

## **Ms. Pamela Fontaine**

# **Five-time Paralympian in Table Tennis and Basketball, Professor at Texas Wesleyan University, and co-founder of the Dallas Wheelchair Lady Mavericks**

*Interview conducted by  
Katherine Toepfer  
In 2016 in Fort Worth, Texas*

Disability Studies Minor  
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### **Biography**

Pamela Fontaine was born in 1964 in Columbus, Ohio. When she was eleven years old her family moved from Ohio to New Jersey where she completed high school. Pam was heavily involved in sports growing up, which included basketball, softball, and volleyball. When Pam was seventeen years old she was involved in a car accident that left her a T-4 Paraplegic. Fontaine discovered wheelchair sports following her release from a rehab facility and continued to play sports.

Ms. Fontaine attended Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, where she received her bachelor's degree in Kinesiology. She also played wheelchair basketball and table tennis during this time. In 1984 Fontaine won a silver medal in doubles for table tennis at the Paralympics held in England. Following this win she retired from table tennis and concentrated on wheelchair basketball.

Fontaine attended Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas, where she received her master's degree and started, but did not complete her PhD. In 1990 Ms. Fontaine was part of a group of women that founded the Dallas Wheelchair Lady Mavericks basketball team. She competed in the 1988 and 1996 Paralympics for basketball, winning a gold medal in 1988 and a bronze in 1996.

Fontaine has two sons and continues to live in the Dallas-Fort Worth area where she teaches P.E. and adapted sports at Texas Wesleyan University in Fort Worth, Texas. Ms. Fontaine returned to playing table tennis and competed in the 2012 Paralympics and will compete in the 2016 Rio games as well. She is currently a coach for the Dallas Wheelchair Lady Mavericks.

## Topics Discussed

- Childhood and car accident at age seventeen
  - Introduction to wheelchair sports
  - First international tournament experience
  - Transition to life after the accident
  - Travel and fundraising for tournaments
  - Experiences with Paralympics and Team USA
  - Attending college at Wright State University
  - Retirement from table tennis
  - Becoming a mother and juggling a sports career
  - Getting back into table tennis at Texas Wesleyan University
  - Changes in wheelchair sports
  - Promoting wheelchair sports
  - Starting the Dallas Wheelchair Lady Mavericks
  - Breaking in a female in a mostly men's sports
  - Choosing between basketball and table tennis
  - Family support and the impact of wheelchair sports
  - Rio and the future
  - Advice for incoming athletes
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### Toepfer

Alright, so this is Katie Toepfer interviewing Pam Fontaine for the UT Arlington Texas Disability Oral History Project. Today's date is April 25, 2016 and I am at Texas Wesleyan University. I am here today to talk with Pam about her experiences as a Paralympian athlete, her life, and career as a professor at Texas Wesleyan.

So if you want to jump in and start talking about your early life and childhood.

### Fontaine

<topic> Childhood and car accident at age seventeen</topic>

(laughter) Ok. Well again my name is Pam and to start off I guess my childhood was normal. I have two brothers. I'm the only girl, in the middle, so sports was always a major priority in our family. It's what we did. When I was eleven we moved from the state of Ohio to New Jersey and I competed in sports there just as well as I did in Ohio, along with my brothers.

When I was in high school, I was into my sophomore year, I had just finished softball season. I was in an automobile with some friends. I was a passenger and there was a boy driving and my friend that I was with she was sitting in the middle because back then they didn't have bucket seats, it was bench seats because this was back in 1981, and there was no seatbelt laws and so things were very different. And we were on an old country road and he was driving and as we approached the crest of a hill and we came over top of that crest there was a car sitting in the lane, on a two-lane country road.

So the kid that was driving, he was seventeen, and in New Jersey you had to be seventeen to drive, so he was a new driver, so his reaction you know he hit the brakes and then the car swerved and it went off the left side of the road and it hit a ravine and the car started

flipping and I went out through the windshield. And in the process of breaking many, many bones, the biggest thing was, you know, I broke my back. So that—the result of that injury left me a T-4 paraplegic. [A T1-T4 paraplegic will have the full use of the arms and varying strength of the chest muscles and upper back muscles depending on the level of injury]

So again the times of being hurt—actually for a very long time they didn't know if I was going to live because I had so many other injuries. I had a life-threatening injury in my leg where I lost a big piece, a big chunk of my leg. So it was—basically a man could make a fist and stick it into my thigh (makes a fist as if to demonstrate) and their hand would disappear, that's how big the wound was.

So they didn't know—I mean it was just an infection away of going bad, what could have happened. But anyway I made it through all of that. I was in the hospital for six weeks and then I went to rehab at Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation in West Orange, New Jersey. And well one of the things that when I was in the hospital bed that I guess was a turning point, and I was at Princeton Medical Center, and sports was—you know again it was such a major thing that we did as a family because my brothers played football and baseball and we were all so active and I did basketball and softball. I remember the doctor come in and said I was never going to walk again and processing all of that and what that meant and during that time frame it was very scary because it wasn't like I knew anybody in a wheelchair.

Although, I did have a classmate and there was other kids in my high school that were in wheelchairs, but I didn't know them. You know how you don't see them because it's not you. So you're with your clique, in your group and you're doing your thing and that didn't exist, right? So even though it did, it was a real thing, but you know it wasn't real to me and my life and what I did so it didn't impact me at all. And my family nobody had a disability so we didn't know about that and as time went on I said to my dad—and I don't know where this came from today, I said to my dad "do you think they have something called wheelchair basketball?"

<topic>Introduction to wheelchair sports</topics>

It was random. It was crazy. I don't know why I thought of that. I don't know where it came from. And my dad said, "I don't know, but I will contact the dad of the kid in your class that's in a wheelchair and talk to him." So I was like OK that made sense. So oddly enough that boy was involved in wheelchair athletics from one of the associations in New Jersey and his dad knew all about it and informed my dad and my dad came back and was like, "Hey! Good news!" And so that kind of gave me some hope that you know there's—OK good.

So I went off to rehab and I was there for three and a half months. This whole hospital-thing— I got hurt in June, I didn't get out of the hospital till November. So my junior year had already started and once I got out of the hospital we—my dad by that point in time had found the local wheelchair basketball team. Now, it was an all men's team and the men were pretty much all vets from—so there's these big old guys right, I mean they're huge, humongous guys and then there's me (laughter) this seventeen year old little girl.

