

# The Paralympic games explained

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## **Chapter 7.**

### **Major Issues within the Paralympic Movement.**

#### **Chapter Aims:**

Highlight some of the major issues within the Paralympic Movement:

- Cultural or Sports Games?
- Olympians or Paralympians?
- Classification
- Cheating

Like nearly all major international organisations, sporting or otherwise, the Paralympic Movement has a number of ongoing issues that it has to deal with and mediate. As is usually the nature of such issues they are both complex and difficult to manage in a way that keeps everyone happy. Other issues such as cheating, in various forms, is possibly a reflection of the increasing importance of the Games themselves and the vastly improved benefits that being successful at the Paralympic Games may now bring to both individuals and the nations and sporting organisations that they represent. The aim of this chapter is to outline some of these issues for the reader, although given the complexity of some of them and the limited space available here they can only be presented in their broadest form. Hopefully, however, the reader will be inspired to learn more about the complex nature of these issues and their impacts.

## **The Paralympic Games – A Cultural or a Sports Event?**

*The Paralympic Movement and its underlying language/ message.*

From its inception in the late nineteen forties the founder of the international disability sport movement, Ludwig Guttman, described the aims of his use of sport in the rehabilitation process of the spinally injured to be social re-integration and to change the perceptions of the non-disabled within society regarding what people with disabilities were capable of. This continued to be the underlying message of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) regarding the Paralympic Games and international disability sport for many years. These kinds of aims and the language associated with them (e.g. social integration, changing perceptions etc) possibly led to the Paralympic Games being perceived primarily as a cultural games rather than one that is about sport. Cultural games have as their aim an ethos of fostering self-respect and belief amongst their participants as well as helping to solidify their social identity as a group. Other examples of cultural games include the Gay Games and the Maccabiah Jewish Games. However, the last five years or so, have seen a distinct shift in the language used and the aims set out by the International Paralympic Committee. The language used is now much more about sport than disability as the very first item on the mission statement of IPC clearly shows:

To promote and contribute to the development of sport opportunities and competitions, from initiation to elite level, for Paralympic athletes as the foundation of elite Paralympic sport...To promote the self-governance of each Paralympic sport either as an integral part of the international sport movement for able-bodied athletes, or as an independent sport

organization, whilst at all times safeguarding and preserving its own identity.

(Paralympic Mission, Chapter 1.1; IPC Website, 2008)

Although references to identity and integration are still inherent within the statement the focus is explicitly on sport and sporting opportunities. There is no mention of disability with the exception of its inherent connection with the word Paralympic and all the mentions of the word Paralympic are in connection with elite athletes and sport. It is possible that the reasons for this change hinge upon the fact that the advent of the social model of disability and the increasing influence of disability politics within societies in general meant that recognition of disability issues was much more prevalent. This allowed disability sport and elite disability sport in particular to shift the focus of its aims away from the acceptance of people with disabilities as potentially productive members of society to gaining their acceptance as elite athletes irrespective of any impairment they might have. So why is this important? Perhaps this is best shown by looking at the potential outcomes of the cultural and sporting models in terms of their aims and the language used.

**The impact of the cultural and sport models on the Paralympic Movement's place in international sport.**

There can be little doubt that, historically speaking, there was a definite need for the disability movement in general to take a cultural model approach in all areas in order to try and remove the cloak of near invisibility cast over it by the rest of society and to highlight the fact that people with disabilities were capable of amazing feats, just like anyone else within society. One of the most successful and visible avenues through which

these aims have been achieved is through sport. However, disability sport has been so successful that the language and aims of the cultural model approach reached a point whereby they were preventing people with disabilities from being accepted in some quarters as athletes within non-disabled definitions of what constitutes an 'athlete'. As pointed in chapter four, this often conjures up images of physical perfection and sporting prowess that most of the non-disabled population could never achieve. By constantly referring to disability and the exploits of 'disabled' sportsmen and women this not only re-emphasised an element of difference, but also continued to highlight the oxymoronic nature between the non-disabled understandings of words such as 'disabled' and 'athlete' when the two words were brought together. By taking a sport model approach, which emphasises the athleticism of athletes with disabilities and using words such as Paralympian, which, although still understood to mean an athlete with disability, negates the need for any mention of the disability itself, the aims of the cultural model approach can still be achieved without the inherent problems of such an approach as mentioned above. By becoming 'Parallel Olympians' athletes with disabilities can try to get away from the oxymoron that 'disabled athlete' may be perceived as and associate themselves with a movement which sells itself as being about sport as a vehicle for peace and understanding as well as sport of the very highest level. In this way both the cultural and sporting aims of the Paralympic Movement can be met in a positive and constructive context. However, a number of Paralympians refer to themselves simply as Olympians. In the next section, therefore, some of the possible implications of this are investigated. If elite athletes with disabilities were to become fully integrated into the Olympic Movement, although not necessarily in the one Games scenario, would this be a positive

