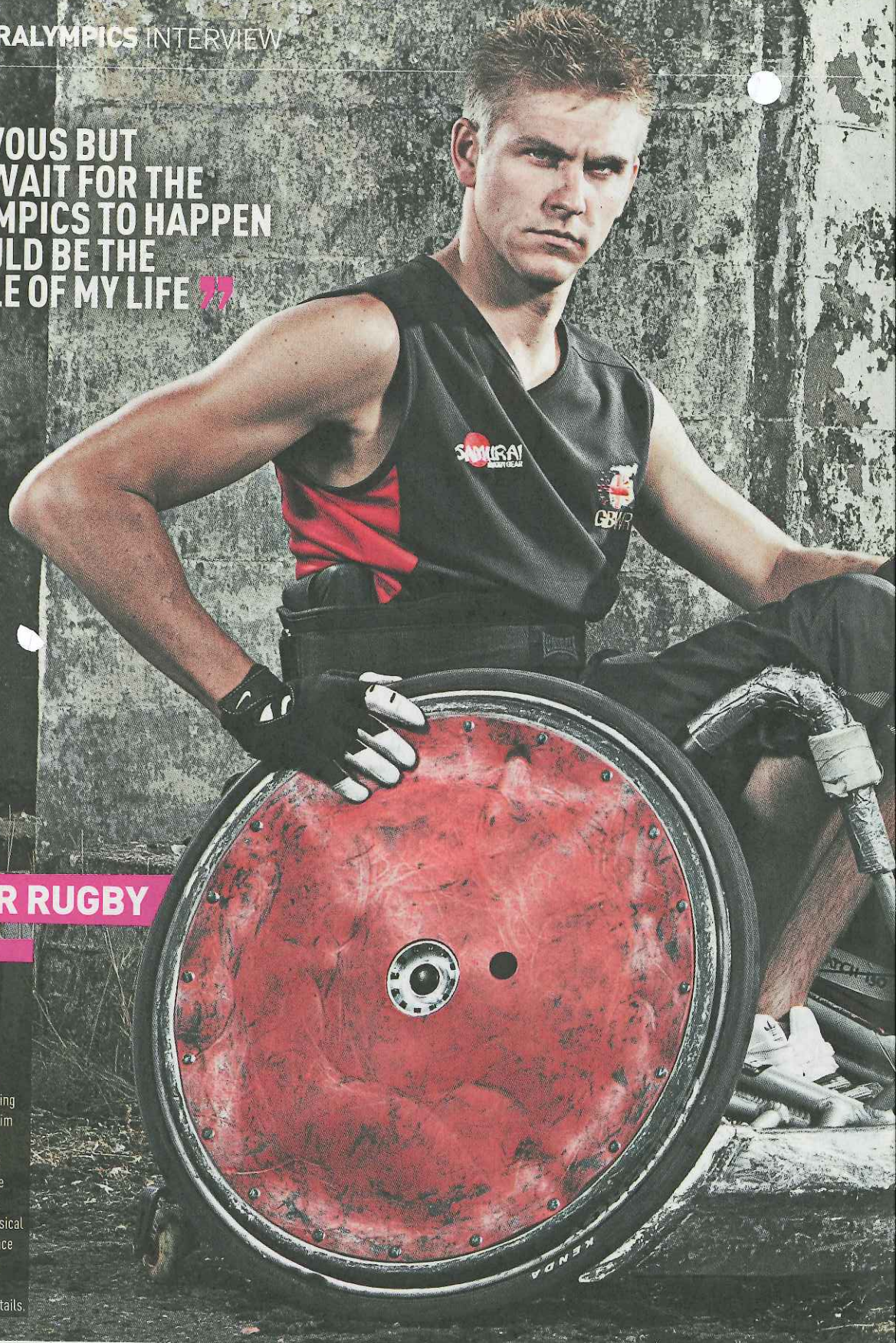


“ I’M NERVOUS BUT I CAN’T WAIT FOR THE PARALYMPICS TO HAPPEN – IT WOULD BE THE PINNACLE OF MY LIFE ”



WHEELCHAIR RUGBY

NEED TO KNOW

VENUE Olympic Park – Basketball Arena

DATES Wednesday September 5 –
Sunday September 9

ATHLETES 96 (Eight teams)

It's played by teams of four (which can be mixed) on a regulation basketball court using a ball that's identical to a volleyball. The aim of the game is to carry the ball across the opposition's goal line within 40 seconds of gaining possession. Players have to bounce or pass the ball every 10 seconds. Contact between wheelchairs is permitted, but physical contact (technically) isn't. The GB squad face their biggest pre-Paralympics competition at the GB Cup, taking place in Cardiff from September 6-8. See www.gbwr.org.uk for details.



