GRAINGER ON OLYMPIC PAL'S HEALTH BATTLE

GOLDEN GIRL Katherine at London Olympic Games in 2012

I cheered Sarah to glory at Games but I'm prouder she's a charity champion

GOOD SPORTS Katherine and Sarah on banks of the River Clyde. Pic: Fiona Willoughby

BY **JOHN FERGUSON**

ONE of Scotland's most successful ever Olympians has joined forces with a former rowing partner to support the battle against Huntington's disease.

Dame Katherine Grainger became Britain's most decorated female athlete by winning five medals in five consecutive Games, including gold in London in 2012.

She is now helping ex-Team GB teammate Sarah Winckless raise money for Huntington's after finding out her fellow rower had inherited a gene which will see her struck down with the neurological condition.

Huntington's can leave people unable to walk, talk, eat, drink and look after themselves. Symptoms include loss of control over movement, impaired thinking, dementia, and mental illness such as depression, anxiety and psychosis.

CHARITY BOSS Haw

Katherine said: "Sarah is such a mature, wise adult but when we first met she was more of an extreme personality, living every moment to the max, the life and soul of the party.

"Anybody involved with high level international sport knows the highs and lows are immense.

"Then you realise Sarah also has this other part of her life that brings very different highs and lows. It's an amazing privilege to learn about something so massive in her life.

"I cheered Sarah on when she won her Olympic medal but I'm never prouder than when I hear her speaking from the heart about something so important.

"I knew Sarah's mum, Valerie, who was in a wheelchair and no longer able to speak. When I look at Sarah it's hard to accept that could be her future."

The Bearsden-born rowing superstar and Sarah won the quad World Championships in 2005 and 2006.

And earlier this month they helped raise £25,000 for Scottish Huntington's Association at the Women of Scotland Lunch in Glasgow.

Medal-winning rowers team up in aid of Huntington's

Katherine was recently appointed the first female chair of the British Olympic Commission and has also broken 500 years of tradition as the first female chancellor of Glasgow University.

Meanwhile Sarah is the first female umpire of the men's Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race and a former chair of the British Olympic Athletes Commission.

> **"I feel fortunate to be well and sympton= free so far**
> **SARAH WINCKLESS** ON LIVING WITH FAULTY GENE

Sarah, 51, said: "The disease was more advanced in my mum at my age so I feel fortunate to be well and symptom-free so far. When I was growing up Mum's behaviour and movements were strange and people thought she was drunk because her speech was slurred. It was a relief to get a diagnosis and give it a name."

The reality for Sarah and her three siblings was they were all at risk of developing the disease. She said: "There's a 50/50 risk to each child of someone with the condition, the toss of a genetic coin."

It was as a rising star in rowing that tests confirmed the worst for Sarah. All she could do was throw herself into training and hope the symptoms would be slow to start – and that decision took her to the top of international sport.

She said: "There was lots of interest when I won bronze in the double sculls at the Sydney Olympics. Mum was there but she clearly wasn't well."

There are around 800 people in Scotland with symptoms, a further 3200 at risk of developing the disease, and hundreds of carers who need support. As new research by the Aberdeen University indicates numbers will rise, especially in northern Scotland, which has one of the world's highest rates of Huntington's, the charity's services are more needed than ever.

Scottish Huntington's Association CEO, Alistair Haw, said: "Huntington's disease is widely misunderstood. Specialist services are not some 'nice to have' optional extra but an absolute necessity for families across Scotland.

"We're hugely grateful to Sarah and Katherine for their support. It's difficult to think of a more powerful double act advocating for the Huntington's community."

GAME ON Sarah rowed to medal glory in Athens in 2004