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Access for all: the rise of the Paralympic Games

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Abstract

The Paralympic, or Parallel, Games for athletes with disabilities have played a major role over the past half century in changing attitudes towards disability and accelerating the agenda for inclusion. This article charts their development from small beginnings as a competition for disabled ex-servicemen and women in England founded shortly after the Second World War to the present day ambulatory international festival of Summer and Winter Games organized in conjunction with the Olympic Games.

The Paralympic Games trace their origins to the work of Dr (later Sir) Ludwig Guttmann at the National Spinal Injuries Unit at Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Buckinghamshire who used sport as an integral part of the treatment of paraplegic patients. A sports competition was held at the hospital to coincide with the Opening Ceremony of the London Games in July 1948. This became an annual event attracting the first international participation in 1952, after which it became the International Stoke Mandeville Games. From 1960 onwards attempts were made to hold every fourth Games in the Olympic host city.

Despite initial success in staging the 1960 Games in Rome and the 1964 Games in Tokyo, subsequent host cities refused to host the competitions and alternative locations were found where a package of official support, finance and suitable venues could be assembled. In 1976, the scope of the Games was widened to accept other disabilities. From 1988 onwards, a process of convergence took place that saw the Paralympics brought into the central arena of the Olympics, both literally and figuratively. In the process they have embraced new sports, have encompassed a wider range of disabilities, and helped give credence to the belief that access to sport is available to all. The Paralympics also underline the change from sport as therapeutic competition to that of elite events that carry intrinsic prestige, with growing rivalry over medal tables. For the future, however, questions remain as to whether the current arrangements of separate but supposedly equal festivals assist the continuing development of the Paralympics or perpetuate difference.

INTRODUCTION

Few developments have challenged existing ways of thinking about sport and disability more than the rise of the Paralympic Games. Seen as the summit of disability sport, the Paralympic Games have played a major part in changing attitudes by emphasizing achievement rather than impairment, by accelerating the agenda of inclusion and by helping to promote the concept of a barrier-free environment within town planning and architectural discourse. The Games themselves have had considerable impact on those parts of the world where disability was ideologically problematic, forcing changes in official attitudes, if only to accommodate international opinion in order to win the bidding process to hold

the event. Above all, they have raised the status of disabled sport to the point where participants earn esteem as athletes in their own right, thereby challenging prevailing assumptions and stereotypes about 'disability'.

This article charts the development of the Paralympics from small beginnings as a competition for disabled ex-servicemen and women in the grounds of Stoke Mandeville Hospital in England to the present day ambulatory international festival. In doing so, it reflects on the transformation in disability sport over the years from an emphasis on what athletes cannot do and their deviation from the norm to an emphasis on excellence.¹ The changing understanding of the word 'Paralympics' itself is

symptomatic of this change in thinking. The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) admits that the term was originally a pun combining 'paraplegic' and 'Olympic',² effectively confronting Olympian traditions of celebrating excellence and the perfectly formed body with the realities of disability. Over time, reinterpretation occurred. This was driven partly by the Games gradually embracing participants with forms of disability other than paraplegia but also resulted from a convergence that has seen the Paralympics embraced within the Olympic Movement. The approved etymology currently asserts that the first syllable of 'Paralympics' derives from the Greek preposition 'para', meaning 'beside' or 'alongside'. Viewed in this way, the Paralympics constitute a parallel Games to the Olympics, existing side-by-side with the event commonly regarded as the 'World's Games'.^{3,4} Indeed, with 3806 athletes competing at Athens in 2004, the Paralympics are now the second largest international sports gathering of *any* type after the Summer Olympics.

ORIGINS

The first stirrings of disability sport date back to the late 19th century, primarily involving the work of activists in the deaf community. The first Sports Club for the Deaf was founded in Berlin in 1888 and, by 1924, national sports federations for the deaf had emerged in Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Poland. Collectively, these six federations sent 140 athletes to Paris in 1924 to participate in the First International Silent Games⁵ – the gathering that marked the birth of a four-yearly cycle of 'World Games for the Deaf'. Subsequently divided into Summer and Winter festivals after the fashion of the Olympics, these were later recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as the Deaflympics.

