

Michelle Weltman given lifetime achievement award after three decades helping disabled people through sport



An inspirational sports coach who has spent more than 30 years working and volunteering in disability sport has been given the Lifetime Achievement Award at this year's London Sport Awards.

Michelle Weltman is head of disability at London Marathon Events, chair of London Disability Swim Club, and has coached a number of Paralympic swimmers during a career which spans more than three decades in disability sport.

Earlier this week she was presented with the Lifetime Achievement Award at the prestigious London Sport Awards, supported by the City of London Corporation, with judges praising the impact she has had on disabled people in the capital and her legacy in disability sport.

It all began, however, when she got a job as a sports development officer in London and was asked to identify some blind or visually impaired swimmers to take part in the London Youth Games.

Working with pupils at a visually impaired school in Hackney she noticed a girl with potential, who swam under the water so she could feel where she was going. Michelle began coaching her, teaching her to swim on the surface. She won a bronze medal at the London Youth Games and Michelle was determined she should have the chance to continue swimming.

Michelle explained: "That's where the journey started. She said she really liked swimming and asked if she could keep training. I went to the local club, and they said they couldn't take a blind swimmer. Went to the next local club, "No, can't take blind swimmers".

"I was working for the council at the time and explained she was really quite good and asked for some time in the pool. They said she could swim in the public pool and we could have a lane for her training so I started coaching her."

Within six months she had been selected for the European Championships.

A year later Michelle was running an athletics event for blind and visually impaired people and one young boy happened to mention he enjoyed swimming. She began coaching him as well. Both he and the girl she was already working with went on to become Paralympians – two of five swimmers Michelle would coach who would do so between 1994 and 2008 – and Michelle began changing the face of disability sport in London forever.

Initially coaching a team of disabled swimmers, Michelle then helped form the London Disability Swim Club, inviting all the disabled swimmers in London to come together to practice as a squad, while working with other swim coaches to help integrate disabled swimmers into mainstream clubs.

She has been involved with the club ever since, becoming chair in 2017, having previously been head coach. She has helped develop new programmes aimed at encouraging more people with a disability into the pool alongside initiatives aimed at training the next generation of coaches to run the growing number of weekly sessions which now take place.

And it isn't solely in swimming where Michelle has had an impact. Her other passion is wheelchair racing and increasing sporting participation among people with a disability.

Since 2015 she has been helping the organisers of the world's leading marathons to improve their wheelchair races and has now spent seven years working for London Marathon Events – not just with their elite athletes, but also making sure the marathon is accessible and open to anyone with a disability.

Her impact on London's sporting landscape – and on the lives of hundreds of people in the city who have a disability and who are now active on a regular basis because of her efforts – cannot be overstated.

The London Sport Awards judges were unanimous in their selection of Michelle for this year's Lifetime Achievement Award. But for Michelle – as welcome as the award is – her motivation has always been about helping others.

She said: "I do what I do because I love what I do. It's about making a difference. I believe it is really important to get everyone doing some physical activity. Not everyone wants to be a Paralympian. Some people just want to do it to be fit and healthy.

"We have people come along who've never swam in their lives. They start off in our swimming lessons and progress into the club. And when I see the joy they get, it's just incredible."

And what about the award? "It's an honour. I am embarrassed by the nomination, because there are so many other people out there who are doing so much extraordinary things across London.

"There is incredible working happening across London by individuals, clubs and community groups and to be recognised is truly unexpected."