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STEVE BROWN

DO OR DIE

It's just 12 months until the 2012 Paralympics begin – and for Team GB wheelchair rugby player Steve Brown, the Games could prove to be the perfect finale to seven years of hard graft and lots of broken bones...



Finding himself lying in hospital, morphined up to the eyeballs, nursing seven fractured ribs, a broken sternum and a bruised heart after a match for his local side, GB wheelchair rugby player Steve Brown could easily have said: "That's it, no more – I'm out."

But he was never going to do that. For it was the same brutal sport – originally called 'murderball' – that dragged his mind from a deep well of depression a few years earlier. Back then, he was in Stoke Mandeville Hospital, recovering from a broken neck suffered in a freak accident – a fall from a balcony that severed the nerves in his spinal cord, paralysing him from the chest down. Suddenly, the independent 24-year-old who had left home at the age of 18 and worked abroad for five years was stuck. In a wheelchair. And in hospital. For months his environment was made as safe and as easy as possible, with everyone around him eager to help.

"I was completely uncomfortable with that," he tells *Sport*. "It was the opposite of who I was." He was given the chance to play sports like archery and table tennis as part of his rehabilitation – but for someone who had grown up playing football and rugby, something was missing. "I'm the eldest of four brothers and I played a lot of contact sports before my injury," he says. "So it was all a bit too tame for me."

But then he was introduced to wheelchair rugby. "I saw people physically trying to knock each other out of their chairs, when at the time I was in hospital doing everything I could to stay in mine," he remembers. "As soon as I saw that I thought: 'Yeah, that's the sort of sport I want.' Not archery, not table tennis, but something where you can get the adrenaline pumping. You can argue and shout and have to rely on others in your team to back you up – it was those aspects of sport I was missing."


Brown was hooked, despite knowing nothing about the sport beyond what he'd seen. The rules and tactics were all a mystery. "The first time I turned up to play it was daunting, completely daunting," he admits. "It's not like

when you're a kid on holiday and see people playing football and just go and ask if you can join in. I didn't know the sport, I didn't know the rules or the equipment. I didn't even know me at the time. I'd only just had this injury and now I was playing a sport I had never played, in a wheelchair I'd never been in, with people I'd never seen. Everything was brand new, and I was really so intimidated by that.

"It was do or die, really. I could easily have left the hall and said: 'No, I don't think so.' But I didn't want to be beaten and I'm glad I wasn't, otherwise I wouldn't be in the situation I'm in now – hopefully being in the GB team at the Paralympics." Since then, Brown has become an integral part of the British wheelchair rugby team, refusing to give up on his dream of competing at a home Games even when hospitalised by the game he loves so much.

INJURY TIME

"No sport's safe, is it?" is Brown's response to the idea that the searing pain of seven cracked ribs might have led him to call a premature end to his sporting career. "Ballerinas break their ankles, footballers snap their legs, boxers get broken noses – but it doesn't happen every day, all of them are freak occurrences. Every weekend you don't get 10 footballers breaking their leg, but every 10 weekends a footballer breaks their leg. It was the same sort of thing for me and my injury."

If selected – and he's eager to point out there are still selections to be made – London will be Brown's first Paralympics, having just missed out on a place in the squad that finished fourth in Beijing. "I can't even start to imagine what it's going to be like," he says. "I've seen artists' creations of how it'll look when the stands are full – just talking about it now is making my skin go all goosepimples. It's what drives me on and makes me go training every day. I'm dead excited. I'm nervous, scared, can't wait for it to happen, don't want it to happen. There are so many emotions that come with it. It'll be the pinnacle of my career. The pinnacle of my life." 

SARAH SHEPARD

Paralympic athletes for London 2012.

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