

BARONESS GREY-THOMPSON



BRITAIN'S GREATEST PARALYMPIAN ATHLETE REVEALS THE SECRETS OF HER SUCCESS AT THIS YEAR'S AGM.

This year we are fortunate to have an extremely prestigious athlete and public figure speaking at the Kensington Society AGM. Not only is Baroness Grey-

Thompson one of Britain's most successful paralympic athletes – she has competed in five Paralympic Games, winning 11 Gold Medals and has won the London Wheelchair Marathon six times between 1992-2002 – she is now a peer in the House of Lords residing over legislation that could change the lives of disabled people in this country forever.

Baroness Grey-Thompson, who was christened Carys, but nicknamed Tanni after her two-years old sister declared that she was 'tiny' when she first saw her; has competed in paralympic sports from the age of 15 and is instrumental in the running of this year's Paralympics in London.

The Paralympics began in Stoke Mandeville in 1948, when Sir Ludwig Guttmann, a neurologist, was working with spinal injury victims from WWII at Stoke Mandeville Hospital and he decided to set up a sports competition as part of the soldier's rehabilitation. Over the years this idea became adopted by other spinal injury units in Britain and by 1960, when the Olympics were held in Rome, Guttmann brought 400 wheelchair athletes to compete as well - in the first Parallel Olympics.

As Tanni explains, 2012 is a big moment for the Paralympic games as, "this is the first Games to be held where both Olympics and Paralympics have been planned together – I think this will have a great effect on the Paralympics, it won't be seen as the event 'tagged onto the end' of the Olympics, but a great sporting event in its own right".




Tanni at the tunnel race launch

Born with spina bifida and confined to a wheelchair at the age of seven, Tanni's paralympic career started in 1984, when she competed in the 100m at the Junior National Games for Wales. She cites Chris Hallam, the Welsh paralympian and wheelchair athlete, as one of her major inspirations, "I watched Chris win the London Marathon on 1982 and thought it looked like fun. Chris was a bit of a rebel, he had long flowing blond hair and raced in a leopard-print suit, and I admired his attitude and skill". His inspiration obviously continued to inspire, as Tanni's international career took off at the Seoul Olympics in 1988 at which she won a bronze medal in the 400m.

Competing at such a high level has obviously not been easy, especially as Tanni overcame extensive surgery on her back in her early career, but she says that her grandfather's old adage of, "aim high, even if you hit a cabbage", which basically means keep trying", is always in the back of her mind. And it's that enduring spirit and fight that has helped her overcome career lows, such as, "straight after the Atlanta Paralympic Games – I had won four golds in Barcelona in 1992 and there was a high level of expectation for Atlanta in 1996. I won one gold and three silver medals in Atlanta (and set two world records), but there were people around the GB team...who were saying that I should retire. I knew that I had a lot more to offer. At the next Paralympic Games, in Sydney in 2000 I won four gold medals again".

Now retired from sport, Tanni was created a Dame in 2005 and a life peer in 2010. She explains her new role is as equally challenging as her sporting life, "there is a lot of legislation passing through parliament this year which will have considerable effect on the lives of disabled people. I've spent a lot of time listening to disabled people and considering their views and as a result I have tabled quite a number of amendments to various pieces of legislation". She clearly undertakes her new work in the same spirit as her athletic career, with vigour and determination, and when not at the Lords she is, "a member of the board of Transport for London and chair the Environment, Corporate and Planning Committee. I am also on the board of UK Athletics and the London Marathon, and I am a trustee of a few charity organisations. I am an ambassador for London 2012 and vice-chair of the Athlete Committee which has been involved in many aspects of planning for the Games".

There doesn't seem to be much that our speaker cannot do, so we look forward to seeing you at this year's AGM where Baroness Grey-Thompson will not only discuss sports and politics, but how we can all "plan for success in whatever we do". It will be a truly inspirational evening 

EMMA JUHASZ

Tanni's various roles take her worldwide as both a trustee and ambassador

