

# Iron Man Paul Stewart

The OE London dinner is a chance for the College community to celebrate an Eastbournian achiever. This year's special guest is Paul Stewart, who in 2013 completed a gruelling Iron Man challenge to raise funds and awareness about spinal injury research.



Paul in the Stoke Mandeville pool

**A** 2.4 mile swim, a 112 mile cycle ride, a 26.2 mile walk and a mountain climb. All within 15 days. That was the challenge that Paul Stewart (W94-99) set out to achieve last August. For most of us the prospect of this would be daunting in itself, but for Paul the effort and determination required was significantly greater. Why? Because Paul was severely injured in a snowboarding accident in 2008 which left him paralysed below the waist.

Paul's injuries were so severe that he was initially told he would never walk again. But he was determined that one day he would – and his positive attitude has enabled him to achieve that goal.

In an interview with David Stewart in November 2013, Paul talked about overcoming his accident and the challenge that he set himself. Here is an abridged version of their conversation.

**DS: Can you tell us about the accident?**

PS: I was with friends from university in the Alps, in a pace called La Plagne. I was teaching one of their friends and we went down this run. It looked pretty safe – it was above a chair lift and it had been skied, which normally is low risk. I was a bit lower than the other guys and unfortunately I set off an avalanche. The

move and I couldn't feel anything below my waist. The cliff saved my life because the snow fell quicker than I did, so I landed on top of it, otherwise I would have been buried and it would have taken a while to find me. The ski patrol came and they got a helicopter, but it couldn't land because it's too steep, so they winched a doctor down. He put me on a board and they winched me up and took me to hospital.

**When did you get back to the UK?**

After five days in France I was airlifted home in an air ambulance to the London Clinic. After a few days I got taken to Stoke Mandeville. I was there six months. I went straight into a rehab ward because I was quite stable.

**What was the nature of your injury?**

It was a spinal cord injury to the L1, which is your lower lumbar. Unfortunately it hit my spinal column and basically dislocated my back in half. In France they had said that I wouldn't walk again, and that I'd be paralysed.

**What happens when someone tells you something like that?**

At first, mentally you refuse to accept it. I felt sorry for myself for about a day and a half, and then something inside me just went, 'This isn't going to help is it? Feeling sorry for yourself.' And then I went back into sports mode and thought, 'What are you going to do about it then? Well, I'll just train.' So that was it, I just said to my friends, 'Get me to a gym and let me train and I'll walk'.

**Tell us about the rehab process.**

Well I wasn't a patient patient, as I was told numerous times! I had to be moving, I had to be doing something to feel alive. I remember I looked at my catheter bag and there was white stuff in it. And I said to the nurse, 'What's that?'. And she said, 'That's your bones. Because you're not



On the trike on the way to London

Sport has always been an important part of Paul's life; he played hockey and rugby at the College and was in the hockey first team at Loughborough University, where he studied sport and business studies. He then worked as a snowboarding instructor in Whistler, Canada, before returning to the UK where he set up an events company and, later, a sports website.

safety training kicked in; then I started to tumble and I lost my bearings... and then the avalanche took me off a 200-foot cliff. And if you play a lot of sport you know the crack. I heard the crack and I knew I'd broken something. When I opened my eyes I wasn't buried, which was a relief. But I just had this inkling and I thought, 'Move your toes Paul' and they wouldn't

using them, your body doesn't think it needs them so it's just getting rid of it.'

### **That probably spurs you on even more doesn't it?**

I had a big brace on and had to wear it for 12 weeks so I couldn't bend or flex my back. But mentally I couldn't rest. I remember I was allowed to put my bed on an incline after about three or four weeks. So I set myself a target to have it at 90 degrees. So I was moving the bed up and down – I was in so much pain – but by the end of the week I got to 90 degrees. I rang the bell and the nurse came and I said, 'I'm at 90 degrees', sitting upright in my bed, 'and 90 degrees is a sitting position.' And she said, 'Yes?'. I said, 'Therefore I can go in a wheelchair now and you can take me to the gym.' But she said no and I was gutted because all I wanted to do was to get to the gym. Eventually I did... I would borrow weights and do physio. Then I found that there was a big hill in the hospital and I used to push up and down it and set myself lap times to make sure I was getting fitter.

