

Mark Colbourne MBE

Mark Colbourne is a Paralympian and the ambassador for the CTC Inclusive Cycling Network project, funded by Big Lottery. He spoke to Dan Joyce

Mark Colbourne is helping CTC raise the profile of our network of Inclusive Cycling Centres across the UK. It's a subject close to his own heart. You wouldn't think it to look at him on a conventional upright bike, but he won a gold and two silvers at the London 2012 Paralympics – in the C1 category, 'locomotor disability: neurological or amputation' – having broken his back three years earlier in a paragliding accident.

'I spent three months completely paralysed,' he says of his accident. 'A month later, one of the hospital physiotherapists sat me on a static exercise bike. She had to bandage my feet to the pedals because my feet don't work due to the nerve damage in my spinal cord. I knew immediately, realising that my quads and my hip flexors weren't damaged, that I could push the pedals – even with no hamstrings or glutes firing. It was hard work. But to sit on that bike and feel normal... It was a great feeling, a door that opened for me.'

After he left hospital, Mark started cycling with Disability Sport Wales in the Newport Velodrome. Initially, he rode a track bike with stabilisers. 'Finding that I could not only now cycle, but cycle effectively using these stabilisers that the disability coach, Neil Smith, gave me... It was life changing. I was obviously in a very dark place at that point. And it just changed everything for me. It wasn't just that it gave me the opportunity to do something physical. My emotional state of mind became better, which made my family happy. It was hugely empowering.'

He says he sees the same effect when other disabled people are given the opportunity to cycle; he is also a patron of

Pedal Power, a disabled cycling charity in Cardiff. 'When you see a disabled person – child or adult, it doesn't matter – when you see them riding a tricycle or a recumbent, the feeling they get of normality takes them out of that dark place and it puts them into Narnia, almost: it's the stuff of dreams. And it's not only affecting the person who is pedalling the bike: it affects their friends,

“When you see a disabled person, child or adult, riding a tricycle or a recumbent... It's the stuff of dreams”

their family, their work colleagues. It's a cascade of happiness and positivity.'

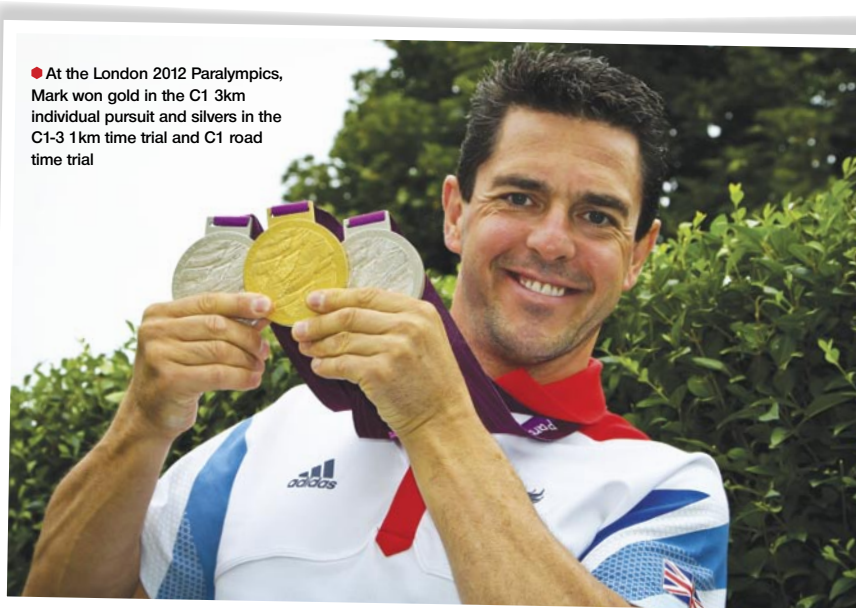
Not enough disabled people have access to adapted bikes, Mark says. Many don't even know about them, or might not imagine they could ride one. 'It's all about awareness,' he says. 'When you see how many people benefit from inclusive cycling – it's massive. I've been privileged to have experienced that myself. Yes, I'm still disabled. Yes, I still have a lack of functionality every day in my life. But the happiness and positivity that cycling gives me outweighs any negativity that I get from my disability.'

This explains his role as an inclusive cycling ambassador. 'I don't think there's enough promotion of the psychological and health benefits around cycling,' he says simply. 'I think my focus with CTC for the next five years would be to get the message out there of how beneficial cycling can be: the health benefits, the positive mindset, that all-over feeling of happiness. It's more than just riding around the park.' ●

Mark's website is markcolbourne.com. For more on inclusive cycling, see ctc.org.uk/inclusive.



● Today, Mark is an inspirational public speaker



● At the London 2012 Paralympics, Mark won gold in the C1 3km individual pursuit and silvers in the C1-3 1km time trial and C1 road time trial

Photos: Mark Colbourne

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