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Q & A WITH PARA-ATHLETE CHARLES FRYER-STEVEN

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Here at Skatehut we are proud to sponsor wheelchair basketball star Charlie Fryer-Stevens whose dream is representing Team GB at the 2016 Paralympics in Rio later this year. However, as current U23 European Champion and 3x British Premier League Champion has a massive future ahead of him. Charlie uses skateboard components supplied by Skate Hut including mob grip tape, moto deluxe bearings and USD team wheels to give him a competitive edge. We caught up for a chat with the 20 year-old who has just completed in the National Championships held last weekend in Worcester where he represented Tameside/Oldham Owls who compete in the Premier League.

How did the Tameside Owls get on at the National Championship finals last weekend?

Incredible! Saturday 4th June was a great day, it saw 22 teams descend upon the University of Worcester Arena for the year's stunning finale to the British Wheelchair Basketball League. The League is made up of the Premier, First, Second Third and Development League, along with the Women's League which fed teams into the 2016 National Championships. I've served my time over the years and escalated through the leagues (obviously never playing in the women's league) and have played Premier League for the past 4 years, winning gold for the last 3!

Premier League Semi Final: Tameside/Oldham Owls v GLL & Aspire London Titans

It was a nail-biting start to the game between us and Titans but we were ahead by 15-13 at the end of the first quarter.

The Titans hit back hard in the second quarter: the London side holding a 32-26 lead at the end of the first half. They were giving us a real run for our money!

The third quarter saw us edge out the 10 minutes by 12-10; nevertheless, the Titans were up by 42-38 as we entered the final quarter.

I was determined they weren't going to win, I wanted that spot in the final, I regrouped and had an incredible final quarter.

I found the mismatch against our opponents again and again, shooting over the opposition, shot and scored 5 out of 6 baskets.

I was able to make some incredible fast breaks away from the opposition as they castors and bearings are so superior to the norm.

It was a stunning final quarter, we put on an incredible performance at both ends of the court to complete the comeback and secure our place in the final with a 57-51 victory.

Premier League Gold Medal Game: Sheffield Steelers v Tameside/Oldham Owls

The opening seven minutes of the Premier League Cup Final saw us and the Sheffield Steelers trade points before we pushed to a 14-9 lead by the end of the first quarter.

The Steelers hit back in the second quarter, decreasing our advantage to just two points: we were ahead by just 24-22 at half time.

It was tough and I wasn't having it, I'd got this far, I wanted that gold. We had a strong third quarter and closed down the Steelers' threat: holding a 38-32 advantage with just 10 minutes left on the clock.

The Steelers continued to pile on the pressure: the score for the last quarter alone was 12-11 to them; nevertheless, we were crowned champions with a 49-44 victory.

How long have you been wheelchair athlete and what have been your greatest sporting achievements to date?

Whilst young and able bodied I loved cycling, swimming and cross country running. I learned to ski and took up martial arts. My greatest sporting achievement then was earning my Ju-jitsu black belt at the age of 10, and then taking up competitive cycling, winning races and being invited to join SportCityVelo cycling club at Manchester Velodrome aged around 12. I went on to be selected for the British Cycling/DHL sprint schools and came 13th in the Manchester track league even though I was cycling against adults. I was a training partner on the velodrome for blind cyclist Sophie Thornhill and piloted her tandem which was a massive privilege.

When I became a wheelchair user in January 2011, I just focussed on my 'ability' not my 'disability' and attended a Paralympic Talent day at Birmingham Uni. I tried fencing, shooting, volley ball tennis and basketball. I had offered from a number of sports, but it was basketball which I loved straight away. Don't laugh, but I used to play netball with the girls at primary school – so I was a good shot!

I've had a number of great moments with wheelchair basketball, I've won the Celtic Cup (where Scotland, Ireland and Wales play) three times, that meant a lot as my Granddad was a Scot and he would have been so proud. I've won the European Championships in 2014, that was incredible as it was the second time I'd played for GB, but my entire family came out to Zaragoza to support the team. Winning the British Championships for the third time just recently was great, as three really does seem to be a magic number – I feel I can go abroad and play professionally having consistent won gold with two different teams over 3 years (2014 Wolverhampton Rhinos, 2015 & 2016 Tameside Oldham Owls).