### **Tell us about the challenge – how did that come about?**

I honestly do believe I'm very lucky, despite what happened to me, and I thought that it was only fair rather than just go away with that luck that I should repay and be thankful for how lucky I was. I picked two spinal charities, Wings for Life and Spinal Research, and eventually we came up with the Iron Spine Challenge.

### **Which was?**

It was telling my story backwards. I started in Stoke Mandeville swimming pool, and swam 2.4 miles. I then got on a three-wheeled trike and cycled 112 miles, doing 18 miles a day from Stoke Mandeville to London, and then I walked a marathon through London on my walking sticks doing seven miles a day. Then I went to France and I climbed the cliff I fell off. All over a 15-day period.

### **And how much did you raise?**

Just over £400,000. And it's going into research into finding a cure because I honestly do believe that in my generation there will be one. What they've managed to achieve in the last ten years is phenomenal.

### **Let's move on to your next challenge – wheelchair tennis, and the prospect of going to the Olympics at Rio.**

Typical me – wheelchair tennis is probably the hardest Paralympic sport there is because only four go and there's only one medal – one gold. It's a very fast game and I can play able-bodied people. I find it hard because I didn't do individual sports at Eastbourne, where I was more of a team man.

### **Is wheelchair tennis different from able-bodied tennis?**

No, apart from the backhand everything else is pretty much the same, although you're allowed two bounces.

### **You've got a pretty specialised wheelchair.**

Yes, the wheels are cambered so they slant out and then there's a wheel at the back. It probably weighs one-tenth of a regular wheelchair. It's very manoeuvrable, very light and quick. I can move it with my trunk without having to use my hands, it's that light. When you're watching the top level, it's a great spectator sport.

### **When will you know if you've been selected for Rio?**

Basically a year in advance. I'm ranked 64 in the world at the moment and I need to be about 45. I'm number five in the country.

### **And only four get selected?**

Yes. The average person playing Paralympic tennis has played for six years. I've played for two. So my learning curve is a lot higher than theirs. But it's exactly the same as the able-bodied game: the person who can read the game better can sometimes beat a more talented player.



During the marathon walk through London Paul was supported by sports broadcaster Clare Balding

### **So what other plans are there for the future?**

I want to carry on helping people. I did a fair few talks when I did the challenge and I helped a lot of people that I didn't think I would. So I think I'm going to go and try to do some talks and help people who maybe weren't as lucky as I was.

### **Can you tell me where you get that belief and motivation and drive to turn adversity into triumph from?**

I think it's from the people around you. I had amazing support and I have friends that I've had since I was 14. Everyone was there for me and all I had to do was to get myself better. I think I always went with the attitude that it can never be as bad as the first day. As long as I worked and worked I was always going to get better. And that initial time, that's the lowest you're going to be. And you just have to remember that.

### **It seems that you set yourself lots of little goals to achieve almost on a daily or even an hourly basis?**

Yes, it dawned on me when I was doing the climb, that if I looked from bottom to top it was impossible. I just did a little step. I wouldn't look up, I just kept looking at my feet and I suddenly realised that it was like my rehab, it was just one step at a time. Two and a half hours later I'd climbed a mountain.

### **So the future's good?**

Yes. I could have sat around all day, but there's so much more. I ski again; I ski the same mountains that I had the accident on and I go and do the same things with my friends that I would beforehand. Sometimes it might take me a little bit longer, but there's so much out there that you can do.

Paul is the guest of honour at the OE London Dinner on Thursday 20 March. More details of how to book are opposite page 1.



Paul and his team at the top of the mountain