



# WHEEL POWER

Britain does have one player at the very top of world tennis, but it's not Andy Murray. **ACE Tennis** met quad wheelchair tennis No.1 Peter Norfolk...

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**O**ne of the most fantastic times of my sporting career was standing in the stands watching you win your gold medal in Beijing.' Thus wrote Lord Coe, the chairman of the 2012 Olympics, in the triumphant aftermath of the Beijing Games. But the object of Coe's admiration was not Chris Hoy, Rebecca Adlington or any one of Britain's illustrious Olympians. It was Peter Norfolk, the 48-year-old from Hampshire who recently won his third Australian Open title in Melbourne's searing heat.

'For a wheelchair sport to touch an athlete of his quality and standing, that means a lot. I feel I'm doing my job,' admits Norfolk, who not only won his second consecutive gold in Beijing, he did it for the loss of just 10 games during the entire tournament. 'When I hit the final ball, the final backhand, it was a total relief,' he reveals, reminiscing about a triumph that took three months of solid training, all day every day. 'But now I think that

was an awesome achievement.'

'Awesome' doesn't quite do the man justice. Struck down in a motorbike accident on Boxing Day 1979, 19-year-old Norfolk broke his back and shoulder blades and in his words, 'wasn't a pretty sight.' After 10 months of rehabilitation at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, he was left in a wheelchair. For a self-confessed sports addict, losing the use of your legs could be devastating. But Norfolk, who once wanted to join the army, is made of stronger stuff. On a visit to Stoke Mandeville Hospital 10 years after his accident, he happened upon a demonstration of wheelchair tennis. 'It was like a spark going off in my brain, a light bulb, going "you can do this, this is the sport for you". I think sometimes in life you just know when things are right,' he remembers.

Determined to conquer his newfound passion, Norfolk pitched up to his local tennis club and demanded to be taught. 'The beauty of tennis is that

there's no special racket, no special ball, no special coach,' he explains. 'All I did was go to my local tennis courts, and I was lucky that I found a coach who didn't see any boundaries. The wheelchair was not a hindrance, it was a challenge.'

It was this kind of thinking that first got the sport off the ground in 1976. Consigned to a wheelchair after a skiing accident and determined not to give in to his disability, 18-year-old American Brad Parks set about devising a way to play tennis in it. The result was a simple one. 'Wheelchair tennis is tennis,' explains Mark Bullock, wheelchair tennis manager at the International Tennis Federation (ITF). 'You don't need anything extra... the only difference is that players are allowed two bounces to reach the ball.'

Within 30 years of Parks' first experiment, the sport went professional, and the ITF established the NEC Wheelchair Tennis Tour in 1992. 'In those days it was just

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## WE'D LIKE WHEELCHAIR PLAYERS TO FEEL CONFIDENT ENOUGH TO GO INTO A TENNIS CLUB AT WHATEVER LEVEL THEY WANT TO PLAY

'There were only 11 tournaments and you certainly didn't win much money so I just mixed it in with work.'

Fast-forward 17 years, and the NEC Tour boasts 150 events in 36 countries around the world. 'There are around 10,000 people playing some level of wheelchair tennis around the world,' reveals Bullock. 'In terms of competitive opportunities we're one of the most comprehensive wheelchair sports, certainly one of the most professionally run.'

### F1 WHEELCHAIR

Unsurprisingly, the wheelchair is crucial. 'The chair is 60-80 per cent of your game,' explains Norfolk. 'If you've got your chair set up right, and service it, it's like a Formula 1 car. With your body set into that chair, every time you move it will go where you go, so it's really an extension of your racket arm.' But, as with anything in life, they don't come cheap. 'Twenty years ago we didn't really have sports chairs,' Norfolk points out. 'Playing in a day chair is a bit like running a marathon in clogs, so we had to adapt them.' It was then that he took the decision to set up his own company, Equipment for the Physically Challenged (EPC), to develop wheelchairs. 'Today our chairs are specific to whichever wheelchair sport you are playing,' he says. 'And you tune the chair to each specific person, to their ability and their disability – that's very important.'

