

## **Paralympic Performance Director Tom Whittaker talks about the World Class Program**

You may know British Weight Lifting for Olympic Weightlifting but we are also the National Governing Body for Para Powerlifting. The GB team continue to be successful thanks to the hard work of the athletes with support from Paralympic Performance Director Tom Whittaker and his team. Tom runs the World Class Program and here he explains what it is, how you can get involved with it as an athlete and his coaching career journey.

### **What is the World Class Program?**

The World Class Program is a support mechanism for Para Powerlifters which is funded by UK Sport, via the National lottery. Athletes on this program receive an award which will support their engagement with the sport and help meet their living costs.

The World Class Program has an annual membership period throughout which athlete experiences are designed and supported to confirm, optimise and prepare them for Paralympic success in the future. Athletes will join an elite group of individuals, who all have similarly aligned ambitions. They are all supported by a number of practitioners with expertise in aspects of preparation and personal development.



Pictured: new members on the 2021 World Class Program – Tom Smith, Charlotte McGuiness, Mark Swan and Liam McGary



### **How athletes can get on it and what's involved?**

Athletes can apply each year. They are either identified through specific talent identification initiatives, the general lifting community at competitions and through enquiries with the NGB in the form of expressions of interest. Prior to application, athletes will spend an initial period of time on the Confirmation Program where they confirm their potential through applied learning and physical progress at a rate which is aligned with future success.

Through planned elements like training, competition and testing the athletes get structured opportunities to experience, reflect and grow both as people and as athletes. Throughout the random challenges of life this development is hardened further.

The program is based out of the Loughborough University at the EIS high performance centre in Powerbase Gym. The facilities are designed to ensure all the necessary movements, loading and engagement is possible. In doing so all individual athlete needs are met.

Several stakeholders support the system in which the World Class Program sits. Many other Olympic and Paralympic sports have World Class Programs, supported by their NGB's, the English Institute of Sport or other home nation sports institutions. The British Paralympic Association help NGB's prepare the team for the Paralympic Games and UK Sport ensure Lottery monies are distributed responsibly.

### **How did you get into coaching the Para Powerlifting team?**

After university I busied myself looking for opportunities and experiences in strength and conditioning. I committed to a Masters in Exercise Physiology and sought voluntary opportunities to support and or observe elite/professional athletes in as many sports and environments as possible.

The initiative to offer my support free of charge was well worth the investment as the experiences and networking were influential in future success at interview and in roles.

I was lucky to volunteer with British Weight Lifting in support of the Olympic and Paralympic team preparing for the Commonwealth Games in Delhi 2010 and Olympics and Paralympics in London 2012. British Weight Lifting had just moved their World Class Program to Leeds and coincidentally I was looking for places to help and gain insight. At the same time as this I completed a professional Strength



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and Conditioning accreditation via the UKSCA and the work with British Weight Lifting turned into a role at the English Institute of Sport supporting the same athletes as a Strength and Conditioning Coach and with general sport science support.



Experiences across multiple sports and organisations served me well in broadening the options and possibilities that could be applied to athletes in order to support them as well as possible. The principles of training are universal and transferable to all individuals which mean the work with Paralympic sport that grew afterwards was a comfortable extension of my early experiences supporting rugby, football, tennis and diving.