Disability And… the Paralympics with Fran Brown

Intro:

Welcome to the Disability And podcast, bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month, Graeae's associate director, Nickie Miles-Wildin chats with paratriathlete, para cyclist and two times world paraclimbing champion, Fran Brown ahead of the Tokyo 2021 Paralympics.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Hello and welcome to the Disability And podcast. I'm Nickie Miles-Wildin, associate director at Graeae Theatre Company. I am a white woman with bleached white hair, short on the sides and a bit fluffy on the top today. I have black winged glasses, piercing in my left nostril, and I'm wearing a black hoodie. Behind me is a white wall. And I am joined today with the fantastic Fran Brown. Hello, Fran. How are you?

Fran Brown:

I'm good, thank you. I'm Fran. I'm a white, middle-aged woman. I have really short hair that is sadly a bit of a mess having just come out of a heat chamber and I'm looking quite red and slightly rosy, put it that way. I'm wearing a blue Nike hoodie and I'm sat in a altitude hotel room at the Elite Athlete centre in Loughborough. Behind me is a standard hotel double bed, a little bit of brown wall decoration, a couple of lights, and my big orange bike box that my bike goes in.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Brilliant. That was a great description, Fran. I love rosy. Rosy face sums it up nicely. And just to give you a bit of an intro Fran, even more of an intro than me just going Fran Brown, Fran is a paratriathlete, a paracyclist, physio-therapist, percussionist, and two-times world paraclimbing champion. Fran's currently training before heading to Tokyo as Fran has been selected as one of GB's paratriathlon squad. So many PS Fran, do you only do stuff that begin with P?

Fran Brown:

Yeah, clearly. I need to find more sports that start with P.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

We were saying, was there para power lifting?

Fran Brown:

Power lifting, yeah, maybe.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Parachuting. (Fran laughs). We met back doing the 2012 opening ceremony. And as I was reading your website, I was like, "Wow, I feel so starstruck sat here talking to you." The fact that you are training to go and represent GB in Tokyo, I just want to try and do a little bowing down to you, Fran. I think it's epic. So how are ya, and how's training going?

Fran Brown:

I'm good. Little bit tired, but in the middle of our prep block. So we fly in a week and a day. So it's not too bad going. We're doing loads of heat training at the moment. So we're in the heat chamber trying to acclimatise to the conditions in Tokyo. So you ride your bike in the heat for an hour, hour and a quarter or run in the heat. And then we're still swimming and running and biking outside to do all our sessions and gym sessions. So it's just a bit hectic.

Fran Brown:

And I'm obviously not at home. I'm up here in Loughborough, which is where most of the squad are based. So living out of a bag for the best part of six weeks comes with its own challenges. I feel like I'm in reasonable shape and I'm looking forward to actually getting on the plane now in a week, basically just ticking off the heat sessions because they're a bit grim.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Yeah. It'd be much different, won't it, to the heat than over here?

Fran Brown:

Oh, definitely. When you get outside with the airflow, even though it's hot and humid, it just feels so much nicer than sitting in a heat chamber where there's zero airflow and all you do is sweat. But that's the point is that then that feels easy to do hard efforts when you get there. So I'm looking forward to going and capping off the training really.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

And what's it like when you get to Tokyo, then? How imminent is it before you have your race?

Fran Brown:

We fly on the 13th, land on the 14th because we're flying down to Miyazaki with an internal flight after we get to Tokyo. So we have to go through our COVID testy immigration stuff in Tokyo that takes quite a few hours. I think that's six or seven hours in the airport and then get another flight down to Miyazaki where our holding camp is. We're going somewhere we've been before, so we know what we're going to get. So that's really cool. It's a really good training base. Amazing places to run and ride and there's some open water swimming. We've got hotel pool. So really nice sets up for us. And it's exactly where the Olympic guys that have just been, went. So we're kind of copying, doing the same as them.

