

Occasional pieces

Fifty years of competitive sport for athletes with disabilities: 1948-1998

Although sports associations for people with disabilities have existed since the 19th century, the credit for the evolution of major games for athletes with disabilities is rightly attributed to the vision and efforts of Sir Ludwig Guttmann. Guttmann was a neurosurgeon at the spinal injuries unit at Stoke Mandeville hospital near Aylesbury in England who introduced sport as part of the rehabilitation programme of his patients. He believed that "by restoring activity of mind and body—by instilling self respect, self discipline, a competitive spirit and comradeship—sport develops mental attitudes that are essential for social reintegration". The competitive spirit resulted in an archery competition on the front lawns of the hospital between 16 wheelchair competitors from the spinal unit and a disabled ex-serviceman's home in London. This was in July 1948 on the opening day of the Olympic Games in London and there started the first Stoke Mandeville Games, which became an annual event.

Four years later four Dutch paraplegics made the journey to England and the first International Stoke Mandeville Games was held. By now other sports had been introduced and included athletics, swimming, snooker, table tennis, basketball, and fencing. As participation and recognition increased, Guttmann even dared to suggest in 1957 that he looked forward to the day when athletes with disabilities could take part in Olympic Games and no doubt he would have delighted at seeing the demonstration events in Atlanta in 1996. In 1960 the games committee elected to hold the International Stoke Mandeville Games in Rome, and quadrennial games thereafter have been held in the country selected for the Olympic Games where pos-

sible, except for financial or political reasons (see table 1). Although other disability groups were increasing their sporting activity, it was not until 1976 in Toronto that the Games included visually impaired and amputee athletes. These Games were known as the Olympiad for the Physically Disabled, and in the 1980 Games in Arnhem athletes with cerebral palsy were also included for the first time. Athletes with disabilities not fitting into the historical disability groups and termed "les autres", which seemed somehow more acceptable than "the others", were also included at this time.

However, the term, Olympics for the Disabled, was not acceptable to the IOC and in 1985 the organising committee agreed to the use of the term Paralympic Games. Paralympic was meant to describe a Games "parallel to the Olympics" and not "paraplegic Olympics" as still thought by many. On the 22 September 1989 the International Paralympic Committee was formed, and since that time the games have been truly the Paralympic Games. Athletes with learning disabilities were included for the first time in the main Paralympics in 1996 after a separate competition in Madrid in 1992. The games have grown from those early days into the second largest sporting event in the world. Athletes now are achieving performances undreamed of 50 years ago that would leave even Ludwig Guttmann incredulous. Roll on Sydney 2000!

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Table 1

Year	Olympic venue	Paralympic venue	No of competitors	Disability groups
1948	London	1st Stoke Mandeville Games	16	SCRD
1960	Rome	Rome	400	SCRD
1964	Tokyo	Tokyo	375	SCRD
1968	Mexico City	Tel Aviv	750	SCRD
1972	Munich	Heidelberg	1004	SCRD
1976	Montreal	Toronto	1657	SCRD, VI, AMP
1980	Moscow	Arnhem	1973	SCRD, VI, AMP, CP, LA
1984	Los Angeles	Stoke Mandeville/New York	1100/1800	SCRD, VI, AMP, CP, LA
1988	Seoul	Seoul	3053	SCRD, VI, AMP, CP, LA
1992	Barcelona	Barcelona	3020	SCRD, VI, AMP, CP, LA
1996	Atlanta	Atlanta	3500	SCRD, VI, AMP, CP, LA, LD

SCRD, Spinal cord related disability; VI, visually impaired; AMP, amputee; CP, cerebral palsy; LA, les autres; LD, learning difficulties.