The Deaflympics were important as an indication of possibilities, but retained a separate existence from the movement that would create the Paralympics. Rather, the latter stemmed from the treatment of spine-injured servicemen at the end of the Second World War and particularly the work of Ludwig Guttmann, a figure whose role is comparable with that of Baron Pierre de

Coubertin in reviving the modern Olympics.⁶ Guttmann, a prominent Jewish neurosurgeon, had arrived in Britain as a refugee from Germany in 1939. After appointment to research posts first at Oxford University's Department of Neurosurgery and then at the Wingfield-Morris Orthopaedic Hospital, Guttmann became director of what would become the National Spinal Injuries Centre at Stoke Mandeville Hospital (Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire). Guttmann⁷ later commented that paraplegia was the 'most depressing and neglected subject in all medicine' at this time, characterized by low morale among nursing staff and difficulty in recruiting specialist physiotherapists.

His approach challenged the orthodoxy prevalent before the Second World War that accepted low survival rates and permanent hospitalization for severely paralysed patients. It instituted a programme of 'total care', having patients turned every two hours day and night to prevent pressure sores and improving standards of bladder hygiene to help tackle problems of infection. Physiotherapy assisted limb flexibility and, for some patients, increased mobility. A pre-vocational work regime and various forms of recreation including concerts, visits and *competitive* sports, designed to keep patients busy and create a sense of purpose, complemented the medical regime. In this context, therefore, sport transcended mere leisure. Not only was it 'the most natural form of remedial exercise' restoring physical fitness, strength, co-ordination, speed, endurance and overcoming fatigue, but it also had a psychological impact of restoring pleasure in life and contributing to social reintegration.⁸ In essence, Guttmann believed that sport was a pathway that might help even severely disabled people to live a healthier, happier life, to gain confidence and self-esteem and to achieve a degree of independence.⁹

Developing these ideas, Guttmann formulated the idea of a sports festival for the disabled that would promote contact with other patients and address attitudes about the capabilities of the disabled. On 28 July 1948, an archery competition took place on the front lawns of the hospital, involving 16 competitors arranged into two teams: one from Stoke Mandeville and the other from the Star and Garter Home in

Richmond. The event was consciously chosen as a demonstration of potential, symbolized by being held on the same day as the Opening Ceremony of the London Olympics, with archery seen as second only to swimming in its 'physiotherapeutic value ... for the paralysed'.¹⁰ In 1949, Stoke Mandeville hosted a larger competition, involving 60 competitors from five hospitals participating in what became a steadily widening group of sports (Table 1). During the meeting, Guttmann gave a speech in which he hoped that the event would become international and achieve 'world fame as the disabled men and women's equivalent of the Olympic Games'.⁷

The Stoke Mandeville Games soon acquired an international dimension. In 1952, another Olympic year, the involvement of a group of Dutch war veterans presaged wider European participation. In 1953, teams from Finland, France, Israel and the Netherlands joined the Games, along with a Canadian team. An American team first participated in 1955, followed by an Australian team in 1957 – by which time the Stoke Mandeville Games had commonly gained the nickname 'Paralympics'.¹¹ These international links reflected connections that Stoke Mandeville had developed through training visiting staff, staff mobility and ex-patients who spread knowledge of and enthusiasm for the Hospital's approach to paraplegic care and the role of sport in rehabilitation. In the early days, the vast majority of competitors were patients, but the Games soon attracted significant numbers of ex-patients living independent lives. Over time, there was a gradual but inexorable shift from therapeutic uses of sport to the development of training and fitness programmes that sought to promote the health and well-being of the disabled through sport.¹² As such, the disabled athlete would gain enhanced physical fitness, but would also gain from sport as a motivational force that encouraged athletes to achieve their potential and to develop 'competitive spirit, self-discipline and self-respect'.¹² Noticeably, the Games also developed away from organization on a hospital basis to the emergence of national teams, which would eventually operate squad systems in a manner similar to conventional international sport.