So I go to my first practice. It was intimidating, but it was also a relief. It was like freedom. I could forget about the wheelchair and I could play. Although I couldn't make a basket (laughter) and I think that inability to even make a layup because I didn't have the strength and that drive to like hey you know this is...me... I can't make a layup right? I was like on the basketball team, moving into varsity basketball. I was like how can I not make a layup.

It was just that drive and that motivation I want to make a layup. And so that was kind of like my goal. And so my dad would drive me to practice and I would go once a week and

practice and at the end of the season the coach said to me "Pam you're weak" (laughter) because I was! I was this girl, you know, and I couldn't—I was struggling to try to shoot the ball and figure out the wheelchair and my disability all this stuff was brand new.

And he said, "You need to try as many sports as you can, go do other sports because if you work on other things between March and this season upcoming you're going to get that much stronger; and you're going to figure out your disability a little bit better and you can figure out which can do and can't do."

So that kind of made sense. So again I—there was another organization, go figure, and I got involved with them and one of the people that ran it—it was a husband [and] wife team and he was disabled and he played table tennis. And she was able-bodied, but she ran the track and field and all that stuff. So I did track and field and table tennis and did what I was told and when I first went to my first table tennis practice I was terrible. (laughter)

And so I remember the coach—the guy who was coaching me, who was in the chair. He says to me "maybe you should go home," because my dad told him we have a table tennis table at home, and the guy said, "Maybe you should go home and practice and then the next time you come back we'll see how it goes" (laughter).

Because I was so bad I couldn't put the ball on the table all they did was pick up—my dad picked up balls that's all he did the whole time. His back was killing him by the time.... So you know I was really lucky because as you can hear as this presentation goes on I talk a lot about my dad, my dad, my—I mean because he constantly...he gave up a ton and it wasn't like I could drive—to run me around to go to these sporting events and without the support of my family none of this would have ever happened. It was him making the phone calls and him trying to get me connected and him taking me.

And so without that network of support I don't know where I would have been. But again, I go home and I play table tennis with my brothers and my dad and I get better. Because I'm still young and I'm still learning the chair, but one of the things that I found is that I progressed really quickly with my skills. I just kind of got good, fast. So the next time I go back the coach was like whoa, OK, now we got something.

<topic>First international tournament experience</topic>

So they started working with me, with table tennis, and I did that a couple of times a week and I still pushed track and field. And believe it or not my table tennis skills progressed so much there was an international tournament (her wheelchair bumped the table where the recorder was sitting) in Austria and they were selecting people to go and I got picked. I was the last one picked, but I got picked. So I was like that made me better than other people who didn't get picked.

So I was like OK. So I was—that was my first—I mean I wasn't even in a wheelchair for a full year yet and I'm already traveling overseas for an international competition. So it was a great honor, and on that trip (laughs) I learned a lot. I learned a lot about—and basically it was because of an older player because again I was very young and there was no junior sports back in that day (door closes). This was long before—if you were a kid with a disability you had to compete with adults because there was no place for you to go. So it was a much older player and she was kind of making fun of me because I needed a transfer board to slide—that I would put underneath me to go from my chair to the toilet or the bed.

On the airplane I guess that's probably where she saw it or I don't know where she saw it. But she started making fun of me, and teasing me, and picking on me. Well, it made me cry

because I didn't know, I didn't know this woman and obviously she had a lot of friends and she was a seasoned athlete and knew other people. And I'm like—we weren't even in the same sport, she was a swimmer because it was a group of—it was an international competition so it wasn't just for table tennis other sports went.

But it was like I had—you know I don't know she started picking on me and I realized hmm maybe she's right. Maybe I don't need this board to go from point A to point B because that's what the rehab showed me how to do and I didn't know any better. So when I went home. I said to my dad.... (laughs) You know I told him what happened and I'm like, "Maybe I don't need this transfer board and I want to learn how to transfer without it."

"Well how do you do it?"

"I don't know. What I saw was people just picking themselves up and kind of swinging and going over and I'm—I don't know if I have the ability to do that, but I'm going to figure it out."

"OK."

"Well just come here and stand in front of me and if I go to fall catch me just push me back."

And I was trying transferring from my wheelchair into my bed. So I didn't rock at it at first. He had to catch me a couple times as I went to fall. But over time we kept practicing and practicing and then I realized oh I got this. I can do this by myself now. I don't need this stupid sliding board and boom that sliding board went away and I never used it again after that.

Now the trial, a big trial and tribulation was of course transferring in and out of a car because the seats aren't the same height, you know like a bed. But I found I could do that as well. So I—you know it was from other people kind of teasing me and picking on me that helped to mold me as a person and what I could do and what I couldn't do. And of course wheelchair sports does that anyway.

So, through the people that you meet they're like, "Hey why don't you try this? Or why don't you do that? Or I do this and this helps me." And you're like, "Oh I didn't think of that. I didn't know that."

And those ideas really help each other to figure out the best way to go about doing stuff. So there's that whole network there that, that's very helpful. And then the person's—the attitude that I got to figure this out that (her phone went off) I can do this you know that drive and fortunate that I had that. So I didn't want to be defeated by things so—and then my family and their support of course wanted me to succeed as well and that was also very helpful.

So the beginning times I have to admit was difficult just because it was a such a huge learning curve. It wasn't like every place that you went was accessible because it wasn't like that then. There were many times you would go to a restaurant and you'd get there and oh crap I can't go here, (text message noise) I can't get in. So there was a lot of different times where that kind of changed what you're going to do or the direction we'd go as a family or how we were going to handle things. But today people don't really have as much worries cause things are so accessible.

## **Toepfer**

So growing up in New Jersey or when you moved to New Jersey and then having your accident there... did you find that the community that you lived in was really accepting—like your dad could reach out to the—your other schoolmate who was already in a chair and they already had this sort of community of like we're going to play, we have a basketball team set up, was there...

## **Fontaine**

<topic>Transition to life after the accident</topic>

Well the odd part is—OK so I got hurt when I was sixteen. OK so when I came back to school... the big difference was when I went back, I'll never forget that day, in November I went back to my first day back at school and I remember like everybody, kids, when I went up, I went upstairs on the elevator went up to go to class and everybody in the hall and the people coming out everybody just stopped and they stared at me.