Fran Brown:

So from a sports perspective, we know the ins and outs, but then we go into Tokyo about 12 days later on the 24th. So the day of the opening ceremony we fly into Tokyo, and then I race on the 28th. So we've got a few days in Tokyo first, and then the rest of my squad race on the 29th, because it's four categories a day. And we haven’t got people in every category, so there's two of us who race the first day and then other people race the second day.

Fran Brown:

And then we fly back on the 31st because you have to fly back within 48 hours of your event. So we're lucky that we've got reserved date as the 30th in case of weather, because we do open water swim. It might be too choppy, it might affect the water quality, it might be too windy. So we've got that reserve date. Oh, obviously thunderstorms as well. No one wants to swim in open water in a thunderstorm. Japan has quite a lot of those. But hence why we're flying back on the 31st. So overall we've got three days afterwards.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

The entire Paralympics had been pushed back a year. How has that impacted on your training?

Fran Brown:

Oh, well, number one is partly why I just want to get it done now, another year. But I shielded. So when COVID started, I was actually on a camp in Spain. And I'd been there for best part of seven weeks. When we went, it was Wuhan and no one had heard of anything else and it wasn't anywhere. And then it kicked off in Italy a little bit after about five weeks and we were like, "Hmm, do we need to be worried, or is this all about overkill?" And then I was supposed to be there for nine weeks. And after eight weeks it looked like Spain had COVID, GB COVID and we looked like we were looking down. So we were basically told, "Come home."

Fran Brown:

So I changed my flights and flew home the next day, and the day I flew home was the day shielding advice came up. So I pretty much went from a camp outside in Spain to staying in the house and not leaving the house. I didn't swim for 14 months. I rode indoors and ran on a treadmill, which I was lucky enough to have for best part of nine, 10 months, and then started going outside in the end. Because also, I have Crohn's and I had a massive Crohn's flare at the same time, potentially down to stress, who knows, and needed surgery. So I had to wait until my surgery in August.

Fran Brown:

And then after that, I then started training outside, but then we had another lock down and then I didn't swim till I was double vaccinated, which that was late April, early May this year. So I've only had four months of swimming.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

And have you noticed a difference? Was it harder when you got back in the pool after 14 months or...

Fran Brown:

Well, weirdly, we did lots of strength training to try and keep your upper body strong so that when we got back and didn't pick up injuries. And weirdly, initially it felt awful. Well, I lie. The first 50 metres felt amazing, like I was Michael Phelps and I had not lost anything and it was all great, and then I basically died. But after that, the first few sessions felt horrible, but they came back remarkably quickly. And if anything, I'm now swimming faster, having done less sessions.

Fran Brown:

So it's strange, quite a lot of our squad have said similar things. We've almost come back better. Now, whether it's because we're less fatigued because we had that time off, whether you just had time to reset your stroke and get out of bad habits because you haven't used it for so long, because when I started back, a lot of my first swims were technical, so I could polish up my stroke. So I think in a way it's strangely advantageous, but I still would've preferred not 14 months of feeling like I was training for two sports out of three.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Yeah. That would be... What is that called? A para-

Fran Brown:

Dualthlon. Which is a thing, just not a Paralympic thing.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Yeah. Well that's interesting, isn't it, how you've all noticed that change that you have come back faster?

Fran Brown:

Yeah. I think everyone's got out of their bad... Because swimming is really easy to develop bad habits. And I think just it's given everyone time to reset that and reset some fatigue and probably build more aerobic fitness before you get in the pool because we ran and biked. Basically once it was announced the games weren't happening, everybody went to their winter training.

Fran Brown:

So I carried on bits and pieces until my surgery. But you went to winter aerobic training, not the really hard stuff, which is what we've been doing in Spain. And I think they gave us a massive aerobic base to then start doing hard stuff on. So the hard, fast stuff came back quicker and therefore potentially add more head room.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

And we've mentioned a paratriathlon. Could you just explain in more detail what it entails? What are the three sports?

