

Paralympian Revolutionary

Hayley Stewart talks to Phil Craven

Phil Craven lost the use of his legs in 1966, aged only 16, in a rock-climbing accident. Just days later he caught sight of a team of wheelchair basketball players, and his life changed again.

Since then he has lived, not as a wheelchair-bound disabled man, but as a world-class sportsman, competing five times in the Paralympic Games. A former captain of the Great Britain wheelchair basketball team, he is now the president of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC).

With a fantastically successful sporting career behind him, and his current fulfilling life, he wants to change things so that others can enjoy life as much.

'If something's wrong in the world, that's a reason to change it,' he says. 'I am an activist, a revolutionary.'

Able-bodied people often unintentionally, and without malice, deny people with disabilities the freedom that they themselves enjoy by right, Phil says.

'Access problems for the disabled are out of sight and therefore out of mind,' he says. 'Education is required to replace ignorance.'

'The people of Athens, where the next Paralympic and Olympic Games will take place, are having to make a lot of changes to make access possible. At the moment you can't get down some of Athens' streets in a wheelchair because the cars are parked up so high on the pavement.

'Athenian car drivers are not against people in wheelchairs or the partially sighted, but until recently they have never been told what is required of them. There is a great need to raise awareness. Otherwise the city authorities in Athens will build wheelchair access ramps and people will continue to park in front of them.'

The IPC sees this as a key part of its work. Phil says: 'The aim is to inspire and excite the world: to effect change in practical surroundings, in attitudes towards people with disabilities and in the attitudes of people around the world. We must reconfigure assumptions and expectations.'

'People with disabilities are just as capable of being top-class athletes; they are

fully capable, responsible and ambitious people. It is important that ALL people are allowed to live life to the full, to appreciate nature, or to do something as simple as go on a walk in the country.'

Paralympic sport has brought improved attitudes and opportunities for people with disabilities in all aspects of life, he explains.

'We know that two hours of Paralympic sports from Athens every night on British television puts Paralympic athletes in the public eye, and we're jolly glad about that,' he says. 'We're also very pleased that through the IPC's agreement with the International Olympic Committee, bidding cities for future Olympic/Paralympic Games have to prove that an environmentally friendly city will await Paralympic athletes when they compete in the Games. Ensuring easy access at Games venues, city buildings and transport facilities will be a key environmental legacy that will benefit people with a disability for years to come.'

He adds: 'The Games attract millions of participants and supporters, male and female, young and old; so educating people through sport is a key role for them. The resources that are pumped into the city and country of the Games present tremendous opportunities to leave behind important environmental legacies. That potentially can be both good and bad: we have to harness this energy to make sure what we leave behind is beneficial to future generations.'

'This world of ours can either get better or it can get worse. What are we closest to? It's got to be the ground that we live on. And what do people cherish most? Water, food and their homes.'

'Caring for the environment is incredibly important. We can't just think about people right here, we've got to think about people 15 kilometres down the road. The Paralympics is about maximizing what you've got. We can effect change so that all people can do that.'

Paralympians, like Phil, are inspirational. It takes something extraordinary to become an athlete – to find that level of commitment, to train so regularly and so hard. It takes similar strength to overcome things that could hold you back because of a disability. The example of the Paralympians can inspire their fellow citizens to look outside the box of their own lives, and their – and particularly other people's – environments, even further than 15 kilometres away.



PHOTO: [HTTP://NEWS.BBC.CO.UK](http://news.bbc.co.uk)

Clare Strange, 24 and Great Britain wheelchair basketball team member since 1998, is waiting to hear if she has been selected for the Paralympic Games. Here she talks to Tunza...

How did you first become involved in sports?

'Before my accident I played (field) hockey and rode competitively; now, since my accident, I'm totally hooked on wheelchair basketball.'

Did being a sportswoman bring you closer to the environment?

'I used to ride a lot and loved how this brought me closer to nature. I am also very lucky to live in the countryside surrounded by nature every day.'

How do you feel about our planet and what's happening to it?

'I think that our planet is being abused and if we continue the way we are it will increasingly start to affect every part of our lives, specially our health. There are so many things that need to be done, and it is easier than we think to live a greener life, but we are just too lazy. No one can achieve everything but we can all do more than we think. This is how so many athletes over the years have done what many said was the impossible.'