It was a very strange—I mean because the last time...you got to remember the last time they saw me I was able-bodied, I was walking. So to me it was very...it was hard because I know I'm coming back and I'm not just in a cast (laughs) I'm in a wheelchair. So the difference in the perception there of what they were going to think or how they were going to feel and of course you still want to be accepted because you're young and you want to fit in. But the other thing that happened miraculously is I matured from my accident significantly.

So when I went back and I'm trying to fit back into my peer group, I didn't fit. Because I didn't get it. Because I thought they were so immature. All the—and I'm like did I grow up that much as a result of my accident, and the thing was yes I did. It changed my life tremendously. It changed who I was to a point in terms of being an immature sixteen year old girl, now I come back I'm much more mature and I'm kind of not fitting in, people are staring at me I'm thinking—I'm trying to fit into my little group that I was with before and I'm thinking these guys—how did—did I—was I like this and it was very strange in terms of that aspect.

I guess it's a fortunately and unfortunately the peers that I had I kind of lost all of them and what became my savior was wheelchair sports. So—and that was again there was no juniors it was pretty much all adults. So I was like the only kid, everybody else was an adult. So after school I come home to get my homework done and then I would go. Somebody would come and pick me up and I would go practice. Whether that was table tennis or track or basketball I would just go.

So I left behind my classmates and because I didn't fit in but I found this other adult group that I could fit in with. So that transition was odd. It was very—I mean there's no way to describe that other than it was just I didn't fit. But I did fit here, but I no longer fit where I was. Now I do still today have one of my friends that saw me through the whole thing and her and I are still friends today. But when it comes to the group of people, that just didn't happen for me. So it was an interesting transition for sure.

## **Toepfer**

After your first trip to Austria now—this is a two part question I guess. So did you travel as part of the national team, were you sponsored? Or was that like a pay your own way (laughs) you have to raise the money to go kind of situation and then after that did you...what was your next like—what was your next step, your next big competition that you were in?

**Fontaine**

<topic>Travel and fundraising for tournaments</topic>

OK. So um I guess that was—when I went to Austria was that... (laughs) I was on so many trips. The following year—OK to answer the question is yes you paid your own way. But, you didn't start to get sponsorship until mid-ninety's. So anybody even if you made a Paralympic team—in 1988 and 1984 I made the Paralympics team I paid my own way.

It was like congratulations you made the team now you need to come up with two thousand five hundred dollars and that's pretty much what happened. But yeah because in 1984 I made the team for table tennis and then in '83 I went to Germany and I went back to Austria. So in '82 it was my first invitational tosser, so yeah each one of those International events everything you had to pay for yourself or you do fundraising. So that's what we did back then we fundraised like crazy trying to get you know help to be able to travel and to participate. And then my parents would help me too so I was lucky that I had some assistance.

**Toepfer**

Did your parents travel with you on...?

**Fontaine**

They did not, they let me go by myself, but I went with the group that—and of course they knew the coaches for the organization that I played under so they didn't have a problem with me traveling with them. And pretty much everybody was like we'll take—because I was the baby of the group for many, many, many years (door closes) because I was so young compared to everybody else. I was usually at least by five or six years you know the youngest person you know on the team.

**Toepfer**

So what was that like for you being so young and being invited to these huge competitions?

**Fontaine**

<topic>Experiences with Paralympics and Team USA</topic>

Well it was an honor (laughter, interviewer acknowledges) I mean—and especially in '84 the Olympics was held in L.A. and the Paralympics was supposed to be there too, but a divestment of funds or whatever happened. The Paralympics wasn't going to happen that year because of L.A.'s fiasco. So Stoke Mandeville in England they took it over. So we were able—they were able to host the Paralympics for the United States because we screwed up so bad. Lucky for us so the Paralympics wasn't canceled, it was held and so I got to go on that trip to England and I played table tennis there and I metaled with my doubles partner [Tara Proffitt] so and that was my first Paralympics Games.

And so you're traveling with Team USA and you're with the national team so it wasn't like I was travelling by myself per se. Especially since a lot of the top table tennis players were in the New York/New Jersey area so you would just meet up and then you would travel together as a group. So it wasn't like at that time I was by myself going places. (Interviewer acknowledges)

And then my coach he was the head coach for a while of the U.S. team so that worked out perfect too because then we would all just go together. So I didn't have to worry about being alone.

### **Toepfer**

And were you at... were you in college at this point?

### **Fontaine**

<topics>Attending college at Wright State University</topic>

OK so in 1983 I graduated from high school and then I went to Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio and one of the reasons why I was interested in Wright State, there was a couple of things. They had at that time a doctor—there was a doctor there named Doctor Petrofsky [known for his development while at Wright State University of a portable computer system which stimulated the leg muscles of paralysis victims allowing them control of their lower extremities] and they were doing electrical stimulation. And at that time it was—he had come on 60 Minutes and several of the other news channels about him taking, using individuals with paralysis and getting them to walk with his FES Program [Functional Electrical Stimulation Program].

So that was how Wright State kind of became famous and in the news during that time. Secondly, they had a wheelchair basketball program so—and then I got accepted (laughter). Better yet right? So I thought hmm that's where I wanted to go. So I got in and—I...you know—my parents are like what are you...my mom was for sure I wasn't going to make it cause she said to me, "If we would have known that you were going to make it and weren't going to come back we pry would have never let you go." But I think that they just assumed you know freshly injured she's not going to make it. She'll be back. But I got out there and loved it.

It was in Ohio and you know I was born and raised in Ohio even though it was a different part I was very comfortable with the state in itself and being there and the people. And of course once I got on campus there was a lot of people in wheelchairs. They had underground tunnels from building to building so you—during the winter you didn't have to go outside so it didn't matter if it was snowing or whatever. I lived in the dorms. I didn't bother with it.

So—and then I played on their wheelchair basketball team and I played on a men's team and I played and started all four years in college. By the time I left there I was a big fish in a small pond. It was a small college or university, but everybody knew me. So I was pretty spoiled really.

### **Toepfer**



Yeah. Were you still playing table tennis at that time or just focusing on basketball?

