

On the cover

“Representing your country feels like nothing else”

James Roberts is a former Paralympic athlete born with a congenital disability. He tells his story...



• James coaches both disabled and able-bodied people

Proving that disability is no barrier to competing in sport at the highest level, James Roberts has excelled in swimming, rowing, and sitting volleyball. He's represented Great Britain at two Paralympic Games. He's now a fitness coach, inspiring others to fulfil their potential.

I have had a disability all my life – femoral dysplasia of the left leg, as well as a floating

hip and scoliosis [twisting] of the spine. Growing up I didn't know any different, so I learnt to walk but was a little slower than my able-bodied peers. When I was a teenager the radiographer told my mum I shouldn't be able to walk with the number of bones I was missing in my left leg.

I wear a prosthesis most days, within reason – if I don't have pressure sores or blisters. The parts are from Ottobock. I don't wear a prosthesis now while playing wheelchair basketball due to safety and comfort, but I did when I was rowing.

I got into sport because my mum wanted to me to do something that would give me discipline. I grew up on a NATO base in Belgium and the first sport I did was karate, then later I took up ten-pin bowling. The athletes who inspired me when I was young were Ryan Giggs and Colin Jackson, and I had aspirations of being a footballer or basketball player.

My mum chose swimming as a sport for me as she thought my disability wouldn't be such a limiting factor as it might in other

sports. I took it up aged 11 and started at an able-bodied swimming club. When one of my coaches asked me, 'Why don't you try disabled swimming?' I thought, 'Why would I compete with disabled people when I am able within reason to compete with my able-bodied peers?' Maybe it was me being a typical teenager and not wanting to conform or maybe, as I see it now looking back, I was looking down on disability sport.

I only got involved in disability sport at the age of 16, and I believe the Manchester 2002 Commonwealth Games were the springboard to my career as a Paralympic athlete. It was my last opportunity to become involved in the Welsh swimming programme. My mother went to the bottom of the temporary stands and shouted 'Is anybody here from Welsh Swimming?' and the then head coach, Alan Isles, came over to chat to us.

Disability Sport Wales opened up a totally new world to me. From 2003 to 2005 I was on British Swimming's Potential Squad and held two national records in breaststroke. I switched from swimming to the GB rowing team in 2006 and went on to compete at





• James was thrilled to compete at the London 2012 Paralympic Games



• James switched from swimming to rowing

What is femoral dysplasia?

Now known as developmental dysplasia of the hip, DDH is a condition where the ball and socket joint of the hip doesn't properly form in babies and young children. The hip joint attaches the femur (thigh bone) to the pelvis: the top of the femur (femoral head) sits inside the hip socket. In DDH, the socket of the hip is too shallow and the femoral head isn't held tightly in place, meaning the hip joint is loose. In severe cases, the femur can come out of the socket (dislocate).



• The femur should sit in the hip socket, but doesn't in DDH

“I stay motivated as there is always someone who needs your help”

three World Championships and finished fifth in the final of the 2008 Beijing Paralympics, finally fulfilling some of the potential I had shown during my swimming career. In the run-up to the Paralympics I was training up to 30 hours a week.

I was in my final year of my sports science degree at Swansea University in 2009 and wanted to concentrate on my studies, but was asked to join the GB sitting volleyball squad. I jumped at the opportunity and we reached the quarter-finals at the London 2012 Paralympics. It is a feeling like no other to represent your country – it makes you feel proud to represent your family and your town and do right by them. It is also a great feeling to win at elite level because you know you are the best at that particular time. For me that has only happened at World Cup level in rowing.

Since my retirement from performance disability sport in 2012, I have come back to Prestatyn, North Wales, and have been involved in wheelchair basketball ever since. I've helped the Rhyl Raptors and more recently the North Wales Knights climb the division ladders of wheelchair basketball in Britain.

I decided to become a fitness coach because I was sick of being passed up for jobs I was qualified for in sports development. I thought, why not use my knowledge to become a personal trainer, and eventually did the PT course in 2015. Before the course my mindset about able-bodied people was 'I have a disability so why can't you do it?' which isn't accommodating of others. I don't think like that any more after doing the course and I coach both disabled and able-bodied clients. It's a very rewarding job and I stay motivated

as there is always going to be someone who needs your help, in whatever capacity that might be.

I also host a podcast called Mind Set Game in which I interview influential people in fitness, nutrition and sports psychology plus current and former athletes about things they have overcome, and what people can do if they are struggling with something.

My goals are to play wheelchair basketball at the highest level in the UK and to keep helping as many people as I can to achieve their goals through my coaching. ●



MORE INFO

To find out more about James Roberts and his work see: fitamputee.co.uk
 YouTube: www.youtube.com/channel/UCDdcgbvE5f3W07br0EEQ9bg
 Instagram @fitamputee
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