

Feature

MyLifeIn HOCKEY

This week...

RICHARD SMITH

Ex-England and GB, Hampstead Director of Hockey

I was having physio on my glute during the London 2012 Olympic Games when Prince William and Kate Middleton walked into the performance centre. Dan Fox, George Pinner and I also showed the Queen and Prince Philip our accommodation on the Saturday morning after the opening ceremony.

They came in through the courtyard and we met them in the middle of the flat and welcomed them into the lounge and bedrooms.

It was an amazing thing to do with them, it was reasonably informal but also so surreal. Prince Philip told us about when he used to play hockey and the Queen spoke about her stunt from the night before at the opening ceremony!

I was at Loughborough University between 2006 and 2009 playing England Under-21 hockey during my studies, and in February 2009 Jason Lee asked if I would go into the central programme with the senior squad.

However, he wanted to see if I would play defence as I had been playing midfield until then, when Jon Bleby retired after Beijing.

Lee said he was looking for a defender that was more comfortable on the ball under pressure and wanted to see if I could convert and play at the back.

I took on that challenge but I didn't know what I was doing tackling so I had to learn quickly. My first competition was in May 2009 when we went to Germany for Tests, and that was a fairly stiff debut.

There was a good atmosphere in the squad when it came to the European Championships later that summer - which obviously went very well.

I can't put my fingers on how or why, whether people who had been in the squad that came fifth in Beijing were building off that, and a few of us came in and added youth to it.

I remember Jason saying to me it's not always this easy.

We had two trips out to India, for the World

Cup and Commonwealth Games, in 2010. Adapting to playing in a completely different climate, the bugs and the home crowds, was a great experience. We were pleased with how we performed in the World Cup.

The Commonwealths were different, though, because we were in the village. We played our semi-final against India in front of a full crowd and we had not experienced that to the same degree in the World Cup.

We were 3-1 up and then the crowd got behind them. They picked up their game and got back to 3-3 and it went to strokes. I took the first stroke, the goal looked very small I flicked it as hard as I could and it went in, which was great.

Unfortunately, they won the flicks 5-4, which was heart-breaking. It was hard to pick ourselves up for the subsequent bronze-medal game against New Zealand then, which we lost on strokes again.

It was a tough year - we were pleased we were getting that far in the tournaments but gutted not to come away with a medal.

Then came the Olympic Games in 2012. At London we had a huge crowd for every game no matter who was playing and they were right behind us. It was fantastic to have that level of support.

The match that sticks out for me was the opening game against Argentina. We won 4-1 and the standing ovation we got afterwards was amazing.

The following summer I was unknowingly playing with a broken thumb and then my knee started playing up. I was in quite a lot of pain so had it scanned and found cartilage damage. The specialist said it was career-threatening.

I'm really thankful to GB Hockey and everyone who was involved in trying to get me back for Rio - but it wasn't to be. It's brilliant to be playing at Hampstead now, but I still have to manage my knee.