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THE MOVEMENT

WE CONTINUE. WE PUSH THROUGH. WE MOVE ON.

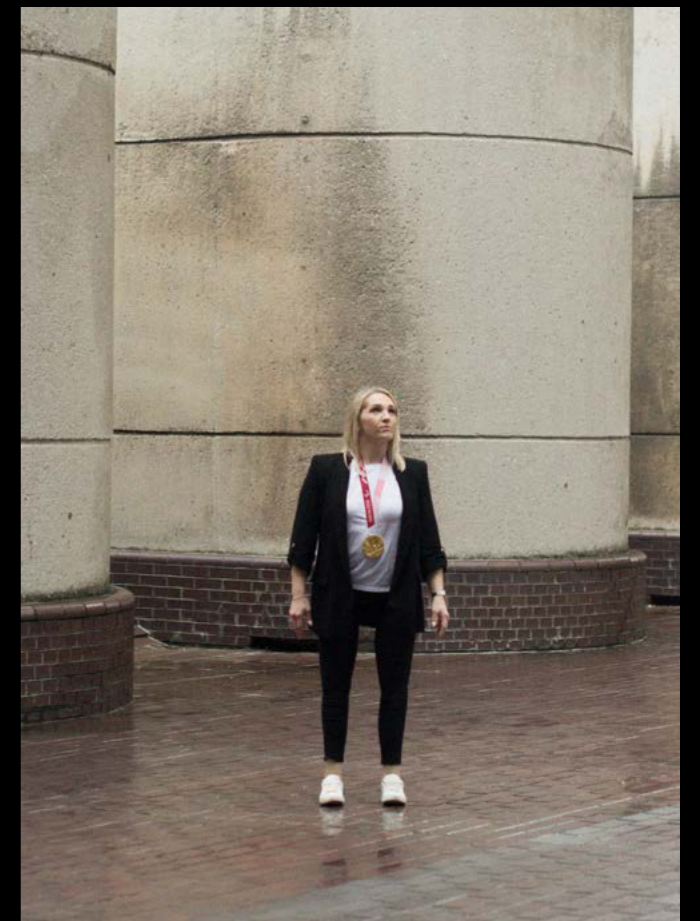


SHANNON RYAN

BEYOND



THE BOAT



The race to Paris 2024 is well and truly on, so we sat down with Paralympic legend Charlotte Henshaw MBE to talk tactics, overcoming adversity and why she's willing to keep asking those all-important questions.



Words by Zoe Knight
Photography by Sofia Wilkinson-Steel

How do I encapsulate an athlete whose career continues to be nothing less than inspirational? From the golds she just keeps on giving, to a recently awarded MBE, from her final race as a professional swimmer to the moment she picked up her paddles to join paracanoe, how do I dissect the most successful switch of sporting disciplines I have ever seen?

While I did touch on these topics when Charlotte and I met, what struck me the most was not the retelling of these momentous occasions. It was instead the way her answers to my questions moved away from medals and other more traditional measures of success. Instead she spoke of one's mindset, catering to the body you have and ensuring that the sport you partake in still serves you. I hope reading her words makes an impact on you too.

ZOE: YOU STARTED SWIMMING AT A VERY YOUNG AGE, WHAT IS IT THAT YOU'VE ALWAYS LOVED ABOUT THE WATER?

Charlotte: I was born with a condition that meant I couldn't use my legs properly, so I had both my legs amputated through the knee at 15-months-old. I've walked with prosthetics since I was two, and while I'm amazingly grateful for them because they allow me to be as independent as possible, they are uncomfortable; they aren't naturally a part of me. When I was in the water as a kid it gave me an opportunity to be free of them for a little bit and just get used to what my body, as it was, could do. I didn't have anything holding me back. That love for the water then kind of snowballed into feeling safe. The natural progression was swimming lessons and it kind of grew from there really.

ZOE: WHAT DO YOU THINK THE WATER CAN TEACH US ABOUT OURSELVES?

Charlotte: I think what I love about water is its unpredictability. You can't harness water; it's very free. It does what it does and there's no way of holding that back. I suppose that's quite a liberating way to live, just allowing yourself to go where things take you. When I think of the water I think of possibility; I automatically think of the sea and the ocean and how vast it is. In my life I try to be open to that freedom and follow it, it can teach you a lot.

ZOE: LET'S LOOK TO THE FUTURE, WHAT'S THE GAME PLAN FOR PARIS 2024?

Charlotte: When I was a swimmer I was thinking that Rio was probably the end of the line for me. So when I got given this amazing second opportunity to be involved in Paralympic sport, I kind of had to re-align my long-term goals. If [the Paralympics] had been held in 2020, I thought I would retire after Tokyo. But the fact that we did that extra year means we've got a year less now; it makes it - mindset-wise - so much more manageable because it's a much shorter space of time. For me there's an extra event available, so my hope is to make the team, compete in both the kayak and va'a (canoe), and put myself in the best possible position to hopefully win a medal in both.

