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Wild about sport Steve is living the dream

Words by Niki Tennant

In an interview with his careers advisor at school, an enthusiastic teenage Steve Brown outlined the very clear path he wanted his professional life to follow: He was going to play sport for England and be at one with wildlife like David Attenborough. Dismissing both aspirations as 'pie in the sky', the advisor patiently and gently suggested Steve pursue a more realistic career direction, such as Media Studies. Today, that wide-of-the-mark careers advisor must surely be eating his hat... because Paralympics GB wheelchair rugby captain, radio and television sports commentator, and presenter of the BBC's flagship wildlife programme Steve Brown is living his dream.

On the day Steve spoke to OnTrack

Magazine, he'd spent the morning in a Medieval tent learning how to make longbows and arrows during filming for the BBC's Countryfile. Not a mundane start to the working day in anyone's book.

Steve is adamant. There is one aspect of his life that's been the catalyst for the outstanding success he has enjoyed in every other, and that's sport.

A keen cross country runner who represented his school and played football for Kent, super-fit Steve lived for sport.

Following his career advisor's words of wisdom, he embarked on a Media Studies course at university, hoping it would lead to a career as a sports photographer or even a documentary cameraman.

Taking a summer job at a holiday resort

in the South of France aged 18, he used his planning skills to organise sporting activities for guests.

Getting a real buzz from seeing families' enjoyment of sport, Steve's enthusiasm was rewarded with a promotion and, by the age of 24, he was area manager, overseeing 11 resorts in Spain and the South of France.

In his words, he "got himself a nice girlfriend and a summer abroad turned into a lifestyle."

But all that was to change dramatically when, after cooking dinner for his girlfriend, he tripped and fell off her first floor balcony, snapping his neck and trapping his spinal cord, leaving him with no movement from his chest downwards for the rest of his life.

"That moment changed everything. I had to quit my job, I ended up separating from my girlfriend. A million and a half things changed. I was told I was never going to walk again," remembers Steve.

"In hospital, it was like going back to college: learning lessons about how to hold a knife and fork, getting dressed and getting in and out of the bath. For five months, I did not go out. I was embarrassed about what people might think."

Then came the defining moment when he realised he had a choice and his destiny was in his hands.

It was on a trip to the local sports centre at which a wheelchair rugby team was in training.

"I looked at these people playing, trying to knock each other out of their wheelchairs. Some of them didn't even have hands to move. It was inspiring. A lot of them had similar injuries to me, some of them had worse. I wanted to be like them, to have their motivation and drive," recalls Steve, who took part in his first wheelchair rugby training session eight months after his accident.

"Watching them made me wonder why I was scared and worried about my future. They were fantastic athletes, fantastic people. They taught me not just about the sport, but also little ways of doing things quicker and more easily that I hadn't thought about before."

Nine months later, he took part in his first competition – which is when a GB coach spotted him and led him to the Nationals in 2005.

Steve didn't look back. He held the 2012 captaincy at London 2012 for the GB rugby team when the highlight for him was not the crowds, the media of the title 'Captain', but the fact that the people in the team who had inspired him after his injury had trusted him enough to give him that role.

He explained: "They made me realise I could do more than I thought I could. They showed me what I am capable of. Without sport when I was working abroad, I wouldn't have been promoted. Without sport, and without those people on the team, I would still have been sitting watching daytime TV, feeling sorry for myself.

"Every sport has its own level of risk. It's just a question of assessing whether it's one you're willing to take. When you play rugby, wheelchair or otherwise, players get knocked about and 99 times out of 100,

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you get up again."

After Steve cut his teeth in broadcasting during London 2012 and the Invictus Games in 2014, an impressed producer commented: "You're quite good at this talking malarkey, aren't you?" and inquired about Steve's other hobbies and interests outside sport.

Steve explained how, as a young boy, his dad would take him across fields and countryside, telling him about the sights and sounds of wildlife. That, and watching wildlife documentaries, instilled a passion in Steve from a young age. And like the skills he learned through participation in sport, he insists the skills he acquired through this deep interest could be transferred to television presenting. The revelation resulted in an approach from the BBC's Springwatch show and, just before nephew Louis' fourth birthday, the pair packed binoculars and a bird watching book and set out to drive country lanes while on camera.

"Springwatch said: 'Let's take a punt on Steve.' They believed in me. It was lovely to give my nephew that opportunity. When Countryfile got in touch, that was the pinnacle. You should have seen the smile on my dad's face when he realised I'd be

working alongside John Craven and Matt Baker.

"My family and friends were very proud of me with London 2012 and being captain. But when I spent time away training with team GB, they could not visualise it or get the enthusiasm.

"But when I come home and say I was up at 3am to listen out for nightingales or boxing hares, they know what I'm talking about and it brings another level of excitement for them," added 5 Live presenter Steve, who has also made appearances on The One Show.

"I'm so pleased to get that text or call from Countryfile saying they loved the last piece and want more. Within a week, to be at both ends of the spectrum and to be taken seriously in wildlife and sports – the two things I grew up loving the most – is amazing."

Steve, who provided commentary on this year's London Marathon, is currently working on Wheelchair Tennis World Cup coverage and will be in the commentary box during Wimbledon.

"It's giving me the chance to show that I know more about sport than just rugby." And he jibed: "If only my careers advisor could see me now!" ■