step forward for the Paralympic Movement or would this lead to the issue of disability becoming invisible again under a cloak of 'Olympism' and the cultural model impacts of the Paralympic Movement being lost altogether?

### **Elite Athletes with Disabilities – Olympians or Paralympians?**

#### *Historical Context*

Before discussing the possible implications of full integration of Paralympic athletes into the Olympic Movement it is worth pausing to look briefly at the historical background with regards to the integration process that has occurred thus far. As early as 1949 Dr Guttman gave a speech in which he made the claim that the Stoke Mandeville Games would one day become recognised as the paraplegic's equivalent of the Olympic Games. Throughout his career Guttman consistently drew parallels between the two movements as highlighted in chapter two. In the seventies and eighties the Paralympic Movement even went as far as using Olympic terminology such as 'Olympics for the Disabled' to denote the Games that occurred in the Olympic year, which led to threats of litigation from the IOC. In 1984 the IOC consented to demonstration events without any medal status being held at the Sarajevo Winter Games and the Los Angeles Summer Games. At that time the Paralympic Movement, however, saw this as just the first step and in the early nineties the International Paralympic Committee set up a Commission for the Integration of Athletes with Disabilities, which lobbied for, amongst other things, the inclusion of events with full medal status within the Olympic Programme. This was never achieved and although the two wheelchair demonstration events continued to be held at the Olympic Games up until Athens 2004 the competitors did not receive full Olympic

athlete status accreditations, were not allowed to march in the Opening or Closing Ceremonies nor were they allowed to stay in the Olympic Village.

*The Rights of Athletes with Disabilities Versus the Potential Impacts*

The modern day usage of the term Paralympic is now widely accepted as being a shortened version of the term Parallel Olympics. However, additional definitions of the prefix ‘para’ are of interest due to their potentially negative connotation:

**Para-**

Etymology: Greek, from *para*; akin to Greek *pro* before

**1** : beside : alongside of : beyond : aside from <*parathyroid*> <*parenteral*>

**2 a** : closely related to <*paraldehyde*> **b** : involving substitution at or characterized by two opposite positions in the benzene ring that are separated by two carbon atoms <*paradichlorobenzene*>

**3 a** : faulty : abnormal <*paresthesia*> **b** : associated in a subsidiary or accessory capacity <*paramedical*> **c** : closely resembling : almost <*paratyphoid*>

Miriam-Webster’s Dictionary **REF**

It is the third definition that is of particular concern as ‘para’ can infer that the Paralympic Games are “faulty”, “abnormal”, “associated in a subsidiary or accessory capacity” to the Olympic Movement. Although the first definition indicates the two Movements are parallel to one another, the third definition has the potential to disempower elite athletes with disabilities. Is ‘Paralympian’ an appropriate label to use, therefore, if it can be associated with negative connotations? Another reading of the prefix ‘para’ in Paralympian, in which parallel may be interpreted as disempowering,

results from the insinuation that the Paralympic Movement takes a subsidiary capacity to the Olympic Movement. Aimee Mullins of the USA, a multi-Paralympic medallist had this to say on the matter:

There is indeed a 'less than' association with the Paralympics. It's why I always say that I'm an Olympian and dare anyone implicitly to say that I'm not, because to do so would only be to 'qualify' my athletic achievements rather than acknowledge them in the same pantheon as that of an Olympic achievement.