Table 1

Paralympic sports	
Summer games	Year included in the full Paralympic programme
Archery	1960
Athletics	1960
Boccia	1984
Bowls	1968–1988, 1996
Cycling	1988
Equestrian	1996
Football 5-a-side	2004
Football 7-a-side	1984
Goalball	1976
Judo	2004
Powerlifting/Weightlifting	1964 men 2000 women
Rowing	2008
Sailing	2000
Shooting	1976
Swimming	1960
Table Tennis	1960
Volleyball – standing	1976–1996
Volleyball – sitting	1980
Wheelchair Basketball	1960
Wheelchair Fencing	1960
Wheelchair Rugby	2000
Wheelchair Tennis	1992
Winter Games	
Alpine Skiing	1976
Ice Sledge Hockey	1994
Nordic Skiing – Cross Country	1976
Nordic Skiing – Biathlon	1994
Wheelchair Curling	2006
Sources: International Paralympic Committee. About the IPC. Bonn: International Paralympic Committee. Available online at: http://www.paralympic.org (accessed 29 October 2006).	

BUILDING CONNECTIONS

As the Games grew, demands for greater professionalism towards the organization, funding and management of international

sport for the disabled saw the establishment in 1959 of the International Stoke Mandeville Games Committee (later Foundation, hence ISMGF). This ran and

developed the annual Stoke Mandeville Games and oversaw the organization of a parallel four-yearly 'Olympic' competition until 1972 (see Table 2). However, holding aspirations for Olympian status, and all this implied for the image and reputation of disabled sport, was one thing; building substantive connections was quite another. The process of drawing the Paralympic and the Olympic movements together would prove long and tortuous, despite highly promising beginnings. In 1956, during ceremonies at the Melbourne Olympics, the IOC had awarded Guttman the Fearnley Cup for 'outstanding achievement in the service of Olympic ideals',⁷ a remarkable degree of recognition less than a decade after the foundation of the Stoke Mandeville Games.

Further convergence seemed likely after the decision to stage the Stoke Mandeville Games in the Olympic host city had led to Games held in Rome (1960) and Tokyo (1964). Such arrangements depended on the goodwill of the host city, coupled with sponsorship and public funding to cover the cost. The Rome Games, for example, had the cooperation of the Spinal Unit at Ostia, gained sponsorship from INAIL (Italian National Insurance Institute Against Accidents at Work), and had the support of the Italian Olympic Committee (CONI). The 400 disabled athletes used the Olympic Pool and Village, but last minute changes meant that those parts of the Village equipped with lifts were unavailable. Moreover, withdrawal of an offer to use nearby Olympic facilities meant that competitors were perforce bused 40 minutes to the Tre Fontane sports ground.¹³ The 1964 Games followed on from the Summer Olympics in Tokyo, with competitors accommodated in the Village and sharing facilities recently used by the Olympic athletes. The Opening Ceremony, with the Crown Prince and Princess acting as patrons, attracted 5000 spectators.

Nevertheless, it was another 24 years before disabled athletes again competed in an Olympic city (Seoul 1988). The IOC, which handled the bidding process for the Olympics, was only interested in candidate cities' ability to meet the needs of elite athletes and made no stipulation that the Olympic city must host parallel games for athletes with disabilities. This absence of any inclusive philosophy regarding athletes with

Table 2

Summer Paralympic Games

Year	Aegis	Location	No. of countries	No. of athletes	No. of sports for which medals awarded	Disability groups ^b
1952	Stoke Mandeville Hospital	Stoke Mandeville ^a	2	130	6	SI
1960	ISMGC	Rome	23	400	8	SI
1964	ISMGC	Tokyo	21	357	9	SI
1968	ISMGC	Tel Aviv, Israel ^a	29	750	10	SI
1972	ISMGF	Heidelberg, West Germany ^a	43	984	10	SI
1976	ISMGF ISOD	Toronto, Canada ^a	38	1657	13	SI, A, VI, LA
1980	ISMGF ISOD	Arnhem, Holland ^a	42	1973	12	SI, A, VI, LA, CP
1984	ISMGF ISOD	Stoke Mandeville ^a New York ^a	41 45	1100 1800	10 14	SI A, VI, LA, CP
1988	ICC	Seoul	61	3013	18	SI, A, VI, LA, CP
1992	ICC	Barcelona Madrid ^a	82 73	3021 1400	16 5	SI, A, VI, LA, CP ID
1996	IPC	Atlanta	103	3195	19	SI, A, VI, LA, CP, ID
2000	IPC	Sydney	122	3843	19	SI, A, VI, LA, CP, ID
2004	IPC	Athens	136	3806	19	SI, A, VI, LA, CP
2008	IPC	Beijing	150	4000	20	SI, A, VI, LA, CP
2012	IPC	London	150	4200	20	na
			expected	expected		

^aYears in which the Paralympic Games did not take place in the Olympic location.

