

JOHN WALKER MBE: OUT OF RETIREMENT AND ONTO LA28 PARAS

By Duncan Busby

John Walker MBE has had a remarkable archery career, going from novice to champion in just four years. Walker survived a devastating and life changing motorcycle accident in 2011 that left him with a partially paralysed right arm and multiple injuries that meant he had to use a wheelchair. While he was recovering from his injuries at home he watched the 2012 London Paralympic Games and was inspired by the sight of Matt Stutzman shooting a bow with his feet. He saw him overcome his disability to win a medal and it made Walker wonder if he could do the same, so he picked up a bow and his life changed dramatically once again.

Walker went on to win two gold medals at the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games as well as medals at the European and World Para Championships, before he was appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in the 2017 New Year Honours for services to archery.

Later, an injury forced him to switch to rifle shooting in 2019, but Walker returned to archery last year and now has his sights firmly set on the 2028 Los Angeles Paralympics.

Bow International caught up with John to ask him about his experiences as one of Great Britain's most decorated Paralympic compound archers...

What does it mean to you to be able to shoot at the Paralympic Games?

It means everything to me to be able to compete at the Paralympic Games. For para-athletes it's the only time we can compete in front of thousands of people and show the world what disabled people can still do, even with our limitations, we just have to work harder to achieve success in our sport.

What are you most looking forward to about the Paralympic Games?

Winning a medal. All my training and focus comes down to winning at the Games; it's the same for able bodied athletes competing at the Olympics. They [Games] only come around every four years and everything we work towards culminates to this point.

During the four-year cycle it feels like we are just competing as individuals, but once we are selected to be part of the GB Paralympics team it feels like we are part of something bigger. Winning a medal for your country is a really powerful thing and it's something that's felt only by a few lucky athletes.

What drives you to achieve in compound archery?

Archery helps me to forget about my disability, I have always been a very competitive person and competing against the world's greatest archers is such an adrenaline buzz. I always strive to do my best, but I always want more so I'm aiming for World number 1 and another gold medal from the LA Games in 2028.

How important is the compound bow to para-archers?

My disability means I'm only able to use one arm so there's no way that I could shoot with a recurve bow, as you need to have the fully working upper limbs. A compound bow allows me to compete in archery and I wouldn't have achieved everything I have without it. I shoot in the W1 category which includes archers with more severe impairments; you can only pull a maximum draw weight of 45lb, and you can't use any magnifying sights or peep sights. I also have to use an adapted release mechanism to draw my bow.

How have you adapted your equipment to your disability and how easy is it to shoot as a para-athlete?

I served as a soldier in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, which honed my shooting and engineering skills. So when I took up archery after my accident I decided to make a shoulder harness with a release mechanism to allow me to shoot with one arm. I worked with my partner Margaret Harris to create something which complied with the Para archery rules; [the rules] are strict but straight forward to understand. I went on to work with World Archery in 2015 to design my current harness and its now the benchmark for archers with only one functioning limb, there's even a photo of me in the rule book!

In 2017 I was reclassified to standing, I was no longer able to shoot from my wheelchair and I struggled to adapt to a stool. I'd shot in hot countries before; out in Rio I won two gold medals and I've shot in Bangkok and it's never been an issue, so I never really saw the dangers of a hot climate to para-athletes before. When I was in a wheelchair my arm just rested in my lap but of course from a stool, my arm is not supported in the same way, so that contributed to my injury. My arm swelled up and just dropped, it's caused some nerve damage to my right shoulder and it prevented me from drawing my bow in the way I used to shoot. That's when I made the decision to quit archery and switch to shooting. The rules change every four years and they can seem very unfair, but shooting taught me a way to protect my arm from further injury so I was able to come back into archery.

What are your greatest achievements with a compound bow?

My two Paralympic Gold medals from Rio 2016. I'm also a World Champion and European Champion in the W1 mixed team with Joe Frith, I hold many World Records and even a Guinness World Record. I was awarded an MBE for my services to archery and I have also been made a Freeman of London by the Worshipful Company of Fletchers who do a lot for disabled archers through their Fletchers Trust charity.

What difference has archery made to your life and how has it helped you to overcome your disabilities?

After the army I worked in the offshore survey industry and travelled all over the world on survey ships, but it was when I was at home on leave when I had my accident. Archery gave me a purpose again and it's a big part of my life. I've missed my archery family and it's lovely to compete with them once more, as we all help each other out. I'd like to see more paras taking up the sport though, there's a lot more help available now than when I first started. Eventually I'd like to become a coach to help the next generation to continue in my footsteps. Archery really helps you to forget about your disability and it's really nice to see that beaming smile on someone's face after they shot their first arrow.

How do you hope compound archery will develop in the future for disabled archers?

I would love for compound archery to be part of the Olympics as it would allow all compound archers the opportunity to compete at the Games. Currently the Paralympic archery event is held on the same field as the Olympics and unfortunately this limits the number of para-archers taking part. As we have to stay on the shooting line we can't compete in two details, so para-archers are limited to two per boss. As a consequence, only two archers in each category can qualify for the games, instead of the usual three, which is a shame as it limits the number of disabled archers who can take part. So I hope venues can eventually be adapted for each Games.

We wish John Walker luck with his quest for gold, and we don't doubt that we'll see him up on that Paralympic Games podium in LA in four years' time. ☺

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