Fran Brown:

Yeah, sure. So a paratriathlon is swim, bike, run, in that order. The swim is 750 metres in open water. So the Paralympics is in open water. There are pool based ones in the UK if you wanted to do a triathlon, it doesn't have to be by default, an open water swim.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

So 750 metres. A bog standard swimming pool is what, 25 metres long?

Fran Brown:

Do 30 laps in a 25 metre pool.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Wow. 30 lengths?

Fran Brown:

Yeah, nonstop and you don’t get to push off the side.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Yeah. In open water as well?

Fran Brown:

Yeah.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

And like you said, who knows what the conditions of that open water is going to be?

Fran Brown:

Yep. And I've swam in some lovely, open water and I've also swam in some disgusting places that you have to wonder what's in the water.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

What's the most disgusting place? Or shall I not ask?

Fran Brown:

We did at river swim at Europeans two, three years ago in Estonia. And the rest of the venue was amazing, but the river was murky brown. You literally couldn't see your fingers if you touched your eye practically. And it didn't smell great either.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Not great. And where in Japan, will you be in the ocean then? Or is it a lake?

Fran Brown:

We're in Odaiba Bay, which is part of Tokyo Bay, basically. It's near the village, it's just on Odaiba Island, which is one of the islands just across. So it's vaguely salt water, so it's kind of the sea, but it's so inland from the sea, that it gets really warm. So water temperature might be not an issue for us, but we'll have to manage your temperature, certainly, because the water temperature for the Olympic races that have just happened at its hottest was 30.3, which if you think about a swimming pool it's normally 25 to 27.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

So how do you acclimatise to that?

Fran Brown:

Swim in a warm pool, have a hot bath. So I'm swimming in a pool here that's 29, which suits me because cold water and my spasticity don't mix. So I would rather warm than cold. And it's obviously non wetsuit. We do swim in wetsuits if the water temperature's below 24, but it's optional from 18 to 24. But everyone would swim in a wetsuit because you're faster. However, it'll be a non-wetsuit swim. So just swim in a warm pool, get used to a hot bath. It does feel slower swimming in a hot pool, even if you're swimming the same speed, it feels kind of sluggish. That's why Olympic pools are notoriously cold. So the 50 metre Olympic pool is actually always 24, 25 because it feels faster.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Wow. There's so much science to all this, isn't there?

Fran Brown:

Yeah. So we swim 750 metres, get out of the open water, do transition one. So the transitions in triathlon are almost like a fourth discipline if you like, because it's all your total time, it's who crosses the line first. So if you take half an hour putting your shoes on, you've lost a chunk of time. So do transition one. So for me, I put on my cycling braces, my leg braces in as soon as I get out of the swim basically. And then I run to where my bike is, grab my bike, put my helmet on and my glasses on and there's rules that say you have to put your helmet on before you touch your bike or you get a penalty. So there's lots of things to remember. And then take my bike off the back.

Fran Brown:

And then it's a 20K cycle, 20 kilometre cycle. And then come back in, get off your bike, run in, put your bike into its rack, hang it on the rack or push it, sometimes it's a wheel one where you just push your wheel in. Take your helmet off... So for my case, I have different run braces to cycling braces. So I change to my run braces, much like the girls in my classification are often above knee amputees on one leg, so they'll change their leg for a different prosthetic, so a blade for running and a normal leg for cycling. Or some of them only cycle with one leg. They prefer to just put the power out with one leg. So they'll then put a running blade on.

Fran Brown:

And then yeah, it's a five kilometre run slash walk in my case. I do run it. It's just, I tend to jump into run, walk, run, walk. It works better for me.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

You must be absolutely knackered by the time you get to run.

Fran Brown:

Yep. Running 5K for me with my disability is hard anyway. So it took me best part of seven years to get to being able to run 5K straight. Initially it was with crutches than it was with the right braces, but then just being able to run a 5K without actually stopping at all, let alone do it at race pace and then off a bike after a swim. So it's a massive struggle. Whereas we have arm amputees in the PTS fives. They obviously wouldn't find that as difficult. They would find that similar to an able bodied person. They're more impaired in the swim than on the bike for controlling the bike with one hand. So that's why they class it as try to put people similarly together.