### **Fontaine**

<topic>Retirement from table tennis</topic>

No. I had to—that was also a time like after the Paralympics in 1984 they realized that to keep the medal count as high as possible athletes couldn't—they wanted you to specialize in your sports. So there was no more going and doing table tennis and then running over to the track and then trying to race because a lot of that stuff happened and then if you were late from one venue to the next you missed your heat and then you no longer had an American in that event.

So after the '84 Paralympics things started to change in terms of taking the sports more serious and so the multi-sport athletes—what they did was they told you that you had to pick. So I had to choose, I had to choose between table tennis and basketball. So in 1983 it was like early...or '84 I retired (laughs) from table tennis. I was nineteen, I retired. And so I wanted to focus on basketball. And in 1986 I made my first international team for basketball and then in '88 I made the Paralympic team and so—I did wheelchair basketball from '86 and then internationally I think my last competition was '96 so for that ten years span there I played with the U.S. team and traveled all over the world with them.

### **Toepfer**

And that's like a full-time job so were you just focusing on...

### **Fontaine**

<topic>Attending Texas Woman's University</topic>

No, I was going to school and in '88 I graduated from Wright State and then I waited until after the Paralympics cause that was I think end of September-ish kind of month and I started my graduate degree at Texas Woman's University [located in Denton, Texas]. And it was funny because I ended up here because I was on my way to Seoul [Korea] in '88 and there's this woman who was on this plane right, and she was sitting in front of me so I was sitting in—there must have been four or five seats behind, they had two on each end and then the aisles and then four I guess middle seats.

So in front of me was this woman and she was sitting next to this guy and he was a spastic cerebral palsy so he must have been a Boccia athlete [Boccia, similar to Bocce ball is a precision ball sport, played mostly by athletes with severe disabilities affecting motor skills] and he was starting with spasming [sic] and whatever and she turned, she got over the seat and she's like, "Why are you just sitting here? Can't you get up and help?"

And I looked at he and I was like "uh, no (laughter) sorry!" And I didn't know who this woman was. And so then after she helped with this guy and got him situated she's like "I'm really sorry. Are you an athlete?" And I said, "Yes!"

And so I started talking to her and she says, "Hi, my name is Dr. Claudine Sherrill." [Professor-Emeritus of the Texas Woman's University, known for her pioneer work in adapted physical activity] And my field was physical education, but my concentration was adapted and all of my textbooks were written by her.

So this—and I idolized her because she you know... and I'm like no way (said in whisper) this can't be happening that's Claudine Sherrill. I was like really? I told her who I was and what sport I was with and that I was—that I had applied to get my Master's degree.

Well then she ended up coming over and sitting down next to me on the plane and she recruited me from, for many hours trying to get me to come—because I had already signed an agreement with [University of Wisconsin] La Crosse in Wisconsin and I was going to their program. But—so she offered me more money (interviewer acknowledges and there is laughter) and so I changed my mind and when I got back told I told La Crosse I wasn't coming and then I was going to Texas Woman's University and that's how I ended up in Texas. And then that became a big battle, but that's between those two universities you know you're not supposed to steal other people's students, but it's kind of what happened.

**Toepfer**

So did you end up getting to study under her or work with her?

**Fontaine**

I did. I did. She was my professor for many of my classes.

**Toepfer**

That's so cool.

**Fontaine**

Yeah that's exactly how that went down it was very, very, very strange chance. I mean I had no idea who this woman was. I didn't know really who she was. I just knew she wrote my textbooks and that—so yeah it was good.

**Toepfer**

And so after you did your ten years of basketball did you retire from that as well or did you just switch right back into table tennis?

**Fontaine**

<topic>Becoming a mother and juggling a sports career</topic>

OK so as my life progressed....I moved down here in '89 and then in that same year I had met a guy who I ended up marrying in 1990. I took a job working for Dallas Rehab Institute as their athletic coordinator and I still hadn't finished my Master's. So in 1992 I finally finished that and graduated there [Texas Woman's University], but also in '92 my first son was born. So I didn't go to the Paralympics in 1992 because...

**Toepfer**

You're a new mom.

### **Fontaine**

Yeah, I was having a baby in August and the Paralympics were in September. (laughs) So it didn't work out timing-wise. So I missed those games for him and then the following year I got pregnant again with my second son and so, but '94 I went to Gold Cup [World Championships] with the U.S. team so I had a lot to do with being a new mom with two babies, two infants. So at that point in time I was a stay-at-home mom and played wheelchair basketball when I could. I also liked wheelchair tennis so I played that on and off as well. But I think in '94 I gave tennis up all together because it just became too much and I wanted to concentrate on just trying to play basketball.

So I knew I wanted to do '96 so I spent the time when the kids were real young and I could go to Texas Instruments [electronics company located in Dallas, Texas], because my husband worked there, and you could use their facilities and they had a daycare so I could put the babies in the daycare and then I could go and workout. And then I'd come back and pick up the boys and go home. So that was my life for a really long time as I was trying to get ready for '96.

And then in 1990 I started the women's team because there was no women's basketball team in the Dallas area. So with my work for the Dallas Rehab Institute we started the first women's wheelchair basketball team and they sponsored us. They sponsored us for two years and then their money ran out and then we had to fundraise on our own. So in 1990 I started the team and we recruited girls to come in. We're still in existence today. We're now the Dallas Lady Mavericks. Now I coach, I no longer play, but yeah so that's....

So basically I was a stay-at-home mom and then I ended up getting divorced in I think 2002. So around that time I thought hmm now my kids are you know going out of elementary school into middle school what am I going to do? So I decided that maybe I would go back for my PhD. So I started working on all of that process to get a PhD. I pretty much did all the course work, but I didn't end up finishing.

### **Toepfer**

Was that at Texas Woman's as well?

### **Fontaine**

<topics>Getting back into table tennis at Texas Wesleyan University</topic>  
Yes, yes and in the meantime (table was bumped) in 2007 Texas Wesleyan University [Fort Worth, Texas] has had a table tennis program. I didn't know anything about it right because I didn't play table tennis. When I dropped the sport—when I retired, I retired. I hadn't really picked up a racket in twenty plus years. So I get this phone call because they knew I was still out there and Texas Wesleyan was hosting college nationals. They wanted for the first time to have a wheelchair event in college nationals because they didn't have that.