(Mullins in Brittain & Wolff, 2007)

The push for full integration by the International Paralympic Committee that was so prevalent in the early nineties has been replaced by attempts to build up a strong Paralympic brand image, the use of much more sports based language in order to try and gain acceptance of athletes with disabilities as athletes and a gradual move towards a greater use of educational tools such as the International Paralympic day. However, there are those that would argue that sport for the disabled has accepted its status as separate and unequal instead of continuing to advocate for full inclusion in the Olympic Movement due to insecurity and internalised inferiority. Conversely, there is also an argument to be made that the need by athletes with disabilities to call themselves Olympians is also a result of this internalised inferiority in that they are trying to take on the sporting terminology of the non-disabled majority in order to gain acceptance rather than making the term Paralympian one they and others can be proud of in that it encapsulates both their sporting and cultural identity.



### **Student Activity**

Make a case, with supporting arguments, either for or against athletes with disabilities being fully integrated into the Olympic Movement and then list what the positive and negative impacts of your decision might be on the Paralympic Movement and athletes with disabilities.

model. You only have to look at examples such as Cathy Freeman and her attempts to increase the visibility of her aboriginal heritage, the 'black power' salute at the 1968 Men's Olympic 200m medal ceremony or the protests by Islamic Fundamentalist Groups against the clothing worn by Hassiba Boulmerka of Algeria in winning World and Olympic track titles that went totally against what her culture and religion dictated were right and proper. But these are all political issues you might claim. Well to most people the right to promote and defend their cultural heritage is a political issue and this is why the cultural identity model element of the Paralympic Games has been so important to athletes with disabilities in furthering the cause of all people with disabilities. However, amongst the athletes in particular and the Paralympic movement in general there is a strong move to have athletes with disabilities accepted as athletes first and foremost, whilst still maintaining other elements of their cultural heritage such as race, gender or disability. This is perhaps best summed up by Sarah Reinertsen, a triathlete who has worn a prosthetic leg since the age of seven:

I've always been fighting to be seen as an athlete, but also as a disabled woman. For so long I wasn't included in sports, so I feel every person, regardless of gender or disability, has a right to be an athlete.

(Reinartsen in Brittain & Wolff, 2007)

The argument most often used against integration is that athletes with disabilities would once again become invisible. However, Terri Lakowski at the Women's Sports Foundation claims this is a myth and that until there is integration athletes with disabilities will always feel that they are second-tier (Lakowski in Brittain and Wolff, 2007). There can be little doubt that many of the reasons for these apparent feelings of perceived inferiority are based in the meanings attached to the language and terminology that surrounds sport. There still remains a great need for many of these perceived meanings to be challenged and re-defined. Sport for people with a disability is a highly legitimate category of sport and if Olympism really is about peace and mutual understanding amongst different cultures, rather than money and political power, as it is often perceived to be, then disability sport has a major role to play in that process within the Olympic family. Whether this is best served by full integration of disabled athletes into Olympic and other non-disabled sporting terminology or whether they continue down the 'Parallel Olympic' route is still open to debate and requires more research and thought. However, what does appear to be clear is the importance of the cultural identity element of disability sport as a tool for changing the understanding of perceived meanings. If full integration is to be pursued then a way must be found to ensure that this cultural identity element remains strong and highly visible. An excellent recent example of this is the introduction of a new law drafted in Russia's State Duma on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2008 that assured the status of the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games and announced the introduction of IOC and IPC standards to Russia's national legal system. This new law, introduced in light of their successful bid for the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Sochi in 2014 are expected to greatly increase the awareness of

disability sport within Russia and it is hoped that it will greatly benefit the 11 million Russians living with a disability (IPC Website, 2008).

### **Classification in Paralympic Sport.**

This is possibly one of the most contentious issues in disability sport and also one of the most difficult to find a solution to that satisfies the needs and desires of all concerned. Different impairments impact upon an individual's functional ability in different ways and to different degrees, but in nearly all cases the impacts usually lead to a competitive disadvantage in sport. This is especially true when compared to non-disabled sportsmen and women, but may also be true in comparison to athletes with different impairments or even athletes with the same or a similar impairment. It is necessary, therefore, to put criteria in place in order that success is determined by 'skill, fitness, power, endurance, tactical ability and mental focus' (BOCOG, 2008) as it is in non-disabled sport, rather than by level of disability. A very crude analogy would be to compare classification in disability sport to weight categories in boxing, but the criteria used in classification for disability sport are much more detailed and require much more than just a set of weighing scales. The classification system in disability sport in general and in the individual sports that athletes with disabilities take part in are constantly evolving as classifiers and those involved in running disability sport learn more about the impacts of various impairments on sporting ability. In general classification decides two main issues:

1. Which impairment groups can compete in a particular sport i.e. in Goalball only individuals with a visual impairment can compete, but swimming is open to all impairment groups.