Fran Brown:

It's it's a weird one. We do have quite a level playing field, but sometimes it just makes it strange. It's a bit like swimming where you might have short stature people, wheelchair users in the same class and you'd be like, "How does that work?" That's kind of how paratriathlon works, except the wheelchair users have their own class. And they have two classes within that.

Fran Brown:

So basically just to explain paratriathlon, there's four ambulant classes. So PTS two are the most impaired, and I'm a PTS two. Three is the next, would be potentially a double below knee amputee or maybe somebody with hemiplegia on one side, or somebody missing an arm completely. PTS fours are normally single below knee amputees. PTS fives are arm impairments mostly. But there are a couple of lower leg impairments in there, but they're the least disabled, least impaired, I hate that word, least disabled, but that's what it's in the manual. Least impaired ambulant class. By ambulant, I mean we ride a normal two wheel bike. It might have adaptations and you might use braces, and we run.

Fran Brown:

And then there's the visually impaired class. They swim with a guide, tethered to a guide with a rope, and then they ride a tandem and then they run holding a rope, much like the athletics you would see. And they have B1, B2, B3 and the B1s get a bit of a headstart. So they start and then the others swim after them after a time so that it's a bit fairer.

Fran Brown:

And then there's a wheelchair classes, two classes. So the wheelchair guys swim, they use a hand bike, a recumbent lie-down hand bike for the bike. And then for their run, they use a race chair standard, like you would see on the track. And then they've got two classes split with disabilities. So the more impaired, if you've got a upper trunk impairment as well and arms, you get a bit of a headstart. And those that just have lower trunk and lower limb impairments. So that's how it works out.

Fran Brown:

Not all those classes are represented at the Paralympics yet, because we don't get a full complement of medals yet because paratriathlon is only in its second games. So some classes were excluded from Rio. Some classes are excluded from this games, but they've given the opportunity this time for some people to race up. So those in the girls, the PT fours and threes, there's not enough people to make races. And so they didn't get medals, but they can race up in the fives if they've qualified. So some of the PTS four girls are qualified to race in the fives. So hopefully by Paris we'll have more complement, cause there's more people coming through.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Yeah. And it is that, isn't it? Finding those young athletes to train. And if you don't know that sport exists or that you are able to take part, then-

Fran Brown:

And there's three sports. So it's a lot of equipment and lots of challenges to figure out. So actually, I can see why people are drawn to one of the sports, but actually quite often that works in our favour because we can find people that are like, they might be really good at swimming, but they don't love it. And they'd be like, "Oh, you'd be really good at..." So I think it's a good talent pathway into triathlon, even if people don't come into triathlon going... I don't think many people come into triathlon straight to triathlon. They do come from something else. I'm a bit strange with that in so far as I came from paraclimbing, which isn't one of the three sports.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

It's interesting, isn't it, what you said around that language around more disabled, more impaired?

Fran Brown:

Yeah.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

I love watching the Paralympics, but there's also part of me where I feel like some of the language is quite different around it, particularly my background is social model where that thing where you're disabled by physical and attitudinal barriers. What is it like? Does it feel like you're being medicalised or do you just get to a point where it doesn't phase you anymore because you're in it for the sport?

Fran Brown:

I think once you get into it, it's for the sport. When you go through the classification process, it feels very much like that. And everyone inevitably ends up with their classification at some point probably being questioned if you don't have a very clear cut disability. So some people obviously, if you're an amputee, it's not going to grow back.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Tell that to the PIP assessors. (Both laugh)

Fran Brown:

Exactly. You're fairly set, but there's certainly the visual impairment class, the wheelchair class for some people and people with neuro impairments, like I have, we often get reassessed and it might be that you just have a fixed review and it gets reassessed in case with training you improve. It doesn't really improve your condition, but then that then becomes a bit medicalised because all their assessment is a bit like going for a medical.

