

Behind the Scenes

INSIDE INCREDIBLE ATHLETES

A radically different vision of disability

Director **Mike Christie** shot in some of London's most iconic locations for this film celebrating the Paralympic athletes competing for Britain in 2012



Mike Christie
Producer/director

Sometimes you get those phone calls – speculative calls about projects that grab your imagination so completely that within 30 seconds you can't imagine not making them. This project began that way.

The idea was simple. "Channel 4 wants to launch two years' of programming running up to the London 2012 Paralympic Games with something partly inspired by your film *Jump London*," explained Renegade's Maria Livesey. Cue mental images of disabled athletes jumping off buildings.

After a fast development with creative director Jon Rowlands, by early April we were in production on a 90-minute film that would attempt to fuse three very different elements: documentary profiles of five Paralympic sports and a carefully selected handful of athletes; science scenes exploring the unique physiology of the athletes; and *Jump*-inspired, short 'performance films' for each of the five sports, shot in iconic London locations.

Which sports gave us the best characters and most varied science? Running and swimming quickly made the shortlist, with two amputee athletes and a swimmer with cerebral palsy. Which sports were most visual? We went for wheelchair rugby and blind football – both of which blew me away. Finally we added equestrian dressage and a Paralympic veteran aiming for his 12th gold.

The documentary content needed to be shot efficiently, capturing the

stories of all the sports and athletes in a dozen days of shooting. The performance films would be shot by a different unit over a further nine days. I opted for a DoP from the commercials world, Luke Palmer, who proposed using Canon DSLRs (1D, 5D, 7D) to give these sections of the programme a completely different look and feel.

My starting point for the performance films was to take the athletes as far away from the track and field as possible, and put them in surprising and iconic locations. The first shoot day arrived in mid-May. I thought I'd had a simple idea: Borough Market, scary man with a gun, looking for our two amputee athletes. He fires the gun, they run off, one amputee performs a stunt – leaping car roof to car roof – as they exit, before racing off across London. In retrospect, I threw us in at the deep end, as the unit of 40 included two leg amputees wearing running blades, an armourer, a stunt co-ordinator and a super slo-mo rig – and this was only day one.

Watching the results of that first shoot, especially the super slo-mo of the finished stunt by amputee sprinter and long-jumper Stefanie Reid, sent a shiver down my spine. I can't recall a more powerful image of a so-called 'disabled person'. That was the point of the film. We all quickly stopped presuming our 'disabled' athletes had limits.

The next two performance films shot were for swimming – basically *Swim London*, loosely inspired by John Cheever's *The Swimmer* – and then blind football, which presented a unique challenge. My script was partly based in the British Museum. Talking the museum into letting the England visually impaired football team run



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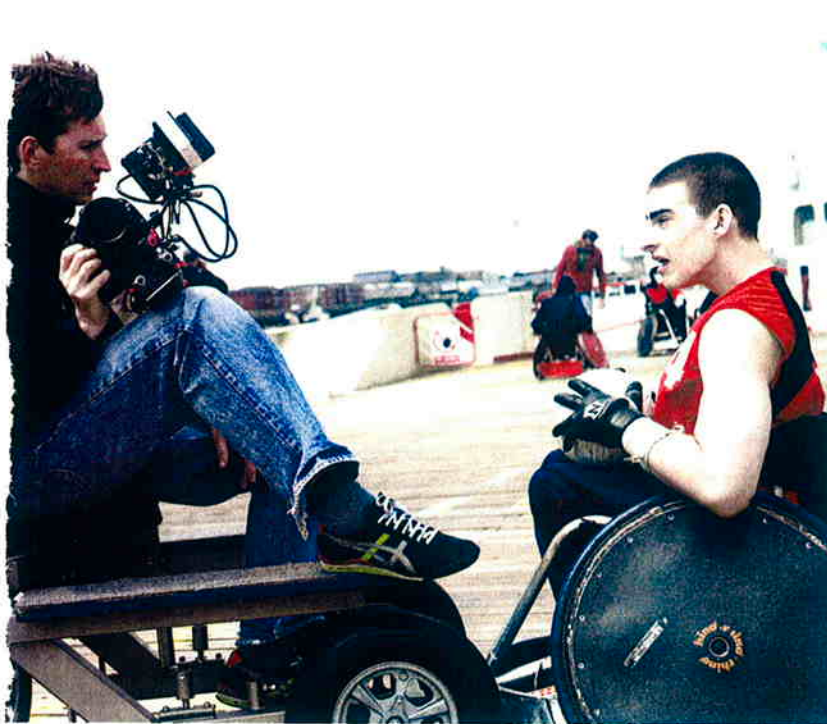
INSIDE INCREDIBLE ATHLETES