^bSI = spinal injury; A = amputee; VI = visually impaired; LA = les autres; CP = cerebral palsy; ID = intellectual impairment.

Sources: International Paralympic Committee. About the IPC. Bonn: International Paralympic Committee. Available online at: <http://www.paralympic.org> (accessed 29 October 2006); Scruton J. *Stoke Mandeville: road to the Paralympics – fifty years of history*. Aylesbury: Peterhouse, 1998.

disability saw a succession of cities effectively refusing to stage the Paralympics. The reason lay in a combination of different factors, *inter alia*, the costs of rectifying inaccessible building design, shortage of funds to invest in an event with what was then regarded as having low revenue-raising potential, and the steady growth in scale of the Paralympics – especially after the admission of a wider range of disabilities after 1976 (see Table 2).

Despite having sent three observers to Tokyo, Mexico City declined the Games in 1968 because of ‘technical difficulties’. They were held instead at the sports centre of the Israel Foundation for Handicapped Children in Ramat Gan near Tel Aviv (Israel). In 1972, the University of Heidelberg staged the Games rather than Munich, as plans for the post-festival use of the Olympic Village had meant transferring the site to developers for conversion into private apartments immediately after the Olympics’ Closing Ceremony.¹³ Lack of suitable accommodation plagued subsequent events. In 1976, Toronto acted as host rather than the Olympic City of Montreal, but the designated accommodation at Toronto and York Universities proved less than ideal given the distance between the Village sites and between the Olympic Villages and the stadia. When the Moscow Olympic organizers failed even to respond to a request to stage the Games, the 1980 festival took place at Arnhem in the Netherlands. Here, too, the available accommodation (an army barracks) was inconveniently located for access to the sports venues. In 1984, the Americans agreed to host the Games for all disabilities, but not in the host Olympic city (Los Angeles). Instead, they were to be split between New York and the University of Illinois at Champaign, an arrangement that foundered when the latter withdrew, through funding problems, just four months before the Games. As a result, the wheelchair events were hurriedly rearranged at Stoke Mandeville.¹³ Ironically, these were the first Games that the IOC officially recognized as the Paralympics.

The early Winter Games for the disabled fared little better (Table 3). Established in 1976, they also did not initially take place in the Olympic venues or countries. The first Games were in Örnsköldsvik (Sweden)

rather than Innsbruck (Austria). These were followed in 1980 by Geilo (Norway) rather than Lake Placid, Innsbruck in 1984 rather than Sarajevo (although an exhibition event was held in the Winter Games there) and Innsbruck again in 1988 rather than Calgary, which declined the Paralympics.

This regression from the pattern seemingly established in the early 1960s greatly disappointed the Paralympic movement. Guttmann denounced the thinking that had prevented Mexico City or Munich from holding the Games, commenting on ‘the lamentable lack of appreciation of the place thousands of disabled sportsmen and women have earned for themselves in the field of international sport.’⁸ Partly as a result, a new complex of buildings was constructed at Stoke Mandeville, comprising a Stadium for the Paralysed and Other Disabled (opened in 1969 and later renamed the Ludwig Guttmann Sports Stadium for the disabled) and an ‘Olympic’ Village in 1981.⁶ These facilities finally detached the sporting facilities from the hospital itself and from the notion of ‘illness’, which reflected the fact that disabled athletes were now achieving elite status with an emphasis on performance.

Problems of the definition of disability and competing jurisdictions of relevant organizations also affected progress. The Stoke Mandeville Games originally confined entry to medically controlled paraplegics, but other groups pressed for participation in internationally organized sports festivals. The foundation of the International Sports Organization for the Disabled (ISOD) in 1964 created opportunities for the blind, amputees and individuals with other locomotor disabilities.¹ ISOD collaborated with ISMGF in broadening the scope of the 1976 Toronto games to include amputees, visually impaired and ‘Les Autres’ (other disabled groups). Competitors with cerebral palsy joined the 1980 Games.