But perhaps my proudest moment, was a couple of years ago I did a demonstration game at the Olympics (A sports event in Oswestry, Shropshire) and some newly injured wheelchair users came to watch us. I spent time with a girl who had only been in a chair a couple of months, but she had a go and loved it. She has since taken up the game and plays with a team in north wales. For me, that's a real achievement - getting someone inspired, by seeing top flight athletes at the top of their game and encouraging them to have a go, and even take up sport at a time when life as she knew it had ended.

You wouldn't automatically think that skateboarding kit would have a secondary use for wheelchair athletes, how did you come to realise this gear could really give you a competitive advantage on the court?

Even in my cycling days I would always 'tinker' with my bike. This was inspired by Sir Dave Brailsford, he became performance director of British Cycling, and he set about breaking down the objective of winning races into its component parts. Brailsford believed that if it was possible to make a 1% improvement in a whole host of areas, the cumulative gains would end up being hugely significant.

The concept of marginal gains has revolutionised some sports. Could the same approach also change important areas of everyday life, asks Matthew Syed. So needless to say when I transferred to wheelchair basketball, as soon as I had my first chair, I took it apart to look at each of the constituent parts. The manufacturer recommended really expensive

Spinnergy wheels costing around £1,000 a pair. I use high performance cycle tyres rather than wheelchair tyres yet the bearings and casters on the 4 small stabilising wheels were overlooked. So I ordered some online, tried a couple of different options to see what would perform the best.... This enabled me to have the edge on other players who didn't view marginal gains in the same way. When added to my training regime and tactics the improvement to my performance was noticeable.

How did the tie-in with SkateHut come about?

SkateHut's great website enabled me to see what was available and my order was delivered in super-quick time, which was ideal for me as a train daily and would try out various options in a single week – and the postage was free too! That doesn't happen much these days! I later approached Gavin about a partnership.

How does the skateboard equipment like mob grip tape, moto deluxe bearings and USD team wheels actually improve your mobility on the basketball court?

My feet are a size 13 and sit on the bespoke carbon footplate when I play. It is important to my performance that I am literally 'at one' with my chair. I have foot, knee, lap and hip straps to hold me in. However, as I can't feel my feet properly and due to nerve damage, my feet often spasm and the mob grip tape holds my feet firm so they don't move. This is massively important as if I'm doing a free through that could win us a game, I need to be still. A badly timed spasm could cost us a game.

The moto deluxe bearings and USD team wheels massively improve both my speed and mobility on the basketball court. The combination of the bearing and the wheels make my fast breaks faster meaning I can get more baskets and therefore score more points. Also they make me more manoeuvrable as I can literally spin on the spot! Lastly, I love the fact that everybody else uses white or black wheels and mine are red!

Are these skateboard components widely used by wheelchair basketball players and other wheelchair athletes?

Since I've been using them there are a number of basketball players waking up to the fact that there are real benefits to be had on court, and there are those that like the look of them! There is a massive potential for other wheelchair sports such as rugby, tennis, hockey etc. plus they are great for day chairs too!

At the London 2012 Games, Team GB finished just outside the medal positions after defeat to the USA ended their hopes of claiming a bronze medal. How well can the Men's British wheelchair basketball team fare in Rio this time round?

Yes, at 2012 the Men's team finished 4th. This time around the USA, Australia, Canada, Turkey and GB are all very strong; its wide open as to what will happen. We also have the Kitakyushu Champions' Cup in Japan in December, the U23 World Championships in Canada next year and then road to Tokyo 2020, which is more of a certainty to me.

The opportunity to represent your country is the pinnacle for any athlete so what would it mean for you personally?

It is. The first time I put on a Scotland vest, that was emotional and then when I was selected for Great Britain to play in the U23 World Championships in Turkey in 2014 that was massive. I played for GB on my 18th birthday, which was incredible. We came 4th there, losing the bronze medal to Sweden in the last 20 seconds of the game, which was a bit of a wrench, but it just made me hungry for more, and the next year when I was selected to play in the U23 European Championships in Spain, we went there and won every game. Unbeaten European Champion has a nice ring to it!

Have you ever had a go at any skatepark tricks perfected by extreme wheelchair athletes like Aaron Fortheringham?

