

Philanthropy

ON THE PATH TO PARALYMPIC SUCCESS

by Anita Choudhrie

Founder of Path to Success

When Mary Wilson was first diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, she spent the day in tears, and in shock. But what she did next is far more important.

Mary is no stranger to setbacks, having spent twenty years as a psychiatric nurse in the Army. While serving in Hong Kong, she was mentioned in dispatches for bravery after intervening to stop a man who had broken onto her ward to murder his own wife. Her injuries were severe enough that she required surgery, but as soon as she was fit to return to duty, she did.

She was serving on Camp Bastion when a Taliban fighter infiltrated the camp and attempted to kill her by running her over in a stolen jeep. She escaped with her life, but with fragment injuries in her leg. Again, this didn't stop her.

So, when the shock of her MS diagnosis had subsided, it should come as no surprise that Mary took life by the scruff of the neck once again, competing as the only female captain in the inaugural Invictus Games, before taking up para badminton. When I heard that Mary, 55, had emailed over 100 companies asking for sponsorship on her

para badminton journey and had received no response, I knew I had to get in touch with her. At that time she was funding her own travel and tournament entry fees out of her disability allowance and pension fund, but now she is number 5 in the world at para badminton, and on course, set to compete in next year's Tokyo Paralympics.

Mary is part of the Path to Tokyo 2020 campaign, which is run by Path to Success, the charity I founded in 2005. I have been passionate about philanthropy all my life, but this latest campaign, launched on International Women's Day in 2018, is one that I am particularly proud of.

We are supporting twelve talented female athletes across four Paralympic sports, Wheelchair Tennis, Para Badminton, Para Powerlifting and Wheelchair Basketball, providing the crucial funding that they need as they target a place in Tokyo. As a philanthropist, this is an incredibly challenging field. Women's sport is finally making

strides in the right direction, but there is still such a long way to go. The funding and press exposure challenges that women's sport face is even more pronounced in women's disability sport.

The reality is that for those who fall outside of central funding, the onus is on them to self-fund or find benefactors who are happy to help them along the way, with little or no prospect of seeing a return on that investment. Causes like this are why philanthropy is so important. By finding a niche such as this and putting resources and expertise into changing it, philanthropists can make a tangible difference.

Mary is not the only athlete who has an amazing story to tell. Louise Sugden was a Wheelchair Basketball player, competing for Team GB at London 2012 and Beijing 2008. She switched sports to Para Powerlifting, and through sheer hard work she won the European Championship gold medal within six months. Then there is Lucy Shuker, Wheelchair Tennis star, who finished runner-up in last year's Wimbledon. She beats the odds every time she takes to the court: she has a spinal injury that is more severe than any other player on tour's disability, yet she keeps reaching the latter stages of Grand Slams through skill and dedication.

In modern society we often talk of role models, but to my mind these women

are who we should look to when trying to inspire the young girls of tomorrow. Nothing has been given to them, they have used their talent and work ethic to reach the top level of their respective sports, and sadly they remain relatively unknown to the public.

I adhere to the notion that while I cannot change the world, I can change the world of one person. Experiences change people's perception, and this is what drives our work as a charity. Each year we put on a Wheelchair Basketball Tournament in Olympic Park, inviting companies to enter, learn the game, and compete to become Corporate Wheelchair Basketball Champions. This is a great introduction into disability sport for participants, and an eye-opening demonstration of the skill that these athletes have. I am pleased to say the event grows every year.

We are also now into preparations for our latest Fundraising Gala dinner. It is always a great event, a chance for the athletes to celebrate their achievements with us, and to mix with the dedicated network the charity has built over many years. Sport can be transformative. Every day I am in awe of the women we support, and I can't wait until next year's Paralympics, so that the rest of the world can witness the hard, skill and determination of the athletes we support.



Mrs Choudhrie & Titans.

Path to Success's charity's fundraising Gala will take place on October 3rd 2019 at the historic Church House, Westminster. To find out more please visit:

www.pathtosuccess.org.uk



Louise Sugden.