The expanding scope of disability sport quickly generated new international disability organizations. The need to coordinate their activities and eliminate duplication of events required further institutional arrangements, leading in particular to the foundation of the ICC (International Coordinating Committee of the World Sports Organizations) in 1982. This brought together nominated senior

representatives from the four major International Sports Organisations: ISMWSF (the International Stoke Mandeville Wheelchair Sports Federation, previously the ISMGF), ISOD, IBSA (the International Blind Sports Federation) and the CP-ISRA (Cerebral Palsy International Sport and Recreation Association). These were later joined by CISS (International Committee of Sports for the Deaf) and INAS (International Sports Federation for Persons with Mental Handicap – later changed to Intellectual Disability). Thus constituted, the ICC gave the disabled sports movement a single voice for the first time. It also allowed greater clarity in developing relations with the IOC and Olympic Games Organizing Committees, which found immediate expression in the final geographical convergence of the Summer Games at Seoul in 1988 and the Winter Games at Albertville in 1992.

THE ICC GAMES

The ICC oversaw the Games held in Olympic cities in 1988 and 1992, with the exception of the Winter Games in Calgary in 1988. The 1988 Seoul Olympics and Paralympics had separate Organizing Committees, but sufficient coordination to allow the sharing of venues, equipment and key personnel. With the Olympic Village unavailable after the Olympics, a specially designed Village was constructed for the Paralympians. They also received the same spectacular Opening and Closing Ceremonies as the Summer Games, watched by capacity crowds of 75,000.

Barcelona pioneered the organizational integration of the two sets of Games by giving overall responsibility to COOB92, the Organizing Committee of the Barcelona Games, with a separate Division charged with overall responsibility to plan the Paralympics. This ensured explicit attention to the needs of disabled athletes and comparable treatment with Olympians. The Paralympic Games now had their custom-designed Opening and Closing ceremonial spectacles.¹⁴ Free admission to Paralympic events ensured large numbers of spectators and there was substantial television coverage. At the same time, COOB92 imposed its own decisions, cutting the number of sports to 15 and

Table 3

Winter Paralympic Games						
Year	Aegis	Location	Participating countries	Number of athletes	Number of sports	Disability groups ^b
1976	ISOD	Örnsköldsvik, Sweden ^a	17	250	2	VI, A
1980	ISOD	Geilo, Norway ^a	18	350	2	VI, A, SI, CP, LA
1984	ICC	Innsbruck, Austria ^a	21	457	2	VI, A, SI, CP, LA
1988	ICC	Innsbruck, Austria ^a	22	397	2	VI, A, SI, CP, LA
1992	ICC	Albertville, France	24	475	2	VI, A, SI, CP, LA
1994	IPC	Lillehammer, Norway	31	492	3	VI, A, SI, CP, LA
1998	IPC	Nagano, Japan	32	571	4	VI, A, SI, CP, LA
2002	IPC	Salt Lake City, USA	36	416	3	VI, A, SI, CP, LA
2006	IPC	Torino, Italy	39	477	4	VI, A, SI, CP, LA
2010	IPC	Vancouver, Canada	45 expected	650 expected	4	VI, A, SI, CP, LA

^a Years in which the Paralympic Games did not take place in the Olympic location.

^bSI = spinal injury; A = amputee; VI = visually impaired; LA = les autres; CP = cerebral palsy.

Sources: International Paralympic Committee. About the IPC. Bonn: International Paralympic Committee. Available online at: http://www.paralympic.org/release/Main_Sections_Menu/IPC/About_the_IPC, (accessed 29 October 2006).; Scruton J. *Stoke Mandeville: road to the Paralympics – fifty years of history*. Aylesbury: Peterhouse, 1998.

refusing to allow the mentally impaired to participate in the Paralympics. Instead INAS held an officially recognized Paralympic Games in Madrid in which 1400 athletes from 73 countries competed. This took place after the Barcelona Paralympic Games.

