

Social Inclusion Through Parasport

A Critical Reflection on the Current State of Play

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KEYWORDS

- Social inclusion • Parasport • Paralympics • Disability
- International Paralympic Committee (IPC)

KEY POINTS

- The paralympic movement has done much to promote social inclusion, challenge stereotypes, and change unhelpful attitudes toward disability.
- There are many challenges that the movement faces if it seeks to continue its socio-political agenda of promoting social inclusion.
- Sports physicians can contribute to lively debate about how to overcome these challenges, so that parasport continues to promote the inclusion of all disabled people.

INTRODUCTION

Medicine has played an integral role in both the inception and development of Parasport, and sports physicians are well positioned to continue to influence the development of the paralympic movement. The origins of the Paralympic Games can be traced back to the work of neurologist, Dr Ludwig Guttmann, who used sport as an integral component of the rehabilitation of paraplegic patients at Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Buckinghamshire.¹ A parasport competition was held at Stoke Mandeville Hospital to coincide with the opening ceremony of the London Olympic Games in July 1948,² thus aligning the event with the Olympic movement. Initially the parasport competition at Stoke Mandeville Hospital was little more than an event for disabled ex-servicemen and women, but it nonetheless became an annual event that attracted international participation in 1952.² The first Olympic-style parasport tournament, convened in Rome in 1960, was a modest event with 400 athletes from 23 countries participating.³ Since then, the Paralympic Games have grown in both stature and prominence; they are now firmly aligned with the Olympic Games and have expanded

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to include a wide range of sports and disabilities.⁴ The Rio 2016 Paralympic Games were a large and spectacular event; 2.15 million spectators witnessed the performance of 4328 athletes from 159 countries participating in 22 sports.⁵ As the Paralympic Games have grown, it has been transformed from an event which embraced sport as a means of rehabilitation, to become an elite event, a public spectacle, and a socio-political movement that explicitly seeks to promote social inclusion. Please see David Legg's article, "[Paralympic Games: History and Legacy of a Global Movement](#)," in this issue, for a full history of the Paralympic Games. This article describes the importance and value of parasport and its potential to promote social inclusion. It critically considers the claims that have been made about the role of the Paralympic Games in promoting social inclusion, and highlights the challenges that the movement might face as it continues to advance its agenda as a socio-political movement committed to promoting social inclusion. The article concludes by turning its attention to the question of what role sports medicine might play in the future of the paralympic movement.

THE IMPORTANCE AND VALUE OF PARASPORT

The considerable benefits of organized sport and physical activity are well documented. Sport promotes the physical and psychological health of individuals.^{6,7} Participating in physical activity promotes social interaction, reduces feelings of isolation, and promotes a sense of belonging, particularly for young people.^{8,9} At a societal level, sport has the potential to promote social cohesion, social development, and peace.¹⁰ The fact that most governments consider the promotion of sport to be one of their responsibilities is evidence of the widespread belief that sport has substantial public, personal, and political benefits.

Sport has particular value for persons with disabilities; in addition to the general health benefits of physical activity, sport can serve as a means of physical rehabilitation¹¹ and an arena in which to promote social interaction and achieve social inclusion. Positive correlations have been demonstrated between participation in sport and quality of life among persons with disabilities.¹² The United Nations has affirmed that "Sport can integrate people with disabilities into society, providing an arena for positive social interaction, reducing isolation and breaking down prejudice. Sports programs for the disabled are also a cost-effective method of rehabilitation. They are highly therapeutic, improving motor skills and increasing mobility, self-sufficiency and self-confidence."^{13(p12)}

The Paralympic Games have been heralded for their ability to promote political transformation and social inclusion by:

- Challenging unhelpful societal stereotypes about people with disabilities^{14,15}
- Changing attitudes about disability by emphasizing achievement rather than impairment⁴
- Providing a stage on which athletes with disabilities can resist social oppression¹⁶
- Creating an arena in which athletes with disabilities can participate in the formation of their own social identities¹⁷

Considerable advances toward social inclusion have been achieved through the paralympic movement. Gould and Gould have affirmed that, "Few developments have challenged existing ways of thinking about sport and disability more than the rise of the Paralympic Games."^{4(p133)} Claims have been made that the Paralympic Games have been a major force in "accelerating the agenda of inclusion and by helping to promote the concept of a barrier-free environment within town planning and

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