

## **DARREN KENNY OBE**

### **Pro-Chancellor,**

Darren Kenny is an outstanding Paralympic cyclist who sets an inspirational example of determination and perseverance against the odds. Accidents and injuries seemed to have ended his racing career at the age of 18, but he returned to competitive cycling some years later and swiftly rose to the heights of international success. At the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing he won four gold medals and one silver, following two gold medals and one silver at Athens in 2004. He has been World Champion ten times, and holds numerous world records. A master of cycle-racing tactics and skills, he is unbeaten in track events.

Darren is a local man, born at Verwood and educated at Hillside School, Verwood, Cranborne School, and Queen Elizabeth School, Wimborne. As a ten-year-old he was inspired to take up cycling when his grandparents took him to see the Milk Race. He started racing when he was 11, but at 18 he injured his head and neck during the 1988 Junior Tour of Ireland, when he crashed in the descent of the Wicklow Gap. Characteristically he got back in the saddle immediately but later fell again. This was followed by a car crash and a work accident, both of which also involved head injuries. The combined effects of these accidents left Darren disabled.

He started cycling again at the age of 30, to improve his fitness and also, he says, to be a role model for his son Brandon. But he was soon drawn back into the racing world and from that point onwards, ambition, determination and absolute commitment took him to the top. Although qualified to work in the financial services industry, for some years he has been a professional athlete and competes around the world almost continuously for much of the year.

Competitive cycling, especially road racing, is physically demanding but also technically complex and influenced by variables such as the weather. Darren has described a road race as 'like chess on wheels' and success at the highest level involves high levels of tactical awareness and skills such as pacing and slipstreaming. Darren excels in these areas. His tough preparation schedule is supported by leaders in sports training, notably his coach Dr Gary Brickley, a specialist in exercise physiology at Brighton University, and the former cycling champion Chris Boardman. The British Paralympic and Olympic cycling teams are fully united and have a combined World Class Performance Plan, supported by highly scientific training programmes and advanced technologies. Darren and his colleagues work closely together to develop this country's remarkable pool of cycling talent, and to build its world leadership in this sport.

Darren has reached the heights of achievement too many times to list here, but we must mention the greatest of his medals and records. In his first Paralympics at Athens in 2004 he took two gold medals and a silver. But he surpassed this at Beijing 2008, where his performances were staggering: Gold in the Men's 1 km Time Trial, the Individual Pursuit, the Men's Road

Race and the Men's Team Sprint (with Mark Bristow and Jody Cundy); and Silver in the Men's Road Time Trial. No other member of the British team exceeded or even equalled his tally of medals. In May this year, at the Manchester Velodrome, became World Champion for the tenth time. His world records include the Para-Cycling Athletes Absolute Hour Record – for distance covered in one hour – at 41.817 km. His versatility is extraordinary: he excels in a wide range of events, as his medal record shows, in an era when athletes increasingly specialise in one or two areas.

In addition to his numerous international medals and championships, Darren was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in the 2009 New Year Honours List, for his services to disabled sport. Also this year he has been nominated as a Laureus World Sportsman of the Year, for the second year running. This places him in the most distinguished sporting company, because the nominees also include Usain Bolt, Rafael Nadal and Cristiano Ronaldo.

As befits one of this country's leading athletes, Darren is intensely competitive but still very much a team player, who readily acknowledges the role of those who provide psychological, physiological and technical support. He knows how to put pain and failure in perspective, recalling the moment in Athens when, just after he had lost a road race, it was announced that some local children had died in a bus accident on their way to watch the Games. He is a true ambassador for his sport, and much in demand as an inspirational leader and speaker, particularly in schools, where his talks emphasise self-belief, learning about personal limitations and working with others to deal with them. Indeed he is always ready to share his experience and insights with others. He also promotes the wider value of cycling for the sake of health and the environment, and reminds us that others are far ahead of the UK in the provision of cycle lanes and other facilities.

At the Beijing Games about half of Britain's gold medals came from cycling, and it is now one of our most successful sports, though public interest has not yet caught up with that success. Darren wants to see more enthusiasm and support for sport cycling, and contrasts this country with Spain where he regularly competes, and where roads are closed and school-children and motorists line the track to applaud and cheer. And he keenly anticipates the London Olympics of 2012. We have by no means heard the last of his success story.

**Pro-Chancellor**, I have the honour to present Darren Kenny, and ask you to confer upon him the degree of Doctor of Arts, *honoris causa*.