EVOLUTION OF THE IPC

The final stage in the evolution of the institutional basis for the Games came with the establishment of the International

Paralympic Committee (IPC) in 1989. Based in Bonn (Federal Republic of Germany), it serves as the umbrella organization for 162 National Paralympic Committees, five regional bodies and four international disability specific sports federations. It also acts as the international federation for 13 of the 24 Paralympic sports.¹⁵ Its vision is to enable 'Paralympic athletes to achieve sporting excellence and inspire and excite the world' and it professes an 11-point mission which includes sport development 'from

initiation to elite level'.¹⁶ Crucially, since 1992 it is now the sole coordinating body for Paralympic sport recognized by the IOC.

As the IOC and IPC moved closer together, there was clarification of areas that had produced conflict, notably, the use of the term 'Olympics' (which the IOC regard as their copyright) and the Paralympic Logo. The IPC Logo, originally introduced at the Seoul Games, comprised five traditional Korean decorative motifs (Tae-Geuks) in the Olympic colours (blue, black, red, yellow

and green). Given that the IOC felt this was too close to their five-ring symbol, the IPC reduced the five Tae-Geuks to three in 1994 and replaced them completely as part of a rebranding exercise in 2003. The new logo, comprising three 'agitos' (from the Latin 'agito' meaning 'I move'), was first used at the 2004 Athens Games, along with the new motto 'Spirit in Motion'.¹⁷

Four agreements between the IOC and IPC signed between 2000 and 2006 clarified the relationship between the two organizations, set out the principles for further cooperation and provided financial support for the IPC. An agreement in October 2000 brought the workings of the two organizations closer by co-opting the IPC President to the IOC and including an IPC representative on 11 of the IOC Commissions, including the Evaluation Commission – the body that examines the competing bids from cities seeking to host the Olympic Games. The IOC also undertook to pay an annual subvention towards IPC administration costs (US\$3 million per annum), annual sums for development projects, and specific assistance to help athletes from developing countries attend the Salt Lake City Winter Paralympic Games and the Athens Summer Paralympics.¹⁸ An agreement in June 2001 clarified the organization of the Paralympic Games, confirming that the location would always be the Olympic host city and would take place 'shortly after' the Olympic Games using the same facilities and venues. From the 2008 Summer Games and 2010 Winter Games onwards, there would be full integration of the two organizing committees.¹⁹ An agreement on revenues for broadcasting and marketing the Paralympics (August 2003) guaranteed IOC payments to the IPC of US\$9 million for the 2008 Games and US\$14 million for 2010 and 2012.²⁰ The final agreement (June 2006) extended these arrangements through to 2014 and 2016, increased funding for the IPC and clarified the respective roles of the IOC and IPC in the planning, organization and staging of the Paralympics, the use of technical manuals, the sports programme and the number of accredited individuals.²¹

The move towards a 'One City, One Bid' approach to the selection of Olympic host cities was of vital importance to the IPC. Cities bidding for the 2008, 2010, 2012 and

2014 Games had to show that the full integration of the organization for the Olympic and Paralympic Games, with details of the Paralympic Games fully articulated in the bid documents. Indeed, the speed of integration has been more rapid than these agreements stipulated, with both Salt Lake City and Athens establishing a single Organizing Committee²⁰ and information on the Paralympic Games appearing in the official Reports of the Olympic Games since Sydney 2000.²²

THE DISABILITY AGENDA

The immediate effect of convergence after Barcelona 1992 raised important questions for host cities as to how they confronted questions of disability. Although, as noted, the requirement to integrate the two sets of Games only became binding with the 2008 Beijing Games, hosts with an established record in upholding disability rights and with legislation enshrining rights of access have enjoyed an advantage when bidding for and preparing of the Games. Hence, cities such as Atlanta, Sydney and London could build on existing practice, whereas the Games in Athens and Beijing effectively drove the disability agenda.

