

FROM A PARALYMPIAN'S PERSPECTIVE

My name is Melanie, and I was born with EEC, a form of Ectodermal Dysplasia. This meant that I have a couple of fingers missing on each hand and some toes missing. In 1992 (Barcelona) and 1996 (Atlanta) I represented Great Britain in the Paralympics, in table tennis. I have also played in World Championships and was Class 10 ladies European Champion in 1994. Class 10 is the minimal disability class, and related to people with the non playing arm being affected. So I was playing against a lot of one armed people.

I thought I would give a behind the scenes view of what happens in the Paralympics that TV viewers do not get to see, warts and all - highs and the lows.



Waiting for the Closing Ceremony to start in Barcelona 1992

The first major hurdle is getting a GB kit that fits you. The kit is supplied by the British Paralympic Association and we get it in advance of the games. We had to fill out forms with a number of our bodily dimensions so that they could supply us with the right size kit. After we tried it on there ended up being a lot of swapping as some people's were too big and others too small. I soon realised that, despite giving our waist size, the trousers etc were a man's cut rather than women's - so not wide enough round the hips, and miles too small. So for Atlanta in 1996 I got wise to this one and gave hip measurements rather than the required waist measurements.

Anyway with kit sorted and fitting, now time to get to the host country. The GB team fly from the various airports around the UK, rather than all together. Once in the host country, the next question is "when will I see my suitcase again?". We were ferried on coaches to the Olympic village; our suitcases were bought on separately much later (the next day if you were lucky).

The athletes' village is normally a few miles from the Olympic stadium. It houses the thousands of athletes and their coaches from all the competing countries. In Barcelona it really was like a village, streets of newly developed blocks of flats near the beach that were then going to be sold after the games, the hub being a shopping mall also just built especially. In Atlanta it was the local university student accommodation campus. First thing before you can even get into the village is the dreaded accreditation. This can be really slow like in Barcelona where it took a couple of hours, but much quicker in Atlanta. You have your photo taken, ID checked and then issued with a security pass that you wear round your neck with your picture, competitor number and a code eg athlete, coach, etc., on it. From now on this bit of plastic is worth it's weight in gold, if you lose it you can't get back into the village or sporting venues, the eating sites in the village or onto the transport. This pass is checked everywhere you go.

Meal times can be an experience, in Barcelona the food was excellent and well organised. The restaurant was below the main concourse of the mall and would later be turned into the car park. There are a number of places to queue up for the food, of all different types and dietary requirements. I soon sussed that it was best to go to the vegetarian counter as the food was better, even though I am not vegetarian. In Barcelona the restaurant opened at 7 in the morning and didn't close until 11 at night. All the food is free and there were freezers full of ice cream and lollies that you could just take. In Atlanta it was a different story! The food tents only opened for a couple of hours around meal times, so on some days there were 2 hour waits to get your food.

You arrive at the village about 10 days before the opening ceremony. The next 10 days are used for last minute training. Each country has a set training time to use the table tennis tables in



Atlanta 1996
Opening Ceremony- entering the
stadium with team GB

the venue itself. Now comes the opening ceremony. This for me is one of the highlights of the games and takes all day for the athletes and coaches. In actual fact a lot of competitors who are competing the next day tend to miss this out as it can be so tiring. Late morning, you are taken on many coaches from the transport bay in the village to a venue outside the stadium in time for that evening's big event. We all have our official smart walking out kit which is used for this occasion only. Then you wait, and wait and wait. The countries are seated in alphabetical order. In Atlanta we were in the next door baseball stadium. In Barcelona all the teams circled the

stadium outside. Despite the wait it is all very exciting and there is a party atmosphere. There are loads of TV crews coming round, the BBC were there filming with Helen Rollason. Eventually when it is time, the teams all file into the stadium. As you get nearer and nearer to the tunnels into the centre of the stadium you can hear the crowds roaring, then there is that moment when you just see all the crowds as you enter the arena. There is then the march around the track, with the music being drowned out by all the clapping and cheering. We were then shown to our places on the middle of the athletics field. When the team for the host nation comes in last, the roar of the home crowd is amazing. At the end of the ceremony it is a scramble to get out of the stadium first before all the other thousands of competitors, physios and coaches to get on the 1st buses back to the village.

Each country is assigned a different part of the village, where the team will have its accommodation plus offices as it's head quarters. Here British press releases are displayed and general organisation of team GB done. Team GB doesn't just consist of competitors, there are the officials from the British Paralympic Association, coaches for each of the sports, team physio's and then each sport may bring their own physio. There are also British doctors and nurses to provide a medical service for the whole team. There are also laundry facilities. The only time you meet the other competitors from other countries in the village is at meal times, on the transport or in the village entertainment venues. In Barcelona there was 10 pin bowling, various music bars (soft drinks only!!), entertainment put on and a Pizza Hut. In Atlanta, not so good; just the communal food tents. At least the GB team had its own privately hired lodge which had comfy chairs and sofas, books and a TV for the team. In Barcelona we even had Prince Edward come out to our part of the village and chat to everyone there very unofficially just standing on the pavement outside the accommodation blocks. You have to be fit just to live in the village - let alone for the sports. The village is so large that it can be a good 15 minute walk to get to the restaurant or transport bays. Then there is a lot of standing around waiting for meals (in Atlanta) and transport to and from your sporting venue. You have to wait for the designated buses for your sporting venue, and if you missed one it was a very long wait.

Eventually it is time to go home. The whole village empties on the day after the closing ceremony. The closing ceremony itself is more like a giant party; everyone swaps kit with other countries.

I went to 2 Paralympics and each was completely different. In Barcelona the village facilities were excellent and accommodation really nice. In Atlanta, a different story. The accommodation was so bad that it was even reported on by the BBC in their reports. Rooms were dirty when we got there, no bedding for some people for a couple of days and meal times appalling waits. The bedrooms were so small

that if you had 2 people sharing who both used wheel chairs then one had to wait for the other to leave the room before they could get out of bed. The Paralympics were organised by a different company in Atlanta from the main Olympics and the company who organised the main Olympics took everything with them (even the medal flags), leaving the Atlanta Paralympic organising committee just a few days to resource everything. They had to borrow the flags from the Australians who were hosting the next Olympics.

Overall going to a Paralympics is an excellent opportunity and one that I would not have missed for the world. I did not win any medals, but came 4th in my class in Atlanta. I lost the semi-final after being well ahead in the final game of the match - then lost the bronze medal play off! It also opened up other opportunities like doing press and TV interviews. I was also invited to a reception at number 10 with John Major, where a number of massive sports personalities were



GB Team Lodge- Atlanta village in Atlanta

also invited. I managed to accidentally tread on Alan Shearer's foot (who was one of England's top players at the time) - but that's another story!



A small part of the Olympic village in Atlanta