And so somebody calls me and says, "Hey would you be willing—we know that you're a student," I don't even know how they knew that, "And would you be willing to play?"

And I'm like, "Well I don't even go to school there."

"Well you are a student right?"

"Yeah, but I used all of my eligibility for basketball back in the eighties."

"This is a different sport you can start over with eligibility."

So it was like OK. I was a student at Texas Woman's and Texas Wesleyan was hosting the tournament and they're like, "Oh by the way if you know of other people who want to come we really want to try to make this event." So I was like hmm OK. So I recruited all my disabled friends from UTA because they have a basketball program and a friend of mine who was disabled from Texas Woman's and they had a couple of other people coming in from other areas of the country, I think they had two or three.

But they really wanted to host enough for an event. I think all together there was like ten of us so it was great. And so I'm in one pool and I beat everyone in my pool and I make crossovers and I get to the final and I'm playing against this standing disabled guy and this kid beat me. And I was mad because even though I hadn't picked up a racquet in twenty plus years I didn't want to lose.

And so that loss to him—I decided at that point on I want to play and I think it was 2006 when this happened, not 2007. And so after that point on that was my turning point and I decided OK that guy beat me, that shouldn't have happened. I don't know why I thought I was some great table tennis player; I don't know what I was thinking. But I—it was I don't know I just wanted to be elite at that so I started playing table tennis again and I was rusty, but it didn't take me long to lose the cobwebs in I guess 2006. And then 2007 I made the Pan American team somehow. Here I go again and then I was really close to making Beijing [Paralympics] in 2008, but I was an alternate.

I didn't make the team, but you know for having not played I felt like I did really well and I would have a chance to make 2012. And so I trained and I did the Pan American games and I did well and finally I reached my goal and made the Paralympics for 2012 and I thought wow that was amazing. And then my doubles partner [Tara Profitt] she made it too so we were really excited because it was just her and I and one other guy. And we were the only two in chairs and he's standing disabled. And then this go round I got super lucky and made 2016 for Rio because the French didn't support their two girls so I made the alternate list and everybody on the list moved forward and I was the last player in. So I'm going to Rio. (laughs)

### **Toepfer**

Yeah! That's so exciting! (laughs)

### **Fontaine**

Crazy you know cause I thought well you know I didn't earn the spot this time because I didn't do well at the Pan American games, I finished third and that's the worst finish I've ever had. I just didn't have a good performance, but you know my points were still high enough and so I got—and then plus the French didn't support their girls so now I'm going to have another opportunity to participate again in a Paralympic Games so after thirty-some years of wheelchair sports and traveling all over the world it's you know, it's crazy.

## **Toepfer**

What are some of the differences you've noticed through your whole time starting you know in '84 and then now you're going to Rio in 2016, what are attitudes-wise differences in technology just or even the sports?

## **Fontaine**

<topic>Changes in wheelchair sports</topics>

Right. So OK technology phew yeah that's the biggest difference just because of the light-weight chairs and the progress in terms of equipment and the light-weight of everything. That has changed sport's entirety just like it has for able-bodied sports it has also for wheelchair sports, but probably even greater because we've come such a... Heck when I got hurt in 1981 they were still—there were no such things as light-weight chairs. They were still hospital chairs.

So think in thirty years how far we've come in such a short period of time in terms of equipment. The light-weight materials have changed—makes people faster and people are stronger now and different mindset in terms of training and weightlifting. That's been humongous. (laughs)

And then of course the other big thing is financially. It doesn't—they no longer say congratulations you've made the Paralympic team I need \$3500 or \$5000 or whatever the price tag is. It's now congratulations you've made the team now concentrate on training and this is what you need to do. I think, however, I think that some of the players that have come out now seem to be a lot more spoiled. Because they don't know how hard the players of the past worked to get the system to where it is today. There was—you know there's nothing worse than being told yay you've made the team, but you know this is how much money I need.

It's like what kind of honor—I mean it's a great honor don't get me wrong to go and play for your country and to compete for your country in your sport, what you love to do. Then it's like, but you have to come up with all this money. So you also have to take time away from not only your job because you've got to work to support yourself because you don't get paid to play and you got to train, now you've got to fundraise on top of that. And it's—you know there are people that that's their full-time job is to fundraise and to you know get grants and that kind of stuff.

So the time you can imagine that that takes to try to come up with the funds—and some people you know couldn't come up with funds and when you can't come up with them you can't go. So those—you know your best player if they couldn't fundraise then that player... They always picked an alternate list so then you take somebody else for the guy who couldn't come up with the money. So, but they deserved the spot athletically so how do you work that?

We've come a long way to where we—now were where we should be, we still have a long way to go, but we're closer to where we should be. When players—we don't have to leave our best player home because they can't afford it. Still sports, especially the sport of table tennis, if you're a have-not it's a very difficult sport to play (voices in the background outside of the office) because it costs so much money to play the sport. You need coaching

and coaches all charge, it's hard to find a program where you can fit in where you don't have to pay to play.

Whereas wheelchair basketball, you just join your local wheelchair basketball team and you go to practice. You don't have to pay dues for most teams and you know some of the teams they'll have to fundraise to get themselves to go to nationals, (door closing) but if you have—or if your team or organization has grants or other funding then the players don't have to pay so there's offsets in terms of what it costs to play locally for the NWBA [National Wheelchair Basketball Association] or whatever.

But for table tennis if you're not on the national team and you want to get points so you can try to make it on a national team you have to pay to go to international tournaments. So when I first started out I paid a lot of money to travel that all came out of my pocket because I wasn't good enough at that point to be.... Actually they didn't have a national team for the para players yet, they only had it for the able-bodied, but you know that's changed as well too since I've been playing table tennis.

There's been a lot of things that have changed within trying to make the equality—we still have a long way to go, but each sport organization is trying to get a little bit better at that, making sure that the able-bodied teams and your para teams have the same or some kind of similar funding. It's not the same, trust me, but it's better than what it used to be which was nothing at all or they didn't even recognize you. (laughs) Now the fact that they recognize that you exist is you know a step in the right direction, but equality in terms of funding would be nice.

### **Toepfer**

Have you worked in any...with any groups that do like promote like trying to get better funding, better equality besides just being an athlete, do you work on trying to promote that?