There was, for example, little tradition of disabled sport in Greece. This was addressed in the years leading up to the Athens Games in 2004 by developing an accessible sports infrastructure for athletes with disability that could be used in the preparation of Greek athletes and to permit training by other Paralympic teams.²³ Nevertheless, while it was possible to plan for access in the new Olympic investment – including public transport, venues and the public spaces around venues – the wider environment posed challenges. The Official Report of the Games went so far as to call Athens 'unfriendly' to the disabled community and requiring 'drastic measures' to make the city accessible.²³ The Organizing Committee (ATHOC) produced design guidelines and accessibility information for the municipalities making up the Greater Athens area, where much of the Olympic infrastructure was located, to encourage them to upgrade their public spaces, particularly along key routes identified by ATHOC. Furthermore, it urged private businesses to promote accessibility in their

own premises and to raise awareness among their staff. To this end, ATHOC and the Chambers of Commerce of the four cities participating in the Olympics (Athens, Thessaloniki, Heraklio and Volos) developed the Accessible Choice Programme (ERMIS). Businesses compliant with this programme earned the right to display a symbol indicating that they welcomed customers with disabilities and their details were included in a directory issued to all Paralympic delegations on arrival in Greece. Although attendances were less than at Sydney (850,000 compared with 1.1 million) and some venues were less than half-full, part of the value of the festival was considered to lie in its pedagogic impact. As in Australia, the organizers had developed an educational programme to promote greater understanding of the Paralympics and a large proportion of the audience were children. An accident that killed seven students while travelling to watch the Paralympics unfortunately cast a shadow over this strategy, leading to cancellation of the artistic and entertainment sections of the Closing Ceremony out of respect. The ceremony continued, but with only the protocol elements required for the completion of the Games.²³

Beijing's plans for 2008 also reflect significant shifts in attitude. China's own participation in the Paralympic Movement is relatively recent. When invited to the Rome Games in 1960, the official statement declared there were no disabled in China.²⁴ Relaxation of this stance saw Chinese athletes start to compete in international competitions, after the establishment of the Chinese Sports Association for Disabled Athletes in 1983.¹ A small group competed in the 1984 Games held in New York, but no team entered the Winter Paralympic Games until Salt Lake City in 2002. The increasing seriousness with which the Chinese then took sport for the disabled is reflected in the spectacular improvement in the performance of their athletes – rising from ninth in the medal table in 1996, to sixth in 2000 and first place in Athens 2004.

This new priority reflects China's characteristic use of sport as an adjunct to foreign policy, with the single-minded injection of extra funds for facilities and

140 ARTICLE Access for all

training, as much as any root-and-branch change in prevailing attitudes. Nevertheless, the requirements of provision for 2008 have focused attention on the challenge of creating a barrier-free Games in a city where access has only been on the agenda for a short time and where much of the infrastructure is anything but barrier-free. The Beijing Municipal People's Congress adopted the country's first local legislation relating to physical accessibility when passing the 'Beijing Regulation on Construction and Management of the Barrier-free Facilities' in April 2004. The regulations apply to public transport, hospitals, banks, public toilets and parks. As a result, for instance, underground stations are having ramps installed, disabled toilets, tactile paths for the visually impaired and public telephones for wheelchair users, with disabled seats available on trains.²⁵

LONDON 2012

Under new rules agreed in 2001, the candidate cities for the final phase of the Olympic selection procedure had to complete a questionnaire with 17 themes. Theme 9 related exclusively to the Paralympic Games and contained nine sets of questions covering the structural integration of the organization of the Paralympics within the Organizing Committee, the dates and the competition schedule, the venues, accommodation, transport operation, travel times, disability awareness (including staff training, volunteer training), media facilities, vision for the Games, finance and the Games' legacy.²⁶ In its bid, the London Committee capitalized on the heritage of disabled sport in the UK, a tradition of volunteering for Paralympic events, anti-disability discrimination in service provision dating back to the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act and a good record in disability awareness training. The London Bid document set out three goals: to strengthen the Paralympic Movement; to deliver accessible and inclusive designs for all facilities; and to maximize media coverage.²⁷ The bid contained eight specific commitments for the Paralympics:²⁷

- ♦ Creating an Olympic Village that is fully accessible to all from the outset.

- ♦ Maximizing media coverage and exposure, as pioneered by the BBC television and radio services.
- ♦ Integrating Olympic Games and Paralympic Games planning.
- ♦ Training all Games workforce in the principles of inclusion.
- ♦ Establishing operational policies that encompass Paralympic values.
- ♦ Recruiting suitably qualified disabled people.
- ♦ Promoting the Paralympic Games nation wide.
- ♦ Creating a cultural programme featuring disabled artists.

