

The Interview

Crosby para badminton player Rachel Choong is the world number one having made history by achieving double, triple world champion success.

The 24-year-old took time out of her busy sporting schedule, which also includes running Crosby Badminton Club alongside her father, to chat to YM Liverpool about winning on the global stage, para badminton's rise to prominence and future goals.



INTERVIEW BY
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You started playing badminton at the age of six. How did you first get into the sport?

My dad plays badminton now and he was playing back then and at the time my sister was [was getting coaching at a badminton club] so my family encouraged me to join her.

It was then when I first picked up the racket and really found a passion for the sport.

Was there a specific point where you felt you could compete for medals on the world's stage?

Growing up, I didn't really think I could do anything with it because I was playing against able bodied people so all my peers were significantly taller than me.

At that time I was thinking I'd just be lucky to make the junior league but then, as I started to get better, I represented Lancashire a few times in county tournaments. I went to one of the county training sessions and one of the coaches suggested going to para badminton tournaments, where short stature was included in the tournament as well.

My first para badminton tournament was in 2007 so I'd already been playing for quite a few years, and coming away from it I'd won two golds and a silver so I was quite surprised.

I hadn't won an awful lot in able bodied [competitions] until then, so when I realised I'd been quite good in a level playing field, the people there were really friendly and it was a nice sport to compete in, it made the decision really easy to say 'I want to do this much more'.

Do you feel your success has also helped para badminton move forward and become more prominent?

I'd hope so, I'd like to think I've been able to impact the sport for the better.

I'm not going to Tokyo 2020 but, although that's disappointing for me, I'm really proud to see the sport go and for it to be where it's at now.

I remember when I went to international tournaments and we were just playing in a tiny sports hall in Germany. Now we're playing in arenas and going to the Paralympics in 2020 and I just think that's fantastic.

As badminton is new to the Paralympics in 2020 is it just the case that the sport will gradually progress to include more categories so that you can compete in the future? Are you looking towards Paris 2024?

Yeah, because it's a new sport for the Paralympics they've only given us space for 90 athletes in the village which means the event itself will be very, very small and the tournament itself will be very small. At the last world championships it was a tournament won over five days, 10 badminton courts, nearly 50

countries and over 200 athletes, so by cutting it down to 90 players at the entire Paralympics they've really cut the amount of events that are in there.

What the BWF (Badminton World Federation) - our world governing body - is trying to do is make sure the best para badminton possible is in the Paralympics so the IPC (International Paralympic Committee) will then allow more events and more athletes in 2024, which is my goal.

You won three gold medals at the world championships for the second time in 2017. How did the victory compare to the first time you achieved it?

I've been to three world championships now. The first was back in 2013 in Germany and I'd won the singles and the mixed [doubles].

Then in 2015 I won the triple (singles, mixed doubles and women's doubles) on home turf at Stoke Mandeville and I had my whole family there because they were able to come down and see me, so that was really, really special.

I feel like I had more pressure on me this time though, just to replicate my performance and success of previous world championships, so it was a little more stressful and a bit more pressure.

No one else in the world can say they've won the triple twice and that's amazing, but when it was in Stoke Mandeville and I had all my family cheering for me in the stands that was surreal.

WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS GOLD MEDALS:

2013 - SINGLES & MIXED DOUBLES | 2015 & 2017 - SINGLES, WOMEN'S DOUBLES & MIXED DOUBLES



How has winning the triple for the second time impacted on your career? Has there been an increase in attention and support?

Not as much as when I did it in 2015. I remember it really took off then and I felt like my name was really getting out there. I was invited to awards nights, events and meetings, so that was quite crazy.

The charity Path to Success has recently selected me as one of its sponsored athletes so it's great they're able to offer me some funding which is very much needed.

Other than that my career is pretty much self-funded so that [support has] been a really important impact since my last world championships and I'm really grateful.

Does that funding allow you to completely focus on competing?

The funding [Path to Success] has offered me is not like a salary or anything - I won't be able to live off that.

I've budgeted it to be able to get me to four or five tournaments within Europe, or if I wanted to go further afield maybe two outside of Europe so it's definitely really helpful.

If I want to go to more tournaments I will still need to dip into my own pocket but it's been a huge help so [funding is] something that doesn't play on my mind as much.

What's the funding situation like for para badminton as a sport?

In able bodied badminton, after [Team GB's] success when they got one bronze medal at the last Olympics, UK Sport cut its funding. Then again, that's completely separate to para badminton, where UK Sport has given GB Para Badminton its own separate pot of funding in preparation for Tokyo 2020.

As I'm not going to 2020 because my events aren't in, I don't receive any of the funding and I'm no longer on the GB squad. That was a real blow because I thought 'oh finally they're into the Paralympics' and then I get the crushing blow that I'm not going and because I'm not going I'm not getting any funding.

It knocked me back a little bit and that's another reason why I'm so appreciative of the chance Path to Success has given me, because without that I would have really struggled with tournaments this year.

What's your focus at the moment?

I'm still active on the circuit. I haven't been to a few tournaments recently because I've been trying to recover from a back injury that I initially picked up at the world championships.

It came back at my most recent tournament in Spain and that was in March, and it meant I had to withdraw from the event during my singles final so I've been trying to recover from that and train up to good strength again.

My next tournament is in Denmark in the coming weeks, and then two weeks after that I'm at the European Championships in France. It's mad busy!

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