### **Fontaine**

<topic>Promoting wheelchair sports</topic>

Well I think that every elite athlete does that in some way, shape, or form. I mean just because people ask you questions and you can answer them and give them information and so they—because not the general—your next door neighbor, able-bodied person necessarily know anything about wheelchair sports in the United States anyway. Because it's not televised and it's not—so unless you know somebody or you have by chance seen it in a university or something you don't really know anything about it. Now in other countries it's a lot more, it's advertised you know you can turn on a wheelchair basketball game and watch it on TV, but you can't do that here because we don't have—the networks don't feel that there's a an audience for that.

But we're always trying to. I don't work for an organization in particular, but we're always trying to educate and to give information that hey we do exist. There are some absolutely fantastic athletes that deserve—they deserve to be paid to play just like able-bodied athletes are paid to play. We're not there yet, but hopefully maybe in my lifetime I'll see that. I'll see that next generation that just—because somebody's got to be the groundbreakers at the bottom to get people to where we want to go so hopefully that will happen in my lifetime and I'll get to see that and that would be fabulous.

## **Toepfer**

So circling back you were talking about the Lady Mavericks and how you had a hand in starting that. Could you discuss that a little bit more, how that became... I know it's because you said there was no team here, so what was that like getting that team off the ground?

## **Fontaine**

<topics>Starting the Dallas Wheelchair Lady Mavericks</topic>

OK so when I moved down here I played for Wright State University. I played on the men's team and then in 1986 we started a women's team and I could play on both. I could play on the college team, the men's team, and the women's team. So because the women's team wasn't a college team it was a community team based out of [Dayton, Ohio]. So I got lucky I could play on both teams.

Well then when I moved down here [Dallas, Texas] in '89 there was no women's team. So I didn't want to not play because I was training for Gold Cup for 1990. And back then you had to play to get selected for a U.S. team. So what—I had to fly back and forth to Ohio to go back to play on my old team because there was nothing here.

And so then after Gold Cup I'm like we've got to get a team here. There's just no reason why we don't have one. We have girls here for tennis and then there was a group of girls in Austin and so there was a network of three or four of those girls there and there were like three or four of us here. So I'm like hmm why don't we come together and form the first women's team. So we were the—the men's team was the Texans so we were the Lady Texans and we started in 1990 and I approached—I put together a plan and approached DRI [Dallas Rehabilitation Institute] where I worked and asked them if they would fund it and they said they certainly would and because they had funded quad-rugby for the men so I was asking them to do something for the women. And so they said sure and that's how we got started in Dallas Rehab Institute funded us until '92 and then after that point in time we didn't have real funding like I said before and we were on our own.

But by that time we had, we had a start. We were in existence for two years, we had a good network of girls who were committed to the sport and to the team, and we were seeing a growth. We were seeing more and more members come on so we were relying less on the Austin girls because we had more girls here locally in the Dallas area and I was always hoping that the Austin girls would form their own team because then we'd have a team there.

But those girls I think as they fell off of our team had lost interest and didn't play anymore. You always have the impact too with women's sports is that the as female we have the babies. And then a lot of times it becomes very difficult to continue in wheelchair sport. For me, that was my one night a week out or "my time" away was to go to a wheelchair basketball practice. I didn't go out with the girls or do anything else because I gave that up to get you know my husband to watch the kids for one night that was my thing (points to herself).

So a lot of times when I had games sometimes I took the kids with me and I took a friend or someone that could go with me and watch the kids while I was playing on the court if my husband wasn't available to do it or had other things or whatever. So I mean it's a huge commitment, but unfortunately we lose a lot of women that way because you know they have kids or have that responsibility and are unable to juggle or don't want to juggle or....

So you see women will come and go more so than the men so they have longer careers and play longer because they don't have the you know...

### **Toepfer**

Because the women are taking care of them [children].

### **Fontaine**

Right. (laughter) It's exactly—if you think about it that's exactly the way it is. It's the women's responsibility and even now. Then it was definitely, now it's you know there's more equality, but at the same time the expectation for the mother to be there is still there and it's really hard to juggle especially for an elite athlete. However the USOC [United States Olympic Committee] is making that easier now, they allow you to bring your baby and if—they'll help pay for that and then they'll help assist with funding for you to have somebody with you to watch your child. Especially if you're nursing because that's—you can't ask a nursing mother to leave their infant at home to come to a training camp. So it's better, but that's—during that time it wasn't so sometimes we lost girls because of starting their families and motherhood and stuff.

But one of the good parts about our team is when we recruited people especially you know women that were newly disabled that already had their children we're like, "Hey! Guess what?" You know most of us are mothers and we juggle it so that made them more comfortable trying to—oh yeah OK I get this. You guys are mothers too and you're making the commitment and you're still able to do this then maybe I can do it too.

So that was also kind of helpful as you're breaking those grounds to say, "Hey you know we're all parents, we're in this together. We have the love for wheelchair sports and basketball and we have the love for our families, how can we combine this all together you know and make it work." Instead of making excuses as to why I can't, let's figure out how we can as a team and as a group. We've been pretty lucky that way.

### **Toepfer**

Did you work at all with any of the wheelchair basketball people at UT Arlington because I know the Movin' Mavs have been a pretty big deal over there? Did you work with anybody when you were starting the Lady Mavs?

### **Fontaine**

<topic>Breaking in as a female in a mostly men's sport</topic>

Back in those days Jim Hayes was the coach over there (laughs) and that was kind of a good ole' boys network over there and breaking in as a female wasn't going to happen. Like I would go to the sweat box [what the basketball court was called because there was no air conditioning] to play, but the men's teams weren't really as accepting here. So when I played with the men, and we did—my friend Gina [McWilliams], she's an amputee, we played with the Waco [Texas] men's team. Because we just found them more accepting and more willing to pass the girls the ball and not have as much of a problem with females participating in sport. Because still back then it was like, "Eh you're a girl" (Interviewer



acknowledges) and even if you were an elite girl on the Paralympic team they still didn't see it was more of a—you're a girl. [emphasis on the girl]

Because I had gone to Jim Hayes many times trying to get him to you know be more open and get us some girls and you know starting a program, but he wasn't interested. It was more of the "Maverick" attitude during those times. I remember I would go in his office and you know cause they had—he was the president of the—each area had its own division right and so he was in charge of the division here. As a women's team, we were the only women's team, we had to play against men because who else are you going to play? And we still do, unless Doug [Garner, UTA Movin' Mavs current head coach] has a women's...