ZOE: IN 2017 YOU ANNOUNCED YOUR RETIREMENT FROM COMPETITIVE SWIMMING, HOW DIFFICULT WAS THAT DECISION FOR YOU?

Charlotte: When I retired from swimming I threw myself into my new sport. I blocked out a lot of the feelings that retiring from the sport I had loved since I was 3 or 4 years old, that had been my entire life until that point, brought up. I'd only ever been known as 'the swimmer', so when I lost that I didn't really know what to do. I was feeling really down, I wasn't motivated to do anything and I didn't really know why. I went to see a therapist and we actually worked through grief counselling. I was pleased I was following this new dream that I was so lucky to have been given, but I was also grieving a loss of something that was important to me. But I'm so glad that I worked through that because now I only look back on my swimming career with great fondness.

ZOE: ON THE THEME OF OVERCOMING BARRIERS - WHAT DO YOU THINK CAN BE DONE TO MAKE THE WORLD OF WATER SPORTS MORE INCLUSIVE?

Charlotte: We can harness the power of - certainly in paracanoe - the success that we have as a squad. I think [in terms of] percentage medal return from the Paralympics we were one of the top performing sports, yet we are one of the smallest and least publicised. I think trying to raise the profile of a success story which features people who have all different disabilities, and of all different abilities, then allows other people to think that there's space for them in that world.

ZOE: BEING FROM MANSFIELD, JUST HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU THINK IT IS THAT WELL-FUNDED LOCAL FACILITIES ARE ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL?

Charlotte: You only have to look at swimming in Mansfield. There have been Olympic champions, Paralympic champions, world champions, and Commonwealth champions who have been born and raised in and around a mining town. [A mining town] that has in one sport provided world-class athletes for decades and that's because we have good facilities. There are clubs that use those facilities who are willing to have disabled athletes be part of their squad. In the case of Rebecca Adlington, there was a swimming pathway that took her from swimming lessons to Olympic champion in Nottinghamshire. That is enormous.

ZOE: MANSFIELD'S SUCCESS MUST FILL YOU WITH SO MUCH PRIDE.

Charlotte: I'm so proud. I am proud to come from a long line of swimmers from a small town and Mansfield is proud of its sporting history. One of the swimming pools is named after Becky, one of the other swimming pools is named after myself and the Hynd brothers. There are huge pictures of all the swimming Olympic and Paralympic medalists in the swimming pools in Mansfield, so the legacy is there. Kids who are learning to swim in those swimming pools can look at the wall and go, those people there standing on the podium at the biggest sporting event in the world literally swam in this water where I am now. That's huge, it means that if they've got a dream they know that they can achieve it because people have done it before.

ZOE: WE'VE SPOKEN A LOT ABOUT THE WATER, ARE YOU CURRENTLY WORKING ON ANYTHING OUTSIDE OF PARACANOE THAT KEEPS YOU MOVING?

Charlotte: We have just started to go to a Reformer Studio in Nottingham as a squad. We wanted to do it because it's something we can do outside of the training centre; it gives us a bit of a change of scenery. It's a really fundamental part of what we do in our sport but we never took the time to explore it: understanding how your body moves and working through those small muscle groups. You can focus on you and what you can bring.

ZOE: DO YOU THINK THAT HELPS YOU OUT WHEN YOU'RE BACK IN THE BOAT?

Charlotte: Yes, definitely. We were looking to explore every possible avenue of how we get the boats faster. It's not lifting as heavy as you can in the gym and it's not paddling as far as you can on the water, but it's a fundamental building block that allows us to do that thing in the gym, or be faster on the water. I can bench press a decent amount but you ask me to slide around on a reformer, or do some planks, I am shaking like you wouldn't believe. But it's amazing to explore those things that you want to improve on.

ZOE: ANYTHING ELSE YOU'D LIKE TO SHOUT OUT TO THE TMM COMMUNITY?

Charlotte: I have endometriosis, so I'd like to shine a light on the gynaecological health issues faced by those with wombs in the world of sport. There's currently a huge push for advocating for your own health and your own well-being - both in and out of a sporting context - but I think it's so important to discuss. We follow training patterns that have been predominantly based around men. No one has - until quite recently - said, "well actually we probably need to tweak that a little bit". Throughout the month our bodies do different things and our hormones go out of whack - so we need to address that.

ZOE: WHAT AN INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT TOPIC, MAYBE WE CAN TEAM UP TO TACKLE IT IN THE FUTURE?

Charlotte: I would love that. It's something that I feel really strongly about, to be able to advocate for things that aren't always the norm. It's that ability to ask the questions; we have to keep knocking on the door until someone is willing to answer it.

And keep on knocking we will.





**THE MOVEMENT MOVEMENT.
THE MOST HUMAN THING OF ALL.**