Fran Brown:

But once you're in the system and once you're in the sport, it just becomes about the sport. I don't think about my classification. I just get on with my training. I know I'm the slowest of all the people in our squad. So if we go on a group ride or a group run or we're in the pool, I'll be the slowest just because I have more challenges, but I just see them as challenges. I didn't really see it as a problem.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

It's really enlightened me, this conversation in understanding the classification. I'm probably the most unsporty person. So it's great. But then, everybody's an armchair wheelchair critic when we're watching the Olympics or the Paralympics, aren't we? Like, "Oh, come on. Oh, I could have done that." Yeah, right.

Fran Brown:

Yeah. You watch the diving you're like, "That's a big splash. Oh, they scored 10." (Both laugh).

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

And there's always that moment where you're like, "I can do this. Come on. Going to get in training." And then you're like, "No, it's just too cold in a swimming costume at the moment." So what was your journey into sport? Have you always been sporty?

Fran Brown:

To some extent, yes. My dad was a sailing instructor, outdoors instructor, always outdoorsy. My mum was a teacher, so it doesn't necessarily come from her. So she's quite musical. I get the musical element from my mum. When I was a kid, we lived in Cornwall. So I grew up in Cornwall, lived there till I was 18. My twin was really sporty as in was fast-tracked through England hockey. So my parents would trek up back and forth to Exmouth with her every two or three times a week for training with one of the big squads in Exmouth and stuff.

Fran Brown:

So I didn't do mainstream sport, partly because in school we were... because we were twins. We wanted to be in different sets and different classes and different everything. And I therefore didn't want to play hockey because she played hockey, but I didn't want to play netball because I'm really short, and at 4"11, you're crap at netball. Everyone in my class could literally just hold the ball over my head and I'd just be like, "Oh, this is boring."

Fran Brown:

So my school offered stuff like rock climbing and outdoor sports and stuff on a Wednesday afternoon as an option for PE. So I was like, "Oh, I'll try climbing." And we had an indoor climbing wall, so I did climbing every Wednesday. So I got into climbing and I competed, I did national level kids competitions like the British U Series. And I enjoyed that and I canoed with a canoe club. I did your standard, I did gymnastics a little bit. I swam with the swimming squad for a little bit. But I wasn't the sporty one of the twins, if you like.

Fran Brown:

And then I went to university in Cardiff and still carried on with sport, but just generally the social climbing club was more about drinking than climbing really, and partying. But we had some weekends away and it was awesome, the best part of uni life pretty much. And then when I moved to London for a job I carried on climbing and found a social circle and my social circle was climbers. I didn't compete and it wasn't about performance at that point. After doing the kids comps once I went to uni, I didn't compete anymore. I just did the social side. It was about keeping fit as well. It was much like going to the gym, only with climbing, you do it with other people. And then I had my accident when I was 22. Going back to work was a bit weird. I stayed in theatre for a bit and then changed jobs. But-

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

What was your job? What was your job in theatre?

Fran Brown:

So I was deputy head of lighting on a show when I had my accident. And then I went back as deputy head of lighting on The Lion King. I went back to Grease. I worked on Grease for a bit and then went to The Lion King and then gave it up because I couldn't climb ladders, I couldn't lift lights. Couldn't do most of the stuff that was the things that you need to do to be in electric. And being a lighting designer is so... I still do freelance lighting design, but it's not a full full-time job. It's very dependent on getting the right contacts and the right people. And even then access is still... you can't go sit in the circle if you can't climb a million stairs.

Fran Brown:

So I decided I wanted to retrain as a physio and it was from retraining as a physio that then I got into climbing competitions because I was going to the gym or the physio crew went to the gym. And my friends had told me about paraclimbing competitions. And I'd got back into climbing after my accident to stay with the same group of friends initially just by going and sitting at the wall and not really climbing. Like I’d relay other people and just then do the social bit. But then that quickly wore off and I got bored.

