demonstrate his knowledge and vision for the sport.

"It's about the event first and foremost and the discreet adaptations that are needed to make it work for athletes with a disability," he says. "Derek worked with Aled and Joshua (thrower Joshua Morgan) and he found it fascinating how these athletes had learnt to rotate so well. He was a very easy guy to discuss and share your thoughts with. I think more coaches should take the time both to share and talk to each other more - we can only benefit from that sort of process."

Hughes is passionate about athletics and also the transition of disability sport from a perceived side show to a stand-alone showcase of elite performance. "Recognition has started to build ahead of London and I hope that the 2012 legacy sees greater numbers involved and greater overall awareness of Paralympic sport," he says.

"I remember training out in Spain prior to Barcelona and thinking that disability was often hidden, that disabled people were often hidden behind closed doors, and I think that the Paralympic Games in 1992 helped to break down the misunderstanding and these barriers. If, by London 2012, people think it's ok to have a disability and that having an impairment is acceptable, well that's fantastic, but I'm more interested in the way that the athletes with disabilities feel themselves. They have a fantastic opportunity to showcase their sport to the world and they should embrace and grab that opportunity with both hands."