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Going for gold – more ability, less disability

I urge everyone to look at individuals with ... disabilities in a different light. If given a chance, these individuals can make a mark in whatever discipline they are guided through. If guided well, they will excel in whatever they attempt to do. (Nelson Mandela¹)

'More ability, less disability' – these sentiments were uttered by a veteran wheelchair tennis player during the Paralympic Games, which aim to emphasise participants' athletic prowess, not their disability.

The Paralympics have a rich history and reflect the humanity and determination of one man.² Ludwig Guttmann, a neurosurgeon who fled Nazi Germany for England at the start of World War II, volunteered to take charge of a 26-bed spinal unit catering for paralysed servicemen at Stoke Mandeville Hospital.

Convinced that participation in sport might restore confidence and self-esteem to these disabled veterans, Guttmann had Stoke Mandeville host an archery competition for men and women with spinal cord injuries, to coincide with the 1948 Olympics. Dutch veterans joined their British counterparts in 1952. In 1960 the first official Paralympic Games, held in parallel to the Olympics (hence the name), hosted athletes with a wide variety of disabilities: paraplegics, amputees, and those with cerebral palsy, intellectual or learning disability or visual impairment, or conditions such as dwarfism or congenital abnormalities of the limbs such as phocomyelia (caused by thalidomide).²

Our media has been full of Olympic and Paralympic endeavour, with our own Oscar Pistorius having competed in both the Games, becoming the 'face' of the 2012 London Olympiad. His award of a gold medal for his 400 m race at the last athletics ceremony had a crowd of 80 000 roaring his name as they applauded his success. South African paralympians won 8 gold, 12 silver and 29 bronze medals and achieved 18th ranking in the medals stakes, out of the 164 countries that participated.

Tuning into the sports channel of an evening to see our Paralympic team in the swimming pool, on the water for rowing, on the athletics track, on the road for hand-cycling, and on a variety of courts for wheelchair tennis, basketball and rugby, was to view courage in motion. Witness Natalie du Toit who, after losing a leg in a scooter accident, became the first amputee to qualify for the Beijing Olympics and has taken her score of medals to 14 in London (13 gold and one silver). Or Samkelo Radebe, whose arms were amputated below the elbow after an electric cable accident and who won gold in the 4×100 m relay race (along with team mates Oscar Pistorius, Zivan Smith and Arnau Fourie). Or Achmat Hassiem, who wryly attributes his speed in the pool to imagining being chased by the great white shark that bit off his right leg.

Yet these athletes would prefer that we not speak of their courage in face of their disability, but rather refer to 'elite sport with athletes that just happen to have disabilities'.³

The benefits of sport for the disabled are obvious ... sportsmanship, friendship, and an active and healthy lifestyle that puts some of us 'abled' to shame. Of greater importance may be the change in perceptions on the part of the able-bodied. Employers are more inclined to offer the disabled work; city fathers respond by ensuring accessibility to buildings, pavements and public spaces and decree improvements in public transport; and the South African medal winners have received the same incentive bonuses as those who

triumphed in the Olympics, following Sports Minister Fikile Mbalula's announcement that 'anything less would be discrimination'.⁴

We are fortunate that the Ministry of Sports and Recreation created DISSA (Disability Sports South Africa) with the stated objective of providing 'access to all persons with a disability to sports and recreation, enabling them to achieve their potential'.¹ Partnered with private institutions and sponsors,⁵ funding for disabled sportsmen and women has been secured.

More will be required, for while technology and engineering are promoting disabled athletes' success,^{6,7} they are expensive. BMW and Honda are said to have helped refine the special wheelchairs that, with their angled wheels, permit greater manoeuvrability, speed and agility ... but each costs more than a million rand. State-of-the-art blade-shaped carbon-fibre prostheses such as those that enable Oscar Pistorius to run just as fast as he would have had he been born with fibulas (but note, no faster⁸) come at one and a half million rand each.

Competing with athletes from richer countries is a struggle for athletes with disabilities, who require special equipment and training. War-ravaged Cambodia, for example, has thousands of disabled athletes, but her top wheelchair racer used a donated racing chair and her top sprinter, a below-knee amputee, ran on a blade not specifically designed for sprinting. Already the 'money gap'^{9,10} is apparent ... the countries ranked highest in the medal stakes are the wealthy ones.

However, if it can be afforded, the technology is potentially stunning in its implications. Hugh Herr, head of the Biomechanics Research Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, predicts that the day will come when artificial limbs will be invented that will exceed the speed and efficiency of biological ones.⁸ Then Paralympic athletes will qualify with ease for the Olympics, as did Pistorius, but will be compelled to use less advanced technology to ensure a level playing field with their able-bodied fellow competitors!

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