Fran Brown:

So I'd got back into paraclimbing. One of my friends found a flyer for the British paraclimbing series. He was like, "Oh, you should enter this." And I did. I didn't really train for it the first year, and then I got hooked because obviously I was all right at it. I then wanted to be good in it. And I started using swimming as cross training, which is then how I started into the journey that led me to paratriathlon. And so I started to swimming for cross training and I started cycling to get to work.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Lighting at uni, and design, then went on to work in the West End in quite high profile West End shows then if that was Grease and Lion King.

Fran Brown:

Yeah. I started on We Will Rock You was the first place, but doing in-house electrics rather than... Not much show biz, just bits. And then had my accident, and then I went to Grease, worked on Grease. Grease was a weird one because I worked for the theatre, but they did all the show electrics. So it was a dual role, which was wonderful because you got to operate the show and you still got to do some stuff. You got some day shifts. And then work done. Then I moved to The Lion King when they were recruiting for their 10th birthday. So two years before the 10th birthday, they expanded their team a little bit to have people to do a rig change because they put a new movie lights and everything for the 10th birthday.

Fran Brown:

And so I went in to basically help with that role because that was a bit more logistical. And I operated the show mostly. So I think I did some crazy amount of times I've seen that show, because it was the most accessible bit of the job, if you like. I really enjoyed it there. I just had decided I wanted to retrain because the opportunities beyond that were slim as far as access in theatre was concerned in lighting.

Fran Brown:

I kept on my lighting design, which was the interesting bit I could still do. I think if I hadn't had an accident, I'd have been quite happy as a chief LX, either touring or maybe moving into production LX, but I would have stayed in theatre. It wasn't that I desperately wanted out of the industry. I just didn't fit with... after my accident it was too challenging, really.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Particularly West End theatres, they're not the most accessible are they? Let's be honest.

Fran Brown:

Yeah. I can understand why, they're ancient, but in some respects there's a few things they could do better, but it was never going to really work as a career. Sometimes you just have to draw a line and be like, "Hmm. I can probably make it work, but it's more effort than it's worth-"

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Have I got the energy to do it? And does it feel like a shared responsibility, or is it just me banging the drum and nothing is-

Fran Brown:

That's literally what I was doing.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

So what about being a physiotherapist? And also, has that impacted your training, I suppose, giving you a better understanding of your own body as well?

Fran Brown:

Yeah, absolutely. So being a physio's really cool. I qualified after 2012 and I went and did NHS stuff. So I worked in wheelchairs for a bit. I worked for a wheelchair service because I was quite passionate about improving that and I was really enjoying that, but then it was full-time and triathlon training was picking up, and the service I was working for wouldn't let me job share and were not super helpful about being flexible. So I went into it-

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

The irony of that. The irony of that.

Fran Brown:

Yeah. So I found a research post and went into a respiratory research post for two years and I gradually changed my hours. They were the opposite. They were super flexible. And then the role ended because the study ended that I was working on. So that was a natural time to take a break from NHS work. So I kept up private work. So I worked for climbers because I was like, "Oh, I'm really interested in hands and hand therapy and upper limb therapy," especially with my disability, I find it quite hard to lift really heavy things and move things around. So doing legs and stuff with people can be awkward. Whereas hands is quite delicate and quite nuanced.

Fran Brown:

So I did a lot of work. I set up a clinic to work with climbers and that was working quite well. I could work part-time, self-employed. You can do the hours you want to do around training. And then obviously with COVID, I had other people covering my clinic while I was away, but then all the climbing walls shut and all my clients disappeared. So I shut down the business because of the extra year, and then I'll start again. But I don't know that I want to be self-employed again. I think I might go back and work for someone, but privately.