2. Which individual athletes, with which impairments and at what levels of impairment may compete against each other in a particular medal event.

The decision as to which events and who a particular athlete with a disability should compete against is made by a panel of classifiers. The role of a classifier, who usually will only classify athletes within one particular sport that is their area of expertise, is to decide, based on a number of factors, a sports classification grouping for each individual athlete to take part in their sport. These factors may include the results of a physical examination, a series of practical sports specific tests and even watching individuals perform within a competitive sports setting. Each individual is then assigned a sports classification for that particular sport. Who each individual athlete then competes against will be down to the type of classification system used within a particular sport. Within the Paralympic Movement there are currently two different types of classification system in use:

1. A General Classification System: This kind of classification system only takes into account the type and degree of impairment associated with each individual athlete e.g. the level of visual impairment. Athletes with similar impairments and levels of impairment then compete against each other.
2. A Sport Specific or Functional Classification System: In this system athletes are evaluated in terms of their functional ability to carry out specific tasks required by a particular sport e.g. the level of ability to catch or throw in Wheelchair Rugby.

In general functional classification systems are associated with physical impairments and general classification systems are usually applied to athletes with visual or intellectually disabled athletes. In Paralympic terms the only sports in which visually impaired athletes compete alongside their physically disabled counterparts are in the sports of Equestrianism, Sailing and Nordic Skiing. Some sports such as Athletics and Swimming may actually employ both systems i.e. they use a general classification system for the visually impaired participants (and the intellectually disabled participants when allowed to compete) and a functional classification system for the remaining participants. Pickering Francis (2005) claims that the need for the Paralympic Movement to provide categories for athletes that are both entertaining for spectators and fair for the athletes involved requires ‘striking a very difficult balance between categories that are sufficiently broad to provide compelling competition yet sufficiently well defined so that people with relevantly similar skills are paired against each other’ (Pickering Francis, 2005; p. 129).

*Classification and the inherent tensions in the Cultural – Sporting Model dichotomy.*

Classification is one area of the Paralympic Games where the inherent tensions in the Cultural Model – Sports Model dichotomy become very clear. As IPC has moved the Paralympic Games further towards the sporting model the pressure to provide an event that is saleable to sponsors and the media has increased or as Howe and Jones (2006) put it:

“The only evaluative criteria relevant to such logic are supply, demand and profit. Good Games are profitable ones, good sports are marketable ones, and

good athletes are endorsable ones. The IPC are conspiring with the IOC to repackage, remarket, refresh, modernize, and essentially sell the Paralympics. The product, however, needs revising to increase demand. The Paralympics needs to be quicker, slicker, shorter, with fewer events and fewer, but higher profile champions.”

(Howe & Jones, 2006; p.33)

As will be seen in the next chapter there has been a squeeze on athlete numbers and a propensity towards reducing the number of medal events at the Paralympic Games since they first returned to the Olympic host venues in Seoul, 1988. However, this move towards achieving the goals laid out by Howe and Jones above comes at a price. Women and athletes with high support needs have been particularly hard hit as will be shown further in chapter eight. This means that although IPC might be successfully moving towards an elite sports model for the movement the further they move away from the cultural model they get the more in danger they become of isolating key groups of the community of athletes they are there to represent. This happens because either there are insufficient athletes from a range of countries and continents to make up what the organisers deem a competitively viable event or alternatively these athletes are combined with another classification group that they deem themselves not able to compete against on equal terms and so decide to either change events or sports or sometimes to give up sport altogether.

Another problem that makes the issue of classification even harder to solve to the satisfaction of all concerned is the difficulty of designing a system within a particular

sport that is easy for non-disabled spectators to understand. In general, spectators, particularly non-disabled spectators, lack an understanding of disability in general and specific impairments in particular on sporting performance. Combine this with a general lack of knowledge of anatomical and physiological understanding of the body and how it works and it is easy to see why many people find classification a confusing concept. Unfortunately, as Howe (2008) points out, even though media coverage of disability sport has increased greatly over the last twenty years there is often little or no mention of classification within this coverage even though an awareness, and some understanding, of the classification process would greatly assist in the public's perception of sport for the disabled. Without this understanding and with only non-disabled sport as a benchmark against which to measure any sport for the disabled these spectators might watch it is likely that their perceptions will remain grounded firmly in the medical model of disability.