Making the most of his ability is even more important for Norfolk, who in

2000 started to lose the use of his right arm and hand. 'I had an operation to try and curb it, but all that did was stop it getting worse, it didn't improve it,' Norfolk says. 'I went back to tennis, and found that I couldn't grip the racket, so the only way to play was to strap it to my hand.' Undaunted, Norfolk re-trained himself to play in wheelchair tennis' quad division, for those disabled in three limbs or more. 'Athens was the first time that the quad division had been included in the Paralympic Games, so that was my goal, to see if I could work my way up, because it's the pinnacle. I'd almost say the rest is history,' he laughs.

History it is. In the eight years he has been playing on the quad circuit, Norfolk, the No.1 in the world, has had 161 wins to just 21 losses, won 14 Super Series titles, not to mention his four Olympic medals – two golds in singles, a silver and bronze in doubles. 'That's not a bad career is it?' he jokes. 'But the truth is, I'm only interested in what's next.'

What is next for Peter Norfolk? Defending his gold medal at London 2012 is certainly on the agenda, as is picking up as many Super Series and Masters Series titles as he can muster, while keeping up his business at EPC and tending to Joseph, his new-born son. Quite a list, but then Norfolk is clearly not afraid of breaking the mould. 'My goal is to push the boundaries, and half of it is changing

one's mental attitude. It's not a "can't do", it's a "can do",' he says adamantly. 'The scary thing is that I believe I can play a lot better.'

### FUTURE CHALLENGES

For Bullock, the task is continued growth, particularly in the developing world, where cultural stigmas make living in a wheelchair, let alone playing a wheelchair sport, a huge challenge. 'In Africa, only two per cent of people who need a wheelchair have one,' he explains. 'There are people in Nigeria playing tennis sitting on skateboards.' The ITF has certainly not been idle. A programme to develop a low-cost sports chair is being put into place, and wheelchair tennis now has sanctioned events at all four Grand Slams. But growth at a local level is also high on Bullock's list. 'Our objective is not social change, but we'd like wheelchair players to feel confident enough to go into a tennis club so that they can be part of regular programmes at whatever level they want to play. That will take some time, but it is slowly happening.'

Whatever the future hurdles, Norfolk's philosophy is simple – 'Don't be scared to try it. Anyone can play tennis.' Amen to that. 🎾

**Find out more about wheelchair tennis – visit [tennisfoundation.org.uk](http://tennisfoundation.org.uk) or [itftennis.com/wheelchair](http://itftennis.com/wheelchair)**

## FUTURE STARS

Peter Norfolk has set the tone for generations of British wheelchair players. Here are a few bright sparks on the horizon...



### JORDANNE WHILEY

The 16-year-old from Birmingham is world junior No.1 and women's No.19. She became Britain's first ever Cryuff Foundation Junior Masters singles champion when she won the prestigious junior event in Tarbes 2008 and 2009.



### GORDON REID

Also world junior No.1, Reid is ranked No.25 in the world in the men's open division. Nominated for BBC Young Sports Personality of the Year in 2006, the 17-year-old Scot has won both Junior Masters singles and doubles for two years running.



### LUCY SHUKER

The 28-year-old from Hampshire is currently ranked No.11 in the world in the women's wheelchair rankings. Just five years into her wheelchair career, she has reached the quarter-finals at the Australian and French Open.



### DAVID PHILLIPSON

Twenty-year-old Phillipson is ranked inside the top 50 in the world in singles and doubles. Currently the British No.2, the Nottinghamshire resident aims to be on the podium at the London Olympics in 2012.

## THE WHEELCHAIR

Peter Norfolk uses the ultimate in sports wheelchairs, the Sunrise Medical Quickie Matchpoint Tennis Wheelchair

### THE WHEELS

The most obvious difference between an everyday chair and a sports chair is the camber of the wheels, which allow players to move quickly around the court. The camber options of 16 or 20 degrees increase stability and enable the player to turn effortlessly. Keeping the tyres well tuned is very important.

### THE FRAME

Made from either aluminium or titanium, the frame of a sports chair is designed to be lightweight and strong at the same time. They are also fitted with an integral anti-tip, allowing the player to sit forward and make the chair more manoeuvrable, without worrying about tipping over.

### THE SEAT

With an adjustable height, centre of gravity and angle, the seat helps mould the player into the chair, so that where they go, it goes. The back angle accommodates different playing styles and abilities, and the upholstery is also adjustable, helping the player to fit into the backrest and increase mobility.

### THE SIDE GUARDS

The aluminium side guards enable players to lock their hips into the chair, creating a secure connection between the player and the chair. Slight movement of the hips will change the direction of the chair according to the player's wish.

