



INTERVIEW

Kelly Gallagher follows her sighted guide Charlotte Evans at speed

INTERVIEW KELLY GALLAGHER

Daniel Elkan asked Paralympic gold medal winner Kelly Gallagher what it really is like to ski without vision...



Q: Can sighted skiers actually improve their technique by practicing blindfold?

A: Yes, absolutely! Able-bodied racers actually train with blindfolds on. It helps your proprioception – knowing where your body is in space. You learn to hear and feel things in your body that you would ordinarily overlook – because what you can see takes up so much of your focus. Taking away vision is a same kind of exercise as when you ski without poles, or on one ski.

Q: You've had your fair share of scrapes and accidents. What causes the danger?

A: Clearly, there's a danger because of the speed involved – and then there is the disability on top of that. Safety is always

paramount, but there are girls out there that are just incredible skiers, particularly the Slovaks and the Russians. So if I don't ski on the edge of my control they are going to beat me. And I don't like coming second.

Q: So how do you push your limits safely?

A: For a while I was holding back; I was skiing comfortably but no-one wins like that. So you have figure how to overcome fears of falling. And actually, the more you put into the ski the more you control it. If I don't put in enough energy, and the ski springs out below me, that's because I haven't come over the top of it with my core and then driven it properly into another turn. It's like an unruly horse – you have to let it know who is boss.

Q: What made you take up skiing?

A: Skiing was the first thing that really made me feel full exhilaration. I had tried horse riding, sailing, cycling, running – but I still felt dependent, not free.

There's a lot of frustration that goes with visual impairment and it can build up and get you down. But when you clip on skis

and feel the wind on your face, with the mountain to explore, it's incredible.

When I was learning, I said to myself: "If I can just get out of this snow plough and go parallel, I'll feel free." And when you start racing, and feel the ski bend underneath you as you go around the gates, and get to the bottom with so much adrenalin you feel sick, it is an incredible buzz!

Q: What's it like to inspire others?

A: I'd like to think we've really taken visually-impaired skiing forward in the past five years – and the new kids coming through will probably out-do us. Maybe we can really narrow the gap between disabled skiing and able-bodied skiing.

People often perceive 'disabled skiing' as a different sport. But when they watch us race, they see we're better than most able-bodied skiers. How many people can come down a Super G at 110km per hour?

Kelly Gallagher MBE won GB's first ever Winter Paralympic gold at the 2014 Sochi Paralympics, winning the Super-G.
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