### **Cheating in Paralympic Sport.**

Many people find it hard to believe that cheating occurs in sport for the disabled. This possibly reflects a perception of sport for the disabled that is grounded more in pity for these poor unfortunate individuals than one that views them as athletes who simply happen to have an impairment. The growing media coverage and increasing rewards now available to individuals who are successful at the highest levels of disability sport and the increasing importance placed on being successful at the Paralympic Games by national governments mean that the pressure to succeed leads to a win at all costs mentality amongst some individuals. Many of the forms of cheating that have long been known

about in international non-disabled sport are now also prevalent in elite sport for the disabled. Although cheating is to be deplored in any sport, disabled or non-disabled, what it does highlight is that athletes with disabilities are as human as everyone else with the same wants, desires and potential character flaws that lead them to cheat.

*Doping.*

Much has been written about the illegal use of drugs for performance enhancement purposes within non-disabled sport. Drugs cheats also occur in disability sport. However, the problem is made far more difficult in disability sport by the fact that some athletes actually need to take drugs on a regular basis for health reasons.

Table 7.1. Doping Tests at recent Summer and Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Games	Olympic Games		Paralympic Games	
	Tests	Positives	Tests	Positives
Barcelona, 1992	1873	5	300	3
<b>Lillehammer, 1994</b>	<b>529</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>0</b>
Atlanta, 1996	2000	6	450	0
<b>Nagano, 1998</b>	<b>621</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>0</b>
Sydney, 2000	2100	11	630	11
<b>Salt Lake, 2002</b>	<b>825</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>1</b>
Athens, 2004	2815	17	735	10
<b>Torino, 2006</b>	<b>1219</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>0</b>
Beijing, 2008	4900	9	1155	3

Dope testing at the Summer Paralympic Games appears to have begun at the Stoke Mandeville Games in 1984 when eight urine samples all tested negative. Since then the number of tests taken at each Games has increased dramatically with over a thousand tests being carried out in Beijing, 2008. Dope testing at the Winter Paralympic Games began in Tignes, 1992 and despite a steadily increasing number of tests at subsequent Games the first and only case of a positive test at a Winter Paralympic Games occurred in



Salt Lake in 2002 when German Nordic skier Thomas Oelsner tested positive after winning two gold medals in men's standing biathlon events (Paralympian, 2002; p.2). As can be seen in Table 7.1 there has only been one Summer Paralympic Games (Atlanta, 1996) where no positive tests have been returned during the Games since 1992. The other four Summer Games have returned a total of 27 positive tests. In the same period there have been 48 positive tests at Olympic Summer Games. Perhaps a little surprisingly this means that the Summer Paralympic Games have returned one positive test for every 121 tests carried out, whereas the rate for the Summer Olympic Games is one positive test for every 285 tests carried out. However it should be pointed out that the vast majority of these positive tests (70%) have all occurred in one sport – powerlifting. Introduced as a sport in Sydney 2000 nearly all the positive tests that occurred in both Sydney (10 out of 11) and Athens (6 out of 10) four years later were in powerlifting. This caused those in charge of the sport to severely tighten up the rules on doping and it is satisfying to see that although three powerlifters were caught in Beijing the number of positive tests has been reduced dramatically. Table 7.2 breaks the 27 positive doping tests that have been found at Summer Paralympic Games down by continental affiliation and gender of the athletes concerned. It can clearly be seen that the majority of positive tests have occurred with athletes from Europe and Asia and that 89% of all positive tests were from male athletes.

Table 7.2. Positive Paralympic Games Doping Tests by Continental Association and Gender since Barcelona, 1992.

	Africa	Americas	Asia	Europe	Oceania	Total	Male	Female
Barcelona, 1992	0	1	0	2	0	3	3	0
Atlanta, 1996	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sydney, 2000	1	1	3	6	0	11	10	1

Athens, 2004	0	1	3	6	0	10	9	1
Beijing, 2008	1	0	1	1	0	3	2	1
Total	2	3	7	15	0	27	24	3

### **Study Activity**

List possible reasons why the prevalence of positive doping tests at the Paralympic Games is so much higher for European nations. Make a second lists of possible reasons why the prevalence of positive doping tests at the Paralympic Games is so much higher for men than women.

