

My Paralympic Experience

by Mary-Jane Hutchison

In late September 2010 I registered my interest to help with London 2012 Olympics and/or Paralympics. It required an in depth on-line application where experience had to be succinctly and briefly summarised. In March 2011, I was invited to an interview at the Excel Centre in east London. The application and interview were more detailed than some job applications I have made in the past! Early 2012 I finally received my assignment – FOP (Field of Play) Paralympics Road Cycling held at Brands Hatch racing circuit in Kent during the first week of September.

Avenue of Flags – Brands Hatch Finish Stretch



Mens Tandem Event Medal Ceremony



Before I got to Brands Hatch, I had to attend two separate day long training sessions. The first was an orientation session at Wembley Arena impressing the importance that the Games Makers were as the public face of the Games. And the second was a generic training session for all the Olympic and Paralympic public highway events (cycling road races and time trails, road walk and marathon events) at the Sandown Park Horse Racing Course Conference Centre. In August I had another trip to an east London industrial estate to collect my Games Maker uniforms and accreditation. This trip was during the main Olympics and into the new West Ham Docklands light railway station near the Olympic Park. The stadium and ArcelorMittal Orbital Tower were impressive from that distance.

There were over 200,000 applications for 70,000 Games Maker roles so the administration and organisation behind this recruitment exercise was impressive. Once we received our assignments we were emailed regular updates and opportunities to apply for free tickets to rehearsals in the countdown to the start of the games. In addition to Games Makers, there were volunteers for the opening and closing ceremonies performances and “paid” security volunteers. It was interesting to find that some key managers of some operations were Australian; they have been professional Olympics managers since the 2000 Sydney Olympics and many were expecting to move on Rio 2016.

Since there was a final day of site specific training at Brands Hatch on Saturday, September 1st, Rob and I booked to stay at a small hotel near Maidstone for the week. The Brands Hatch venue included a secure bicycle park so I cycle commuted approximately 11 miles to Brands Hatch, a short distance compared to the normal rides we make. But this was up Wrotham Hill on the A20 and included 4 miles of a steady uphill gradient. During the Paralympic road cycling events the A20 was closed as a short section was incorporated into the racing course so it was a spectacularly scenic ride early in the morning with views over north Kent towards London and the Docklands skyscrapers.

The athletes competed in different classes depending on disability either on adapted bicycles, tricycles and upright or recumbent hand cycles. The 8 kilometre course was testing for abled bodied athletes so it was inspiring to watch these riders compete. The course went clockwise starting in front of the main grandstand then leaving the Brands Hatch circuit onto the A20 descending to a tight right hand bend with an unclassified road down and up a long draggy ascent to a new entrance into the back of the circuit. As the Brands Hatch circuit is in a natural basin there were 2 sharp ascents and descents with 3 hairpin bends inside 4 kilometres. Since the motor racing events run counter-clockwise on the circuit there was also adverse road camber affecting trike and recumbent handling. The minimum number of laps was 1 for the trike time trial classes (cerebral palsy and similar disabilities) to 13 laps for the B class men's adapted bicycle road race. Sarah Storey was in a class of her own dominating the women's time trial and road race events.

Tandem Event with blind stokers



T1 / T2 Mixed Road Race



Ex-professional car racing driver, Alex Zenardi, was the international star that everyone wanted to watch. He had a terrific motor racing accident and lost his legs but not his competitive spirit so took up hand-cycle racing. As he never won in a car at Brands Hatch, he was overwhelmed to win two Paralympic gold medals on his hand cycle!

Alex Zenardi Medal Presentation



Alex waiting for his lap in the Hand Cycle Team Relay



The FOP (Field of Play) assignment was essentially course marshal and I was assigned morning sessions on the Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Monday and Tuesday were the first days that athletes, officials and volunteers were allowed on the course so we were on familiarisation duties. I was course marshal at the back of the course in a dip. It was interesting watching the different cycling styles. The tandems were just fearless, the bike and trike riders showed different levels of confidence depending on their disability and how it affected their balance and the recumbents went different speeds depending on their upper body strength.

On the competition days we checked in where we were assigned to a team and our venue / location. If the venue was on the back of the course with few spectators, we were marshals watching for rider incidents and accidents. This was a quiet assignment since the motorcycle National Escort Group, medical cars and national team coaching vehicles followed the groups of riders and handled emergencies. If the venue was on the course, we could volunteer as pedestrian crossing controllers, course marshals or hazard warning marshal.

Since I did not mind looking the fool, I volunteered twice as hazard warning marshal. The first time was on the A20 turn. While I was on this session, a woman Chinese bike rider crashed into the barriers. She was a cerebral palsy athlete, her balance was not good and she was on the wrong line for the turn – you could see the accident was going to happen. As it was expected that this would be the most dangerous turn on the whole course, there was a dedicated St John's Ambulance station and medical team. The NEG and medical team immediately implemented emergency measures and neutralised the area. Luckily she was only winded but they did take her into hospital for x-rays.

The second time I was located in front of the Brands Hatch gate gantry post inside a hay bale enclosure opposite the main spectator entrance. This is where I discovered the main disadvantage of this role. When you are in the hot sunshine waving a flag back and forth overhead blowing a continuous whistle blast while the peloton splits around the hazard one gets very light headed! I had to do this for 6 laps and a split field. The arriving spectators also enjoyed a wobbly marshal after these occasions.

A Team Photo



Hazard Flag and Whistle Warning – A20 Turn



After lunch, I would meet up with Rob and we watched the afternoon events at the new entrance into the Brands Hatch circuit. It was a good location to cheer the athletes as they were approaching to top of the draggy incline so we were able to identify many riders. Between 10 to 20 people congregated at this point and some spectators were there every day. We had some interesting conversations with local residents and on one occasion, an American team coach was at there and we were able to find out about his team and training. The residents found out about hazards for cyclists, the cyclists found out about the difficulties HGVs have with cyclists, the American coach could not believe Team GB funding and the Olympics and Paralympics coverage on UK TV.

As a Game Maker, we were treated well with meals, refreshments and drinks provided at every turn and daily thank you gifts. Spectators were courteous and atmosphere at all the different volunteer events was enthusiastic, energetic and cheerful.

Since the week of the Paralympic cycling events was the best weather of the summer, it was a pleasure to be outside even without standing by the side of the road with warning flags and whistles. I would not have missed the experience.