Aaron is incredible; I watch his tricks in complete awe! I'd probably break my neck – literally – if I tried them. I have done a rather fab tilt in my basketball chair, which many basketballers can't do, but it's nothing compared to anything Aaron does. He is a true legend; I just put a ball in a hoop!

Check out some other amazing British athletes in our Best of British blog right [here](#) -

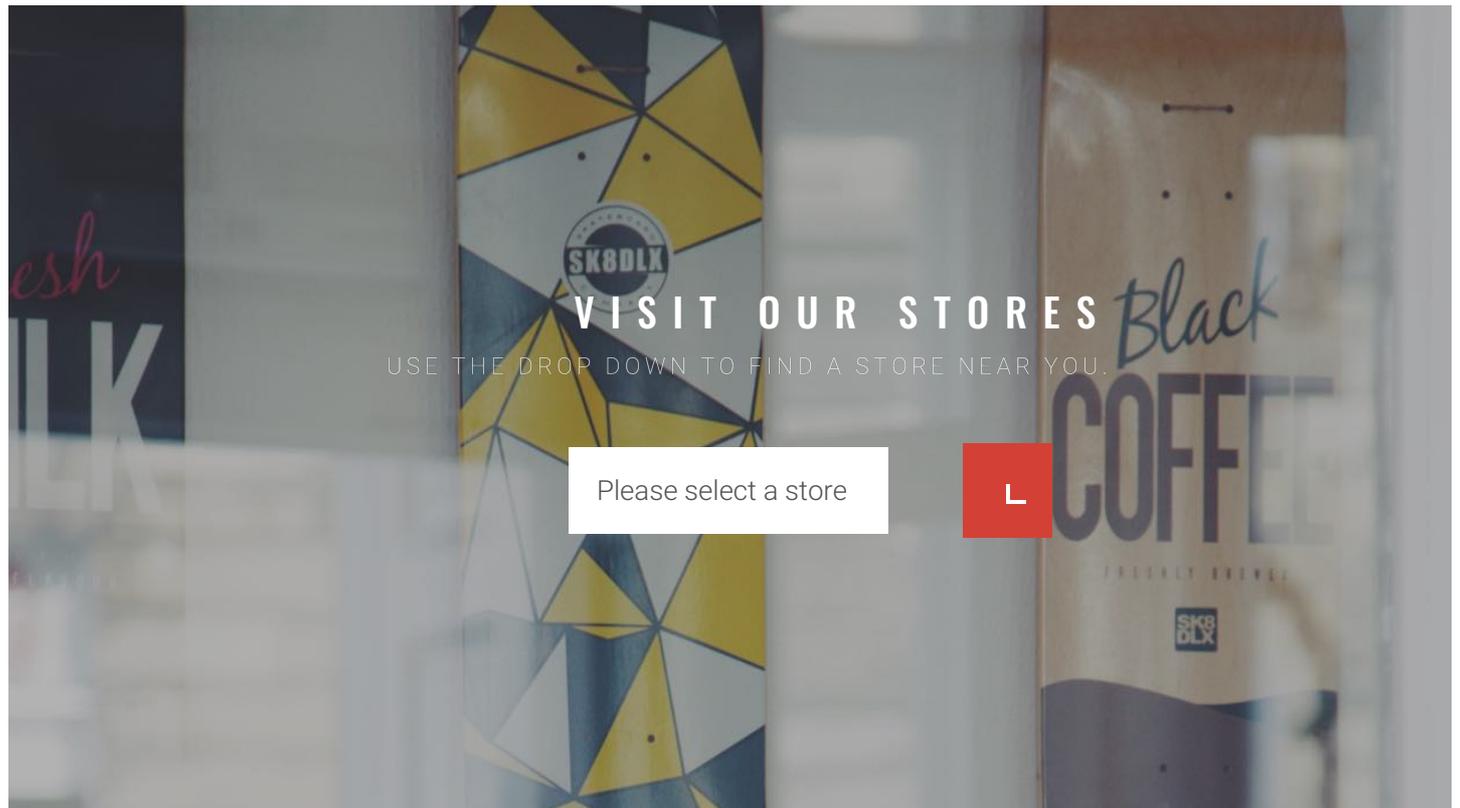
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