

Talan Skeels-Piggins, Hon DLitt

Wednesday 16 July 2025

Orator: Rachel Sandby-Thomas, Registrar

Provost,

From time to time, we encounter someone who, by overcoming immense personal challenges, becomes an inspiration to others. One such is this morning's honorary graduand. I am delighted to introduce TALAN SKEELS-PIGGINS.

Talan is an educator, distinguished athlete, advocate for disability rights, mentor, and children's author. Having completed his degree in Physical Education Teaching and Coaching in 2002, he went on to teach PE while continuing to pursue the sports he particularly loved: skiing (he had been part of the Royal Navy's ski team) and motorcycling. Then, in 2003, his world turned upside down, when a motorbike accident left him paralysed from the chest down. However, with enormous courage and determination, he worked to get back to the sports he loved. Within 12 days of his accident, he had decided to learn to ski again, get into the British team and go to the Paralympics – 'most people,' he comments, 'thought I was unrealistic'.

In 2010, he was selected for the British team for the Vancouver Paralympics, becoming Britain's top placed male skier in two events; in 2011 became a European champion in winter sports. He also got back on a motorbike and in 2012 made sporting history by becoming the first paraplegic to race a motorcycle in an able-bodied race; he has also competed in world championships for disabled motorcyclists, winning the 600cc paralysed class in 2015 and 2018.

Talan has used his life experience to inspire and encourage other disabled athletes to achieve their sporting ambitions. In 2011, he founded The Bike Experience, a charity that helps motorcyclists with disabilities learn to ride again. This charity has received widespread recognition for its role in adaptive sport and has influenced other organisations to adopt a similar approach.

Four years later, Talan founded Talan Racing, for teams of disabled motorcyclists to compete with able-bodied racers.

He has also worked with athletes more generally, especially addressing their mental health needs. He is a mentor for the True Athlete Project – a charity that tackles the 'win-at-all-costs' sporting culture and has pioneered a holistic, mindfulness approach to sport – and is also an ambassador for the British Inspiration Trust (BRIT), working in schools, colleges and universities to improve mental fitness among young people. He is a sought-after motivational speaker, sharing his life experiences and insights with young athletes globally. He visits schools, promoting physical activity and resilience among pupils, using story-telling, to emphasise inner strength and self-belief – the theme of his children's book, *The Little Person Inside*.

Talan is recognised nationally and internationally for his lifelong dedication to adaptive sports, his advocacy for disability rights, and his contributions to education. His championship of inclusivity and diversity and his work to enable young people to realise their full potential represent our own values and aspirations here at Warwick. It is a great pleasure to welcome him today.

Provost: in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, TALAN SKEELS-PIGGINS.