How do you think sport affects the environment?

'It can be both positive and negative. Areas of nature are lost when big sporting venues are built over them, but at the same time there are lots of run-down areas which get completely regenerated this way. Sport can also be used to increase awareness of important issues like the environment.'



PHOTO: PHIL CRAVEN



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FRANKIE FREDERICKS – former world 200-metre champion

Sprinter Frankie Fredericks helped put his country, Namibia, on the map. Just two years after it became independent, he won two silver medals – in the 100-metre and 200-metre races – at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, following this up with two more in the same events in the 1996 Games in Atlanta. He was his country's first Olympic medallist and, in Stuttgart in 1993, became its first world champion by winning the 200 metres.

'Namibia was a young country, and I came along at the time it needed advertising,' he told *Tunza*.

'What better way is there than to have someone in an Olympic final?'

He says that sport has a lot to give young people and the world. 'It can help the young keep out of trouble, particularly if they live in troubled areas, and help tackle the obesity problem. People learn how to share, and how to deal with winning and losing, in sports. Those are very valuable lessons.'

He is worried that building sports stadiums and manufacturing sports equipment damages the environment and believes that sports personalities should use their positions 'as the best-known people apart from politicians' to help protect it.

'We have to look after the environment,' he says. 'If we keep destroying it, it will be difficult for future generations to have clean air.'

MANUELA DI CENTA – former world and Olympic cross-country ski champion

I have chosen to dedicate my life to sport, and in particular cross-country skiing, because I feel at ease in the environment in which I move, suffer and live. It was also love of nature, the desire to feel closer to nature through physical hardship, that led me to discover extreme and unique environments.

I was brought up in the mountains, and I continued to live there even when everyone around us seemed to be moving to the big city. Today, I live in the natural park of Stelvio. I have always been aware of how important it is to respect the environment in which we live, and am convinced that we ourselves are the expression of our own environment.

I began skiing when I was four, and have enjoyed a long and fruitful career, participating in five Olympic Games and winning seven Olympic medals, seven world titles and two world cups. For more than six years I chose to wear the uniform of the National Forestry Association to do my bit to help protect the environment.

Finally, on 23 May 2003, I achieved the greatest height of all: the peak of Mount Everest. I was the first Olympic medallist to climb it, and did so with a small Olympic flag bearing the five circles: a tangible sign of the union between nations.

The athlete experiences an intense bond with nature through training and racing. However it is the confrontation between opponents, not that between humans and nature, which comes first: the natural obstacles along the way – which need to be overcome in the quickest time possible – are a means, and not the end, of the competition.

This contrasts completely with conquering a peak considered the roof of the world. Here, nature imposes itself on you; its vastness and strength condition all your movements and choices. The paths on Everest are not marked out by people: we have only those that mother nature provides. We can follow the paths of mountain climbers who have gone before us, amongst whom, let me tell you, there are not many women, but the traces of their passage are continually cancelled by fresh snow, ice, wind... or by the heat of the beautiful sun. Mountaineers can only rely on themselves to find the strength and will to conquer the mountain.

Under these conditions, victory is not so much a dream, as sheer madness! The opponents you must defeat are natural adversaries, which are not so much 'easy' or 'difficult' as 'possible' or 'impossible.' With every step, as you gradually ascend, the basic elements of life become precious: oxygen, water, heat. Even the simplest physical exercises – such as keeping good posture while walking – become strenuous: walking itself becomes a challenge.

You learn to understand that if you succeed in arriving even halfway to your destination, it is because nature was on your side: what you were able to accomplish might not have been possible one minute later.

Much depends on how well you are able to accommodate mother nature's presence and power, in order to coexist with her, respecting her role. By far the most meaningful victory is not the conquest of the highest peak but that extra step taken towards a greater knowledge of humanity and its relationship to nature.

After this experience I asked myself: what can I do, as Olympic champion and member of the International Olympic Committee, with my skills and professional knowledge, to contribute towards preserving our environment?

The answer was to combine sport and television journalism by initiating a new project: 'The flag of the 5 Olympic Circles'. I will set out to climb a mountain on each continent, with the flag of unity of the International Olympic Committee, thus combining sport, culture, environment and tradition. The project will be broadcast on international television to communicate the value of preserving and conserving our environment.



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