I guess it's different now because Doug is much more accepting and now there is a women's team there [at UTA], even before there was a women's team Doug was still more accepting of women in sports. He would bring in the women's teams and always invite us so we always played. So we have that connection, but back in the nineties, the early nineties, I was in charge of our team, the team representative so I would go to the different meetings (laughs) and you would go into the office and they're all in there smoking cigarettes and you're like (makes disgusted face) and if you're a non-smoker you know—and back then you could do that and you're like I don't know if I can do this. So I would sit in the door frame because I couldn't stand it because it was just, I couldn't do the cigarette smoke and—but I kind of always felt like an outsider. I never really felt that welcomed I guess because I didn't smoke, I didn't—you knew I was...

**Toepfer**

Weren't a man...

**Fontaine**

Yeah, right. I had this girl thing going on and of course I was always pushing and pushing because that's what you have to do. You have to be an advocate. If you're not willing to scream like, "Hey we want this opportunity. Hey we want to play. Hey we want games. Hey put us in. Hey how can...you know don't just overlook us we're paying our dues too we deserve the opportunity to participate and have officials and all of that stuff." It was a fight, it was a fight to get everything we wanted and so I was more of a pain in the butt fighting for the girls and for the women's team to make sure that we were included.

**Toepfer**

And you currently coach for them right now?

**Fontaine**

I do. I've been with team since I started it.

**Toepfer**

Since you started.

**Fontaine**

Yeah since 1990.

**Toepfer**

Do you coach here at all? Or you just teach here?

**Fontaine**

I just teach here. I work at Wesleyan as a university professor, I'm an adjunct here. (Interviewer acknowledges "OK") Yeah so I've been teaching here since 2007.

**Toepfer**

Is it difficult to juggle teaching, coaching a women's basketball team, and doing your own table tennis career? (laughter)

**Fontaine**

<topics>Choosing between basketball and table tennis</topic>

You now there are times when—what I said was to my coaches; my table tennis coaches that is, “I don't want to have to choose. Don't put me in the situation where I have to choose between basketball and table tennis because you might not like the outcome. So let's not do that, let's work with each other and work around it.” Cause I sometimes—I'd go to practice and they'd go, “Well there's table tennis Monday night why don't you go play at this club?”

I'm like, “Because I've got basketball.”

“Well you need to decide.”

“I did. (scoffs) This one night a week is my night a week for basketball and we don't have that many weekends when we're gone, but when we do I'm going.”

So—I think—and I've always said that even to the Paralympic coaches I'm like, I just don't—let's not do that. I don't want to ever choose. I'll make a choice based on the level. So if it was a choice between going to a tournament and qualifying for something, then I'll go do table tennis to qualify, but if the tournaments were equal then I would probably do basketball.

Because it's been my whole life. It's been thirty-some years, that's the first thing I did when I got out of the hospital was I went to a wheelchair basketball practice. I got out in November and went to my first practice in December. So I mean it's—I don't.... I've never wanted to make that choice. I've tried to find a way to balance it and to do it. And then my—I teach online some of my classes and then my adapted class I work with Doug [Garner] when we need chairs. We do our wheelchair basketball and you know he's always a pleasure

to work with. I'll just you know can we borrow so many chairs so we can—and I'll borrow chairs from them and take them back and so I've been doing that for years.

### **Toepfer**

Do you think that you're—obviously a very competitive person, so do you think that your competitive nature and just your family sounds just amazing and wonderfully supportive, do you think those two things were your two biggest motivators and what drove you to become an elite athlete, in two sports which is amazing?

### **Fontaine**

<topic>Family support and the impact of wheelchair sports</topic>

Right. Absolutely, I think initially without my family that I was lucky to have a true blessing from God; I am very appreciative of my family. Would I be the person I am today and that answer is probably no. Because without that support I may have found wheelchair sports at some point, but I may not have. I may have floundered, I don't know and I don't know what would have happened to me in those years when I was maybe not doing anything and waiting.

Whereas I immediately went from (laughs) a hospital bed to [the] gym floor. (laughter) So it's that impact and then that impact of wheelchair sports within itself has been tremendous on my life and who I am and what I've become and my confidence and my ability to join a fitness center. And then they have their able-bodied classes going on and if I want to go to that class I just go in there. And sometimes, you know I'll get the teachers like, "Oh this is umm... a workout class?"

And I'm like, "Yeah I know, I'm here for it." (laughter) Their eyes kind of get big and I'm like, "Don't worry we'll work together I can adapt activities as you're doing them and we'll make it work."

So I try to make them feel comfortable because initially they're like I think you're in the wrong room and then I have to make sure that they understand that I'm confident enough to adapt and change the exercise. If you're doing jumping jacks I can make my arms work in those motions, to change things so it's very similar of an activity and of an exercise to where I'm getting [the] benefit of a workout and so is the person that you know is able-bodied that came to your class. And they don't mind me you know sitting in there and usually they all say, "oh my gosh I can't believe you did all of that."

Afterwards they come up to me and talk to me about 'you're an inspiration' and I'm like pff I'm just trying to work out like you guys and I kill myself in the process and survive to the end of it. (laughter) I think without that—wheelchair sports—I know a lot of people can't do that they just don't have the confidence to go into a space like that and create and make things happen for themselves because it's not an adapted class or whatever.

So I think it has really molded the person that I am and that I've become in terms of confidence. Wheelchair sports and athletics and all that it's done for me and the support you know that network that I had to start off with was so important. I definitely don't think I'd be the person I am today without it.

### **Toepfer**

After this summer in Rio, do you have any plans of—are you going to continue or keep going until you can't? (laughter)

### **Fontaine**

<topic>Rio and the future</topic>

I don't know, I didn't think that I was going to make this one and I was just shocked. I mean what a blessing, what an opportunity. I'm fifty-one so I don't know how many more of these I have, but will I keep playing? You know, I need to stay active because I find that I'm at that age where that creeping obesity thing, the womanly issues (laughter) and all of that stuff and I'm trying to figure it out and it's not like there's a book out there on spinal cord injury and how all this goes down right?

