

# Hurricane HANNAH

When Hannah Cockcroft was born, doctors said she'd never lead an independent life. They didn't predict she'd win five Paralympic gold medals. Now training for Tokyo on the Yorkshire Moors, she shares the highs and lows of chasing medals

INTERVIEW BY LAURA SILVERMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALUN CALLENDER

**T**owards the end of London 2012, Hannah Cockcroft, now double Paralympic champion, decided to pop to the shops. She refused a bodyguard because she thought it ridiculous. Who would know a wheelchair sprinter? She was mobbed. 'Hurricane Hannah' had become a household name. "My life changed overnight," Hannah says today from her home in Chester. "I got swept up in it." At first, it was the parties. Then it was the pressure to keep winning. "As I got older, I had no idea how to control it."

This year has been the first time that Hannah, 29, has been able to relax a bit. Cancelling trips abroad to race has been difficult, but it has had an upside. "It's allowed me to put everything into perspective and realise that I live the most amazing life," she says, smiling. As she chats away, you still feel her energy, but there's an underlying sense of composure.

## AGAINST THE ODDS

Hannah races in the T34 category for athletes with coordination impairments. At birth, she had two cardiac arrests, which damaged parts of her brain and left her with weak hips and deformed legs and feet. Doctors told her parents she would never lead an independent life. They failed to predict five Paralympic gold medals – possibly more after this year in Tokyo.

Hannah's parents offered her the same opportunities as her brothers. At three, she wanted to be a ballerina and, for years, she danced. (Her dancing days paid off in 2014, when she won the *Strictly Come Dancing Sport Relief Special*.) She also went to a mainstream school, where she did everything except sport until

a wheelchair basketball team came to visit when she was 12. "My parents never wrapped me up in cotton wool and it was the best childhood," Hannah says, taking a moment to reflect. "But I always felt alone. I always felt different and I couldn't work out why it was me who had to be the different one. Then I found out about this whole world of disabled people who were just like me." The next day, she was training with the basketball team. She had seen her wheelchair as a symbol of disability; now she saw what it could be. At 15, she tried wheelchair racing and felt free.

Hannah trained on the moors near the family home just outside Halifax in West Yorkshire, her dad often cycling alongside. She still trains there today when visiting her parents. It's where she attracted her first fans: "People driving past would give me a beep and wave."

Within a year, Hannah was invited onto the British Paralympic team. At her first World Championships in 2011, she became double world champion. Then there were the Paralympics: "At London 2012, I had no nerves. If there are no expectations on you, you can relax. I was just a ball of excitement." She won gold medals in the 100m and 200m, and has won golds at every World Championship since, as well as the 2016 Rio Paralympics. She also holds the world record in wheelchair racing for five distances, from 100m to 1,500m.

These weren't inevitable wins, though. After London, Hannah felt under pressure to do well and, by 2015, had taken on too much, training on top of doing a full-time degree. She lost her first race. It was a small competition, but the media latched onto it: Hannah had been beaten by Kare Adenegan, a British athlete, who was just 15.

Today, Hannah can see positives. Kare had been inspired by London 2012: the Games had a legacy. Losses also spur her on. "A ▶

Paralympian Hannah Cockcroft trains on the moors near her family home in West Yorkshire

## “PARALYMPIANS DON’T GET MANY OPPORTUNITIES TO RACE IN FRONT OF A BIG CROWD, SO WHEN YOU DO, YOU MILK IT!”

couple of times, the expectation on me has been so high and I haven’t performed,” she says. It feels “horrendous” getting “ripped apart” online and in the papers, “but no athlete wins every single race... You have to lose sometimes because it gives you the motivation to keep going.”

Back in 2015, however, she wanted to quit. Something had to change. She left university, moved home and trained extra hard so that she wouldn’t be beaten again. The following year was “scary”. She had put pressure on herself to win at Rio and her three golds there were “a relief” rather than a joy. It also meant even higher expectations.

By 2018, Hannah found herself overworking again. Winning silver at the European Championships that year was “rubbish”, while the World Championships in 2019 were difficult because she was going into a race when she wasn’t top. “Every race I do now, I’m getting prouder of my performance because the competition is getting harder,” she says.

Excitement seems to be overtaking any pressure for Tokyo, perhaps because Hannah is just keen to race. She was buoyed by the opening of the stadium at the end of 2019: “Every seat was full. There was such a buzz.” Overseas spectators won’t be allowed, but “as long as there is an audience, it will be just as electric as any other Games”. Spectators give Hannah a boost: “When people are there, you want to show off a bit. Paralympians don’t get many opportunities to race in front of a big crowd, so when you get it, you milk it.”

