

Picture: TIM CLARKE

By Kat Hopps

SHE survived a Taliban attack in Afghanistan but ex-Army nurse Mary Wilson has a new fight on her hands – reaching the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics.

The determined athlete hopes to compete in the first ever contests of Para-Badminton (a kind of badminton for people with a variety of disabilities) but is having to use her disability allowance to cover costs.

So far, she has spent £35,000 – a mixture of benefits, military pension and savings, plus money left to her by her late father.

“If you’re not expected to win medals, forget it, you get no money,” says Mary of the funding available.

She needs to be in the top six to qualify in her category by April but is now seventh and must pay all the costs for the international ranking tournaments herself.

She needs £10,000 to pay for her travel, training, accommodation and physiotherapy while competing in these matches to gain the all-important points to qualify.

This is a big ask for someone who survives on £1,300 a month, a combination of disability benefits and pension.

And even if Mary makes the team, she will need thousands of pounds more to get her to Tokyo on August 25 next year.

Mary also has to pay for her coach, Sarah Bok, because she receives no funding either.

“The Paralympics are meant to be inclusive,” says Mary, 55. “Well, this is actually elite because I know people who would be good and do well but they can’t even afford to go to one tournament.”

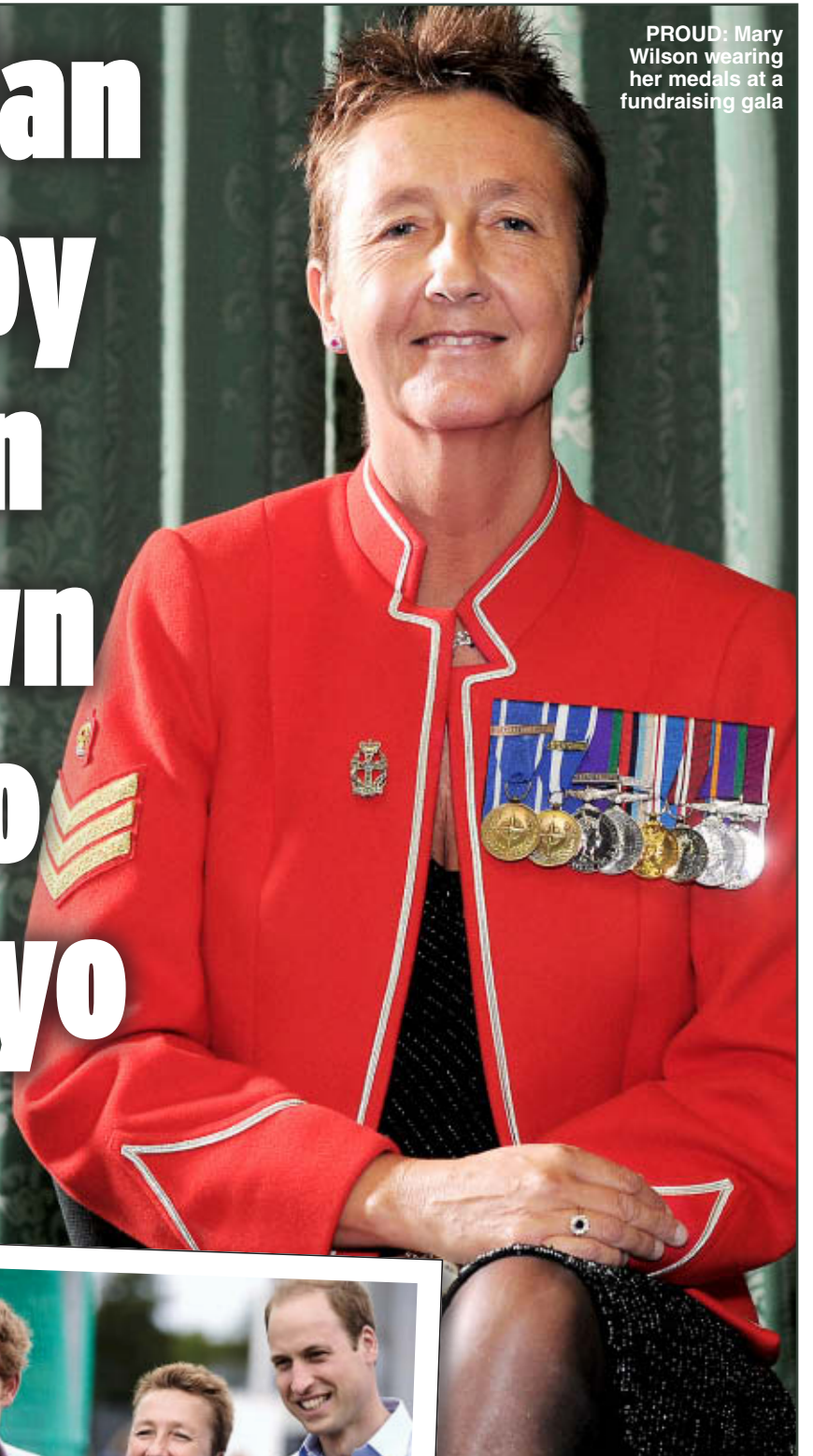
“The sports bodies and Government need to have a good look because it should be much fairer than picking certain sports and giving them all the money.”

