

Caroline's story...

I was born profoundly deaf to hearing parents. All my life I have always proved people wrong and shown that nothing has held me back despite being deaf. I cannot hear and my speech is distorted, which is a barrier to so many situations. Though I have been frustrated at times, I haven't given up. Here is my story...

By aged 10 I was small and very thin which led to me being bullied at school. I was inspired by a very good swimmer who was also deaf at my school. She had swam for the county and she had also broken most of the school swimming records. I thought that if she can swim then I can! I decided to join her swimming club, where she swam with a number of other hearing students.

Two years later I was selected to swim for the under 14 county swimming team and flew for the first time to East London (1000 miles from my home in South Africa). I was the only deaf person to be in the top swimming team. I was competing against 8 other counties and I won the 100m breast stroke. It was the first time I was featured in the national newspaper and I felt good that I was now inspiring others and showing that being deaf should not hold you back.

I became a very competent sports person; achieving in netball, athletics (sprinting), swimming, tennis and many more. From this I gained the respect of my peers and the bullying reduced.

When I was 16 years old I broke all the national deaf swimming records, 8 in total and I also won many sports person of the year awards at mainstream events. Within that mainstream setting, I reached the top 15 seeded swimmers in the country and won bronze in the 400M relay, I felt so proud when I was standing on the podium; and felt very lucky to have friends who were willing to learn sign language so that we could communicate.

I had to give up swimming when I was 19 years old as there were no deaf specific sports events for school leavers. When I heard about the Deaflympic Games being held in Bulgaria in 1993 I restarted my swimming training after having taken a year off. Eighteen months later, I was selected to represent South Africa in the Deaflympics. There were six swimmers selected out of a group of 50 deaf athletes; the competition was fierce.

I won 3 silver and gold medals at the Deaflympics. I was so exhausted after my swimming gala finished and I had lost a stone in weight due to the lack of nutrients that were available

in such a poor country. Out of those 50 deaf athletes, I was the only one who had won any medals for the country.

As soon as I got home from the Deaflympics I was overwhelmed by the welcome I received from people at the airport. They were cheering and I was offered so many congratulations, hugs and kisses! I would like to be able to rewind the clock so that I could relive the memory of people faces and note down their names; it just wasn't possible at the time!

After, I was invited into schools and gave numerous presentations about my achievements. So many pupils and teachers came up to me afterwards just to take a look at my medals. I was actually a bit worried that the medals may have disappeared but my bodyguards (the teachers) took care of them. I was on national Television; won many sports person of the year awards, and I have received countless gifts and letters from supporters. It was a most memorable time in my life.

Then at the age of 22, I went on to join a mainstream rowing club. I was the only deaf rower and I taught the hearing rowing team some sign language to help us all communication better. I was sitting behind the rowers in the **Coxless Fours**, it was challenging because the other rowers were shouting instruction which I couldn't hear! I learned the feel of the boat and I memorised the race plans; it has taken time but we have all found a way for the crew to work together.

I have a hearing coach who uses loudspeaker to communicate with rowers from the motorboat while we were training in the lake; it was frustrating for both the coach and myself not being able to communicate in a way that allowed me to correct the technical movements. Coach and I had to think about how we could improve our communication and in the end we started creating our own sign language that was specifically related to rowing. It worked! And eventually, four years later I was selected to represent South Africa as part of the rowing crew.

We toured around the Europe, and managed to include the Women's Henley Regatta. Women were not allowed to row at Royal Henley Regatta at that time! It was an excellent achievement to have reached some of the semi-finals. My back had been injured from a rowing accident; the under 21's South African men's rowing crew had crashed into my Coxless Fours from behind, this didn't happen because I was deaf, but just that the cox didn't see my boat. I was forced to stop rowing as it became more and more uncomfortable and the pain unbearable.

I have always wanted to become a physiotherapist and I needed some experience within a hospital before I could enrol on a university level Physiotherapy course; one of NHS hospitals actually refused to have me there on work experience because of my deafness and speech. This experience made me so angry that I eventually decided to take up the Sport Injury Diploma and become a sports injury therapist; This was a three year university course. I have been involved in various sports activities that support mainstream athletes, and I do this on a voluntary basis. I very much enjoy meeting people and try to help them when I can.

A few years after, I then picked up badminton through my husband. At the time he was playing for Oxfordshire County and coaching Oxfordshire teams in his spare time. We have both been playing for the GB Deaf Badminton team since the 2009 Deaflympics and I decided to retire from badminton in November 2011, after the world deaf badminton championships in Korea.

I remember my mother once telling me that at my old school in Johannesburg, the governors were discussing ways they could reduce some sport activities in the afternoon and encourage pupils to do more homework and extra lessons. My mother was very feisty and refused to let this happen.

Being Deaf can be very frustrating, and doing sports is a good way of releasing some of that feeling of stress that can develop from just every day life. Achieving through sport is a good energy booster.

It is so important for deaf children to get involved with sports, enjoy themselves and be proud of themselves for what they have achieved.

My vision for UK Deaf Sport is for it to expand and allow deaf children to enjoy sports. They could very well be on their pathway to the Deaflympics, World and European championships in the same way as Paralympic Games.

I am a board trustee of UK Deaf Sport and we are working very hard to raise deaf and inclusive awareness with all national Government bodies across the UK. I am also the Great Britain Deaf Swimming manager.

People often ask me how I am able to represent three sports internationally. My motto is 'Never give up'! If there is a barrier in the way then find a way around it or over it so that

you can get what you want. If you fail, try again until you've got it! You shouldn't be frightened of failure. Failing just means that you are learning a lesson.

I offer thanks to my parents and friends who have been there offering support to me from the very start. I would like to carry the 2012 Olympic Torch for deaf people in this country and worldwide and hope I can be an inspiration to others.