### *Therapeutic Use Exemption (TUE)*

Given the nature of some impairments certain individuals may be required to take substances or use treatment methods, under doctors orders, that are prohibited by the WADA code. Under such circumstances, if the individual wishes to continue competing in their chosen sport, they must apply to either the IPC TUE Committee or their own national anti-doping agency for a therapeutic use exemption certificate at the latest on the final day of entry for the competition they wish to compete in. However, in extraordinary circumstances, such as an injury during training or illness just prior to competition an emergency TUE may be granted. The TUE Committee to which the application has been made, and consisting of at least three members, then evaluates the request in accordance with the WADA International Standards for Therapeutic Use Exemptions and renders a decision. This decision is then communicated to both the athlete and WADA. At this point WADA may, at the request of the athlete concerned or of their own volition, review the decision and, in exceptional circumstances may even overturn it. The outcome of this is that an athlete who is granted a TUE may then compete in a sporting competition and if

drug tested the testers will know to expect to find the allowed banned substance in the sample and the expected levels of that substance.

### **Study Activity**

Make a list of possible reasons why there have been so few positive doping tests at Winter Paralympic Games when compared to their Summer Paralympic and Winter Olympic counterparts.

#### *Boosting.*

Boosting is the colloquial terminology for self-induced autonomic dysreflexia, which is considered as a performance enhancing technique (Harris, 1994). Boosting refers to a technique potentially employed by athletes with a spinal cord injury at the T6 level or above. The resultant affect is similar to that produced by ergogenic aids. Boosting has, therefore, been banned in sport for the disabled. Reported methods for boosting by some athletes include temporarily blocking their own urinary catheter, drinking large amounts of fluids prior to their event to distend the bladder, tightening clothing, and sitting for long periods of time. According to Grey-Thompson (2008) it can boost performance by up to 25%. Potential complications of prolonged boosting are the same as for non-self-induced autonomic dysreflexia in general eg, stroke, seizure, irregular heart rhythm, heart attack, and potentially death (Malanga, 2008). Boosting is, therefore, banned not just on ethical grounds, but also health grounds.

#### *Classification.*

The most obvious and clear cut case of cheating the classification system occurred in Sydney in the intellectually disabled basketball. This case is described in much greater detail in chapter ten. However, given that in Beijing there were 99 functional

reclassifications, 63 visual impairment reclassifications and 13 athletes reclassified again after their first appearance in front of the classifiers it clearly shows that classification is not an exact science. Two athletes were actually reclassified to such an extent that they were deemed to be not sufficiently disabled enough to compete in Paralympic sport, one of them after having won a silver medal. The inexactness of the classification system clearly opens up opportunities for individuals to try and get themselves classified into a group that would give them a competitive advantage or to be simply wrongly classified and the mistake not get spotted.

#### *Tampering with technology*

Grey-Thompson (2008) claims that there have been instances where wheelchair track athletes have felt that their racing chairs, and in particular their compensators which they calibrate themselves to help them go around the two bends on the track, have been tampered with. A slight change in the calibration might mean that the chair would either not turn in correctly forcing the chair out wide or might turn in too sharply causing the chair to hit the curb on the inside of the track. For this reason Grey-Thompson claims she also guarded her racing chair very closely whenever she was racing.

#### **Technological Doping or Cyborg Athlete Syndrome.**

With the massive improvements in performance standards currently occurring in disability sport some athletes have reached a standard that might allow them to qualify for the Olympic Games. However, the technology they use in terms of adapted equipment in order to enable them to compete has raised questions regarding advantages such equipment might give them over their non-disabled counterparts. This has led to the