Funding for the 22 Paralympic sports varies, according to the government-run UK Sport.

Paralympian attacked by the Taliban spends own benefits to get to Tokyo

Mary won three medals at the inaugural Invictus Games. Now former Army nurse has to self-fund her training

PROUD: Mary Wilson wearing her medals at a fundraising gala



SPORT OF PRINCES: Mary with William and Harry at Invictus Games trial event

ASPOKESPERSON said: “UK Sport invests Exchequer and National Lottery funds across a variety of Olympic and Paralympic sports. This investment is targeted where it has the greatest chance of delivering medals.

“Of course, we would love to fund every athlete and every sport but unfortunately with limited resources we do have to make tough decisions. However, during the four-year cycle building towards Tokyo 2020 we have invested £949,595 in Para-Badminton specifically.”

Mary, who has multiple sclerosis, is already a champion, however, having won a gold and two bronze medals for swimming at the first Invictus Games held in London.

And as the only female captain at the 2014 event, she met Princes Harry and William. The Duke of Sussex’s competition for wounded service personnel is now a biennial phenomenon



WAR ZONE: Mary in Afghanistan

watched by millions worldwide

It was a chance for Mary to stay positive rather than focus on the worsening effects of MS, which could leave her dependent on a wheelchair within five years.

But she didn’t hesitate when it came to breaking royal protocol during her meeting with Princes Harry and William at the Invictus trials in Bath.

“I had been warned not to ask for a photo but I said to Prince William, ‘Sir, with all due respect, is there any chance I can get a photo?’

“I was talking to Harry but William grabbed me around the waist and said, ‘Of course you can Mary’. As we were standing having our photo taken, Prince William whispered in my ear, ‘Do you know that guy over there?’

“I said, ‘Yes I do, he’s one of our lads, he’s a Royal Marine and he was blown up by an IUD. He’s lovely, a really nice guy.’

“William said, ‘He’s very handsome isn’t he?’ and I said, ‘Yes, I suppose he is,’

and then I had another look and said, ‘Well, yeah, he is very handsome and William said, ‘Steady on Mary, steady on!’”

But despite her royal connection, Mary, from Edinburgh, is “sacrificing holidays and personal time” with her partner Judi Syson.

And the situation for wounded service personnel is getting worse, she says. “Since the wars [Afghanistan and Iraq] people have become more acclimatised to disability,” she says.

“Some people think it’s unlucky but you’ve got to make your own way and we haven’t got the money to give you to do it because you’re nothing special really.”

In a desperate attempt to raise funds, Mary has contacted at least 200 companies.

We meet at a fundraising dinner for female para-athletes organised by British charity Path to Success.

Anita Choudhrie, the charity’s founder said: “Disability sport is still heavily underfunded in the UK, and despite their talent

these athletes need support to be able to compete.

“By supporting our athletes, we want to change this reality and inspire the next generation of female Paralympians. I am confident we can make a difference, in Tokyo and beyond.”

MARY is wearing her eight military medals with pride. They represent long stints on the frontline in Bosnia, Kosovo and Northern Ireland, and for the bravery she has shown in life-threatening situations.

She spent 20 years as a psychiatric nurse and was in charge of a mental health team, responsible for 5,000 troops in Afghanistan during 2008.

The nurse faced life-threatening situations daily, and once narrowly escaped death when a member of the Taliban deliberately drove at

her in Afghanistan. She recalls: “I was walking back from work along a gravel road to my accommodation and a vehicle behind me switched its lights off before trying to run me off the road,” she said.

“I dived off to the side and he skidded past, throwing up gravel.”

The encounter left Mary with fragments of metal under her skin, which turned septic.

She was whisked into surgery and although she made a full recovery, had to spend days in hospital next to an enemy insurgent.

“I woke up with a Taliban fighter next to me in bed as there was only one ward,” she recalls. “I had to think about what he might have done and whether he might have killed one of our British guys.”

“It was hard juggling those thoughts, while he was next to me and getting the same care.”

Mary left the Army in 2012, eight years after her MS diagnosis.

Now all her efforts are focused on reaching Tokyo.

“To walk out at the opening ceremony with other Paralympians and go: ‘You know what, we’ve made it,’ she says. “We are elite athletes who have determination, power, courage and everything that goes with it.”

“We are proud to be here.”