Fran Brown:

I've done my master's in sports and exercise medicine. So I want to use that basically. As much as I love the wheelchair side, there's so many you can't change things that really need changing. I found it so demoralising. I found it was super cool being able to help people out that potentially wouldn't have got the right equipment if I hadn't have been there to pull the right strings and tweak the right things. And actually as a wheelchair user myself, because I still use a chair for when I'm recovering between sessions because my spasticity gets really high from training, just understanding their active user needs and, which is the bit that I think gets lost a lot of the time. But then equally, there's so much budgetary constraint and things. I find it a little bit depressing.

Fran Brown:

It might be something I do go back to in the future, but I've got options open. But it's certainly taught me a lot about my body. It's taught me that if I get a niggle... Because you're going to get niggles training as an athlete. You're never going to be completely injury free, pain-free. But identifying when a pain is adaptability good pain, just a little niggle, like something that's going to settle in a couple of days and just changing your training slightly, I'm quite good at. Whereas some athletes would just plough through and then get injured, injured. Or knowing when something is a deal breaker that this is bad, I need to stop. I need to change it. And I need to seek help with something because obviously there's only so much you can do to treat yourself.

Fran Brown:

It's not the best thing to do anyway. And you're kind of limited, I can't exactly massage my own leg. Not that massage is a great modality, but also, I can't do some of the tests on myself that you would want to do to decide on an injury, but I can certainly identify when I need to reach out for that support, which I think is probably appreciated by our team physiotherapist because it means I nag him a lot less than some people do.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

You were in the Paralympics opening ceremony in 2012 along with me. And tell us what your role was and how did you come to be in it?

Fran Brown:

So I was one of the aerialists. So basically, I come from a ballet background and performing background and I wanted to be part of 2012. So I signed up for a dance workshop. It wasn't for disabled people specifically. It was a dance workshop for volunteers. And I went to that and I think it was for both. So it was just a general cast recruitment. I went to that, I really enjoyed it. I did it in my chair because I cannot coordinate my feet where I have to dance without it now.

Fran Brown:

And then they contacted me afterwards. I thought they were going to contact me and be like, "You can be one of the volunteers in the ceremony," which is kind of what I was angling for. I just wanted me to be part of it. And then they said, "Oh no, there's this opportunity. Would you like to come and audition for a different role?" And they didn't really tell me much about the role. And they basically said, "Are you scared of heights?" And I said, "No, and I'm a climber. It's fine." And they said, "Okay, cool." Can I turn up on this day? And I did.

Fran Brown:

And it turned out it was a aerialist role audition. So they basically strung up in a harness and made you like pull around in the air and see what you could do, how expressive you were. Could you orientate yourself and stuff like that. And I really enjoyed it because obviously I'm a climber. Hanging from a harness is my thing. I was like, "This is so cool." No expectations as well. And they hadn't quite told me what the role was then either.

Fran Brown:

And then from that, then I was contacted and told that it was the opportunity to do the circus based training. So to do, I can't remember things like eight weeks or 10 weeks at the circuit base training in aerial stuff and then be part of the pro cast if you like, of aerialists for the opening ceremony. And I was like, "Yep, absolutely. That's fine. I 100% want to do that," because I would've been happy to volunteer as a general anything, to be honest with you. So for me it was an epic dream come true.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Yeah. It was, wasn't it really? For me as well at that thing of when I got the world of Miranda, like, "Oh, are you okay with heights?" "Yeah, I'm fine." "25 metres in the air?" I'm like, "Oh, okay. Yeah, I'm absolutely fine." But that feeling of being in a harness was so freeing. I hadn't been up that high before and being able to do roly-polies was just epic until they made you have to do them really slowly where you have to hold your body at each bit of the clock. And I was just like, "Ah, I hate this now," but it was, wasn't it? It was that feeling of 2012, everyone come together and we were chatting before we came on the Zoom, weren't we? We were told to make sure we have that moment that night to just take it all in.