coining of such terms as 'technological doping' or 'cyborg athlete'. The most notable example of this is, of course, Oscar Pistorious, the South African double-below the knee amputee who uses carbon fibre blade prosthetic limbs to allow him to compete. It is unnecessary to go into detail regarding the Pistorious case as it has been covered heavily by both the media and academics worldwide (see Wolbring, 2008; Howe, 2008). However, in brief, Pistorious, a Paralympic Gold medallist and world record holder decided he wished to compete against non-disabled athletes in open competition and if possible qualify to compete in the 400 metres at the Olympic Games in Beijing. He came within half a second of the qualifying standard, when in March 2007 the IAAF introduced a rule regarding 'technical aids' that brought into question the use of such prosthetic limbs within the Olympic Games as it was felt they gave the user an unfair advantage when compared to the capabilities of the human leg. Following an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, which challenged the veracity of the tests carried out by the IOC and the IAAF it was decided by CAS that Pistorious should be allowed compete (but only using the technology which he used in the original tests). In the end Pistorious failed to reach the qualifying time for the individual event, but still hoped to make his country's relay team, at which point the IAAF Secretary General Pierre Weiss is cited as saying "we'd prefer that they don't select him for reasons of safety.... Pistorious will risk the physical safety of himself and other athletes if he runs in the main pack of the relay event" (CBC Sports, 2008). In the end Pistorious was not selected for the South African team as four other athletes posted faster times. Another South African, swimmer Natalie Du Toit, a single leg amputee, did qualify to represent South Africa in the 10k Open Water swimming event at the Beijing Olympic Games and there was no such

reticence to her participation by either the IOC or FINA, as she does not use any kind of prosthetic when she swims, although she does for daily living.

The fear then, in the case of Pistorious, for the IOC and the IAAF, was not the usual prejudice most people with disabilities have encountered at some point in their lives of being considered 'less than human', but in fact the complete opposite – the fear of being 'more than human'. The very devices society has devised to allow individuals to walk in the upright position like everyone else and to compete in running events in a similar style and manner as their non-disabled counterparts are now considered to give an unfair competitive advantage. Pistorious has gone from a fine Paralympic athlete whose achievements were to be applauded, perhaps in the slightly patronising manner outlined in the previous chapter, to a kind of 'Robocop' of the track who might not only have an unfair advantage over athletes not wearing his prosthetic limbs, but also might reap danger and injury upon both himself and his fellow relay competitors. Swartz and Watermeyer (2008) ascribe this reaction to the fact that Pistorious is effectively challenging one of the key underlying ethos' of sport – that of bodily perfection. He is challenging culturally ascribed definitions of bodily perfection based around non-disabled conceptions. To have someone whose body is less than perfect (i.e. missing limbs) potentially beating athletes whose bodies far more readily meet the requirements laid down for bodily perfection is a challenge to the virtues of those who hold power, especially when that body has been 'technologically accessorised' with prosthetic limbs. It is somewhat ironic that the term 'prosthetic' is derived from the Greek meaning "an addition designed to remove physical stigma" (Howe, 2008; p.127), when in Pistorious' case it appears to have resulted in removing the stigma of being disabled and adding the

stigma of being 'more than human' in athletic ability, but 'less than human' in physical appearance i.e. some kind of cyborg. This then begins to raise numerous questions around the difference between being human and being a machine. Whether Pistorious ever finally gets his wish to compete in the Olympic Games or not remains to be seen, but what is certain is that the questions raised by the issues related to his attempted participation will be far reaching and will continue to be debated for a long time to come.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that the Paralympic Movement has some highly complex and difficult issues to deal with. How it deals with these issues and how their remedies are perceived will ultimately decide the success or failure of the movement. Many of the issues such as doping have been a problem for the Olympic Movement for many years and so hopefully IPC can learn from the mistakes and triumphs of the IOC in this area. Clearly, as the Paralympic Games become more successful and gain more media coverage the pressure on some individuals to cheat will increase. In addition, how IPC deals with the move towards an elite sporting model, thus moving it further away from its cultural model roots, will potentially impact upon its ability to successfully serve all the members of the Paralympic community, particularly women and athletes with high support needs.

### **Chapter Review Questions:**

1. What are the differences between a cultural and a sports event? Give examples of each.
2. Should athletes with disabilities who compete at the Paralympic Games be called Olympians or Paralympians? Give reasons for your answer.
3. What are the extra issues involved in doping control within sport for the disabled and how are they managed?
4. Name and explain the different classification methods used in sport for the disabled.
5. Should Oscar Pistorious have been banned from non-disabled competition? Explain the reasons for your answer.
6. How are Oscar's blades different to the latest aerodynamic carbon fibre racing bike or technologically advanced swimming suit?

### **Suggested Further Reading**

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