London plans 11 Paralympic sports in the Olympic Park, seven in the 'River Zone' (ExCel in Docklands and Greenwich), road racing in Regents Park and sailing at Weymouth. Housing the athletes in the Olympic Village will mean that 95% are accommodated within 15 minutes of travel from competition venues, linked by environmentally friendly and fully accessible buses. Ticket holders would travel free by public transport, with a Games Mobility Service for disabled spectators.²⁷

In its assessment, the IOC's Evaluation Committee was highly complimentary with regard to the bid's coverage of the Paralympics. There was praise for the degree of integration between the Olympic and Paralympic Games in terms of organization, management and physical planning with a rich history of Paralympic sport, a reputation in television coverage and public support for Paralympic sport, and capacities of UK Paralympic Sport that are 'among the best in the world'.²⁸ There was a real feeling, too, of the Paralympics coming home, given its close associations with Stoke Mandeville.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the Paralympics' chequered history and the characteristic dissonance between bid promises and final realities, the Evaluation Committee's buoyant assessment underlines the extent of progress over the last half-century. The Paralympics have developed dramatically since the first competition between 130 British and Dutch athletes in 1952. In the fullness of time, the Games have spread geographically, have moved into new sports,

have encompassed a wider range of disabilities, and helped give credence to the belief that access to sport is available to all. The Paralympics also underline the change from sport as therapeutic competition to that of elite events that carry intrinsic prestige, with growing rivalry over medal tables. Athletes with disability, in a few instances, have enjoyed considerable celebrity status through their sporting prowess that, in turn, has provided them with a platform where they can express themselves on their own terms. Moreover, as the Games have come progressively closer to the heart of the Olympic movement, they have ensured that the disabled community has to be accommodated, figuratively and literally, within the planning, design, cultural and educational programmes of Olympic cities. While cities could avoid those obligations in the 1970s and 1980s, the bidding process now ensures that they must provide not only barrier-free Olympic facilities, but also a wider environment and society that welcome diversity.

However, two important challenges remain to be faced. One lies in the fact that not all disabilities are regarded equally, either within the Paralympic movement or by society generally. For example, while wheelchair events are an accepted part of Paralympic programmes and receive media coverage, athletes with learning disabilities find it more difficult to gain acceptance and compete.²⁹ The second challenge stems from the extent that the Olympics overshadow the Paralympics and poses the dilemma of how far the process of integration should proceed. The pattern of closely related but succeeding festivals is not the only model available. The Commonwealth Games, for example, integrated events for athletes with disability into the overall programme at Manchester in 2002. All participants were classed as 'Elite Athletes', with some events designated for Elite Athletes with a Disability (EAD).³⁰ Notably, the disabled South African swimmer Natalie du Toit, who competed with distinction in both disabled and mainstream events, won the David Dixon Award as the most outstanding athlete of the entire Games. By contrast, the current view that the Paralympics and Olympics should share facilities, venues and cultural programmes but remain distinct entities encounters the notion of being

supposedly separate-but-equal; a concept that is as uncomfortable here as in other realms of public life. In reality, there are considerable differences between the two sporting festivals. The Paralympics only usually attract substantial crowds on days when there is ceremonial spectacle or when organizers distribute large numbers of free tickets, particularly to schoolchildren. They plainly lag far behind the Olympics in media coverage and in developing sponsorship, especially because companies

remain reluctant to associate themselves with Paralympians. Media coverage tends to portray athletes with disability as being courageous or brave and frequently Other; a style of representation that irks many such athletes.³¹

Integration with the Olympic programme on the lines adopted for the Commonwealth Games would bring Paralympic sport within the commercial umbrella of the Olympics, but would undoubtedly encounter resistance from those intent on

maintaining the traditional identity of the Olympics and the special qualities of the Paralympics. It would also undoubtedly reduce the number of events and participants from the disabled community, with the likelihood of concentration on the more televisual sports such as wheelchair racing and thereby adding to problems of inclusiveness. It is not just vested interests, therefore, that are likely to ensure that the two Games will continue on their parallel courses.

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