Fran Brown:

Yeah. Look around and breathe in the moment and try and make a memory from it. And don't just let it go past you. But it's funny, we've been told the same thing, with Tokyo. When our team was announced, our performance director stood up and basically said exactly that, "Don't go to the games and just let it wash over you and come home and then be like, 'Oh, well it happened and I don't really remember any of it.' Try and take in as much as you can."

Fran Brown:

And for me, it's my first games. I think because of the restrictions around COVID and not having family out there and things like that and supporters, in a way it will almost make it easier to take in the moment because there's less to take in. There's less pomp and circumstance, more just the race. But equally then you can take in being part of the wider Paralympics GP team. And I'm quite looking forward to that. And even with COVID, we've got things like, it's not Facebook, but it's like Facebook for the wider team and staff so you can feel like you're part of something. And I think it will give a bit more of an opportunity to breathe in the moment and enjoy it.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

Yeah. Not so many distractions.

Fran Brown:

Yeah. And I don't want to say less pressure because obviously I feel that I'm going to perform, it's performance based, but in a way, it's less in your face pressure, I think. Not having your family in the stands. And I'm not someone that my family comes to every race, so I'm not going to miss that. I know that they're going to be watching at home and I feel their support and that's amazing, but at the same time it just feels it will be a bit more chilled. And so therefore you can just focus on the performance bit and then enjoy the experience.

Fran Brown:

And our holding camp and everything, I want to enjoy as much as enjoy... Enjoy is a strong word. If you're almost on the verge of vomiting doing a really hard bike session, it's hard to say you enjoy it, but ultimately you can still have that moment where you look around and be like, "Oh, wow. This is a really cool place." Because we get to visit some really cool places even with the restrictions around training.

Fran Brown:

And then my teammates are awesome. So we're quite a close knit, quite a small team as sports go. So I'm looking forward to just being able to spend a bit of time as much as COVID allows with them and training with them and just enjoy their experience too. And in a way that's cool that we're racing on different days so we can support each other.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

What are you most looking forward to of being in Tokyo?

Fran Brown:

Yeah, experiencing it with everyone, with my teammates. And also first games. It's a massive honour. I'm looking forward to just putting on the kit and getting on the plane and being able to say I'm a Paralympian. Regardless of the outcome, that's such a massive goal after... When 2012 happened, I obviously watched, was part of the ceremony and then our passes gave us access loads of sports. So I got in the park and I live really close to the Olympic park and I still do. So I went to every single day, and I just watched once and I was like, it was so different to climbing where climbing is progressing. So paraclimbing has progressed now, so that there's crowds and it's got a higher status within the climbing community. I know they're pushing towards Paralympic sport.

Fran Brown:

But when I did it, it was very much like no one would come and watch. We were the first people on at 6:00 PM when the main show was at 10:00, if you like, and not even really the warmup act. So it just felt so cool at the Paralympics to see people pushing at the highest level and wearing their kit and representing their country at what is the highest level of sport. I was like, "I really want to do that." And that was why I went hunting for a sport. Even though I did climbing for four more years, I hunted for a sport at the same time that would allow me to be part of that, if I was good enough. Obviously it was never a given, but that was what drove me. I was like, I want to be a Paralympian. I want to be part of that pinnacle of your sport and representing your country, because it was an honour to put on the kit and get selected.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

And it feels an honour to have spent this time chatting with you tonight and thinking that you're going to be on a plane soon. You are going to be in Tokyo, you are going to be representing GB. And I feel just really humbled that you've taken the time to chat to us. So thank you, Fran. And look forward to seeing your success and wishing you loads of luck for your first Paralympic games.

Fran Brown:

Thank you so much for having me. I've enjoyed being able to tell my story and if it means someone else thinks, "Oh, maybe, I'll give that a go," or, "Oh, I might give drumming a go," just because I've got an impairment it doesn't mean you can't do it.

Nickie Miles-Wildin:

But thank you, Fran, and definitely all the best and we'll be watching you. Thank you.

Fran Brown:

Thank you so much.

Speaker 1:

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