Production company Renegade Pictures
TX 29 August 2010, Channel 4
Producer/director Mike Christie
Executive producers Alan Hayling, Jon Rowlands
Line producer Rachel Naughton
Science producer Nick Watson
DoP (performance films) Luke Palmer
Documentary cameras Will Churchill, Craig Hastings
Editor Kim Nikolajsen
Summary 90-minute film about Britain's 2012 Paralympic athletes, fusing documentary, science and performance elements.

Mike Christie
My tricks of the trade

- Ridiculous ideas are the ones you're most likely to pull off
- However much time production allows for general views, double it
- Always carry sunglasses and an umbrella
- When things are going well, send the runner to buy a big bag of chocolate
- When things are going badly, send the runner to buy two big bags of chocolate





blindfolded, kicking a football, through the Egyptian gallery among fragile, 6,000-year-old exhibits took some time, to say the least. The overnight shoot was one of the most nerve-racking of my career (and having filmed potentially fatal stunts for other films, that's saying something).

The sequences did not get any easier. The ultimate game of wheelchair rugby is played out on a 'hijacked' Woolwich Ferry sailing down the Thames and spinning out of control by Tower Bridge. Then to cap it all off came the dressage sequence. Dressage is often referred to as horse ballet, exec producer Alan Hayling informed me, so what better place to shoot it than in the Royal Albert Hall, with four ballerinas from the English National Ballet, and set to a piece from Swan Lake. Line producer Rachel Naughton faced a big challenge: how to get 30 tonnes of equestrian flooring into the auditorium by hand.

Of course, our documentary shoots continued in tandem throughout. While the performance films may ultimately grab the attention, it's the documentary testimony, profiles and revelations that truly move and inspire. We set out to present a radically different vision of 'disability', and hopefully the film does exactly that.

Clockwise from bottom left: the England Blind Football team on location with football choreographer Andy Ansah at St Pancras station; Beijing Paralympics gold medallist Liz Johnson; DoP Luke Palmer with wheelchair rugby player David Anthony aboard the "hijacked" Woolwich Ferry; 100m runner Jonnie Peacock and 100m, 200m and long jump athlete Stephanie Reid

INSIDE INCREDIBLE ATHLETES CGI



Adam Zuabi
Executive producer,
Kazoo Creative

Our brief was to create CGI that illustrates what goes on inside a Paralympic athlete's body. Director Mike Christie was clear: he wanted a strong aesthetic look, which was scientifically correct but not overly medical or familiar in the usual TV medical cliché kind of way.

Rogério Alves (our VFX supervisor) and I quickly realised that the main challenge would be how to blend the CGI seamlessly with Mike's strong photographic look for the film.

There were other considerations, too: a modest budget and tight schedule, and the fact that many of the medical results on the athletes' conditions were not final. Hence we needed a flexible solution that would allow last-minute changes.

For inspiration, our creative director, Rotem Nahlieli, turned to the MRI scans and X-rays of the athletes themselves, but also got his hands on all the medical sources he could find:

tomography shots, photos and medical references all the way from Gray's Anatomy to the Merck Manuals.



Once we understood how to make the graphics anatomically correct, we decided to use X-ray pictures as the foundation for the CGI. X-rays captured the scientific style required, and the transparent nature of the images enabled seamless entry in and out of the 3D world.

The VFX team used Maya animation software to build the 3D models and supplied the editor with grey-scale preview so that Mike (who seemed to survive on a diet of chocolate biscuits – a lifestyle we have since adopted ourselves) could storyboard the camera movements. We then used Nuke to create the transitions from Mike's footage into the CG world.

Some 300 chocolate biscuits later, and infinite renders, we delivered the inner workings of five top athletes.