### REST AND RECOVERY

Being at home has been “a godsend” because it has shown Hannah the importance of rest. This has involved watching a lot of *Bridgerton* and *How to Get Away with Murder* (a legal thriller), but it doesn’t mean she has been on the sofa every day. For six days a week, she has been in full-time training, working out in the garage and spare room and racing on the road. She lives with her boyfriend, Nathan Maguire, a wheelchair racer in the T54 category, and they have guilt-tripped each other into training. In the home gym, they are always competing. Hannah has more medals, but Nathan, who is European champion, is “currently faster”.

Hannah has had particular support from Danny, her younger brother, who is doing a masters in sports psychology. “I speak to my little brother every day and he knows me better than anyone,” she says. “I’m mentally quite strong – I know what I want, I’m pretty headstrong – but when I do fall down, it’s been good to have someone telling me to get up and keep going.”

Unlike Danny, Hannah’s older brother Joel is “ridiculously unsporty”. Hannah’s mum also “doesn’t really know what sport

is”. This creates a nice balance in the family: “It makes you realise that sport isn’t everything.”

### GOING OFF TRACK

Hannah has made a point of having interests outside sport and says yes to every opportunity. In 2012, that included *Celebrity Mastermind*, where McFly, a band she has seen dozens of times, was her specialist subject: “I’d never watched *Mastermind*, though, so that was a shock.” In 2019, it was *The Great British Bake-Off for Stand Up to Cancer*. Not that she’s much of a cook: “I had baking lessons from a place in Halifax. I genuinely don’t know where

I would have started if I hadn’t because I am not a kitchen person at all... I’ve got no patience; I get bored waiting for the microwave.”

She does, however, love the rural life and Yorkshire. She loves the friendliness of Yorkshire people, the landscape and the pies. Not everywhere in the countryside is easily accessible for people using a wheelchair, but there are still plenty of places to go. Scarborough seafront is a favourite. “It rarely gets busy and it’s lovely,” Hannah says. This year, she has been going out locally in her wheelchair for an hour or two a day. “There’s no noise and no technology; there’s just you and your thoughts.”

Hannah brims with enthusiasm talking about her appearances as a guest presenter on *Countryfile*, but admits she worried about it at first: “Producers were coming up with all these ideas like you’ll go on a dolphin observation and you’ll become a cattle farmer for a day, and I was thinking, ‘No, I won’t. I won’t be able to do that in a wheelchair.’” This is unexpected coming from a Paralympic champion, but these experiences, she explains, seemed like a leap from her regular life. The team, however, “figured it out”. “They didn’t see me as Hannah with a disability,” she beams. “They just saw me as anyone else.” On screen, she looks as happy mucking out the cowshed as she does kissing a medal: “I’d definitely go back and herd the cattle – the Highland cows were phenomenal.”

After retirement, Hannah hopes to go into TV presenting, as long as it’s away from a track. “Outside athletics, I have limited interest in sport,” she admits. As for presenting athletics, “I’d get too angry at what I could see... I’d love to be a chat-show host.”

Until then, her starring role will be at the Paralympics. “I still wear the same knickers [as she has done for all major races since London 2012],” she says. “That’s where I am right now!” Will she be going for gold? “The medals are nice, but deep down my motivation is different. I’m interested in what else my body can do. How far can I push it? How fast can I go? I want to be one of the greats.”

**AT THE TIME OF GOING TO PRESS**, the Tokyo Paralympics are scheduled to go ahead on 24 August-5 September.

## Hannah’s HIGHLIGHTS

**1992** Born in Halifax, West Yorkshire. Two cardiac arrests after birth leave Hannah with brain damage and deformed feet and legs. Her parents encourage her to try everything – and she does

**2005** Takes up wheelchair basketball after the local team visits her school

**2008** Tries wheelchair racing. She is reluctant at first because it looks uncomfortable (you sit on your legs and lean over), but she feels free

**2012** Wins two gold medals at the Paralympics and becomes a poster girl for London 2012

**2013** Appointed MBE for services to athletics

**2014** Wins the *Strictly Come Dancing Sport Relief Special*

**2016** Wins three gold medals at the Rio Paralympics

**2018-2019** Guest-presents six *Countryfile* episodes

**2019** Takes gold at the IPC World Championships in Dubai

**2021** Trains for the long-awaited Tokyo Paralympics