So it's hard enough for able-bodied women to figure out pre-menopause and menopausal stuff let alone somebody who's disabled and how that affects and the hormonal change and what you can do to not cause your body more harm. So there's so much out there that I don't know, but I do know that I need to maintain a level of activity. I no longer play wheelchair basketball, I coach, so having given that up I will definitely, probably play table tennis for life, but it's just at what level.

So after Rio I'll probably continue to play just to stay active. I also found another sport called pickleball [a racquet sport similar to badminton and table tennis] and that is an amazing amount of fun and if you don't know of it you should look it up. It's just so much fun to play. I play with seniors, people over fifty, but I also play in an open league as well and I'm the only disabled person. So it's again, something else that I go here's a bunch of able-bodied people playing this sport. I see it, hey let me in I want to play and they accept me and I've become friends with a lot of these pickleball players and I really enjoy going to play.

I'm not the best pickleball player, but I'm definitely not the worst. I'm right in the middle in terms of skill level. I feel pretty good about that and you know I can hold my own so if you were to pick me as your partner you know it's going to be a battle and you have a good chance to win.

So, I like sports and activities and so will I always stay active and try to move as much as possible? The answer to that question is yes. But the level of—that may change. I've been lucky that I haven't had a ton of injuries, but I do have arthritis, I have a bad left shoulder, but I'm right-handed so that's been fortunate. I have a really bad left hand, it doesn't work very well. There's a lot of things that I can no longer do with my left hand, but again I'm right-handed.

So I've been pretty lucky that's it's all affected my left side for the most part. If when that changes then of course that will impact me tremendously, but until then I'm just trying to move and do what I can do. And enjoy sports for the times that I have left to play and especially at this level. It's a real blessing not that many people get to compete this long.

### **Toepfer**

You mentioned earlier that when you when you went to your first games, someone gave you a hard time when you were younger. And now that you're older I'm sure that you're

seeing younger people that you're playing with now. What kind of advice do you give to them, since you've had a thirty year career like—as opposed to making fun of them?

### Fontaine

<topic>Advice for incoming athletes</topic>

Right, right. Having gone through that experience that is one thing that I knew I would never do to anybody else. Do I give advice to people when I see stuff? Yeah, especially to our new generation of our younger athletes. If I see like—there's a junior athlete whose mom does too much for him, but it's not his fault, it's more or less talking to her. I've got a good relationship with her so I lecture her often and she doesn't mind and she's OK with it. To let him learn how to take care of his own body needs on his own and not helping him and assisting him so much. That's just going to help him, make him more independent especially now that he's sixteen. He's way too old for some of the assistance she gives him, but you know we have long discussions about that.

But for other players there's always going to be struggle whenever you're competing in sport. You're going to get those times when you think I'm not good enough, there's somebody else better. Well, that's not necessarily true. You are good enough; if you weren't good enough you wouldn't be playing at this level. Now you just need to mentally get your hat on straight and figure out how you can just.... At that level it's just little things and it's just figuring out what those little things are that we need to tweak. And then if you can see that then of course you point that out to the kids and you just say hmm maybe let's consider doing this or maybe in our preparation before the match starts we need to take different steps to get ready. We need to make sure we're not at the last second, where's my water? Where's my towel? Where's my equipment? Where's my...no.

These are things you know by the hour before we're already prepared for. So just a lot of it is just preparation so you're not at the last second going out to play a match and you don't have a proper warm-up because you don't know where your stuff is. So a lot of that type of—it's an obvious oh wait let's do this differently so you're more prepared. So for me with our juniors and our kids—and it's you know helping them in that way.

I remember, it must have been in 2008, we had a young kid and his mom wouldn't let him travel yet, because he was in middle school maybe early high school and his grades weren't good. I had a—he looked up to all the Paralympic athletes and so I had a shirt and I gave him one. And she [his mother] was like you don't know how much that impacted him. And that kind of stuff you don't know until later on. You hear that just really helped to change his focus to just have that shirt, you know a USA shirt; I've got a USA shirt. At the time I just did it to just motivate—you know hey this is going to be you one day because you have the talent, you've got the skill. You're going to be traveling with us. Get your grades up.

But, you don't really know that. Usually you never hear the outcome of the stuff you do, but his mom did tell me that was—that really got him thinking and helped him get set on track and you just don't know those thing that you do in everyday life that I didn't mean for that impact I just—but I'm glad it did. Because now he's in college and he's—he almost made the Rio games and so you know he's up there in the rankings and so he's an amazing athlete.

As we step down as older players it's going to be him and our new young ones stepping up to take our spots and that's just an honor to see. That maybe you had an impact somewhere along the line travelling with them and helping them and motivating them and just helping get organized and correcting them if, if they're not where they need to be, but all in a positive way.

**Toepfer**

Is there anything else that you would like to discuss that we didn't maybe hit on?

**Fontaine**

I can't really think what that would be. (laughter)

**Toepfer**

We covered a lot. Are there any names of anybody that you would suggest for us to interview as well? Anybody you know in this area?

**Fontaine**

Yeah, Gina McWilliams.

**Toepfer**

How do you...is that just M-C-Williams?

**Fontaine**

Yes. Yes. She would be a fantastic person. She's USA sit [sitting] volleyball and she did wheelchair basketball a little bit too (interviewer makes acknowledgement) back in the nineties. She's an amputee so she's a—would be a different—but extremely intelligent, very well versed, great interview person. So...her. And then the other girls would be Darlene Hunter, have you talked to Darlene?

**Toepfer**

Yeah, we interviewed...my classmate interviewed her.

**Fontaine**

OK, I'm trying to think of girls from this area. [pause]

**Toepfer**

You can always get back to us.

**Fontaine**

OK. Yeah some of the other girls are out, I mean I know of other people, but they're not here.

**Toepfer**

Right, OK.

**Fontaine**

But Gina's been here since '92 and has been here the whole time so she knows all the—for basketball.

**Toepfer**

Awesome, I'll let them know.

**Fontaine**

Yeah, and she was on the US sit volleyball team.

**Toepfer**

OK well, I'm going to turn off the recorder now, but I just want to say thank you for participating and congratulations on Rio that's super exciting.

**Fontaine**

Thank you.