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**Author name: Brittain, I.S.**

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## Chapter 4

### The Toronto Olympiad for the Physically Disabled 'A.K.A.' the Fifth Summer Paralympic Games held in 1976

*Ian Brittain*

#### Introduction

The 5th Summer Paralympic Games held in Toronto, Canada from 3rd to 11th August, 1976 are best remembered for three facts. Firstly, they were the first Games to incorporate disability groups other than wheelchair users when both blind and amputee athletes took part in the Games in their own separate sections. Secondly, they were the first Paralympic Games to suffer from major political problems and interference centering (which spelling do we use – I assume we allow whatever makes sense for each author). on the participation of a fully integrated South African team at a time when South Africa had been ostracised from mainstream non-disabled sport due to the apartheid practices of their government<sup>1</sup>. Thirdly, perhaps partly as a result of the first two points, the Games, although dogged by organisational and financial difficulties, received widespread and on the whole very favourable media coverage and public support and were declared a big success. The combined result of these three facts was to have a huge impact upon the way disability sport and athletes with disability were viewed, organised and fun-

35  
ded within Canada in the years that followed. In addition they paved the way for future editions of the Paralympic Games to successfully incorporate other disability groups into the Paralympic Games including athletes with cerebral palsy in 1980, athletes in the Les Autres group in 1984 and athletes with an intellectual disability in 1992. This chapter will, therefore, begin by outlining how each of the above three facts came about and then discuss their overall result in terms of the legacy they provided for disability sport in Canada and for the Paralympic Games themselves.

#### The first multi-disability games

According to the minutes of the International Stoke Mandeville Games Council meeting held at Stoke Mandeville on 24th July 1970 the Toronto Games were not the first attempt to make the Games a multi-disability affair. Sir Ludwig Guttmann in his capacity as President of both the International Stoke Mandeville Games Committee (ISMGC) who were responsible for wheelchair athletes and the International Sports Organisation for the Disabled (ISOD) who were responsible for blind and amputee athletes at the time, had attempted to get the Olympic hosts of 1972, Munich, to host a multi-disability Games. However, Munich declined to host the Games, citing accommodation problems, and although the German Sports Organisation for the Disabled (DVS) offered to host the Games in Heidelberg they stated they would only be able to accommodate the athletes of the International Stoke Mandeville Games i.e. wheelchair athletes (p. 2 item 3). In the minutes of the International Stoke Mandeville Games Federation (ISMGF) Council meeting held in Heidelberg on 8th August 1972 Sir Ludwig told those assembled that he had discussed with representatives from Canada the possibility of holding a joint ISOD-ISMGF Games in Canada in 1976 and that he was very much in favour of this in order that Canada should 'provide an example to the whole world in a combined international sports festival for as many disabled people as possible' (p. 7 item 8).

#### Impact on the 'Name' of the Games

Ironically, this decision to put on a combined ISOD-ISMGF Games in Canada had several knock-on effects upon both the venue and the name of the Games to be held in Canada. The increased size and complexity of the combined Games meant that Olympic officials in Montreal, already mired in spiralling costs of hosting the Olympic Games immediately declined a request to host the ISOD-ISMGF Games. Following some persistent lobbying by the Chairman of the Canadian Organising Committee, Dr. Robert

Jackson, Toronto was eventually persuaded to host the Games. The four previous versions of the ISMGF Games had been officially known as International Stoke Mandeville Games, but as the Games in Canada were now to include blind and amputee athletes the name was no longer felt applicable. The previous Games had also been unofficially known as 'Paralympic'

THE TORONTO OLYMPIAD FOR THE PHYSICALLY DISABLED

36

Games, the name having derived from a shortening of the term 'Paraplegic Olympics' (Brittain, 2008) and so this term was also deemed unacceptable. In the end the committees of ISMGF and ISOD decided to call the games the Toronto Olympiad for the Physically Disabled, but which the organisers shortened to the 'Torontolympiad' for marketing purposes.

### **Organisational Issues**

The increased size of the Games in Toronto, combined with a relatively inexperienced organising committee, the issues around South African participation and some computer issues at the beginning of the Games meant that things did not always run smoothly. On the very first day the computerised results system crashed, so no results were available to the media, the public or the athletes (McCabe, 1976). The participation of South Africa also led to a number of countries withdrawing at the last minute which in turn led to a large number of event schedules having to be reorganised. This led to communication issues around getting the new schedules to all the teams. McCabe (1976) reported that the Australian men's wheelchair basketball team thought they were due to compete at 6 p.m. and so failed to show for their rearranged time of 11.15 a.m. Organisers had to hastily rearrange the fixture. The mixing of the different impairment groups at the same event was also a steep learning curve for the organisers. Today blind sprinters run attached to a guide runner by a short rope that both hold. However, in 1976 blind sprinters were 'guided' by voice commands from someone standing at the end of their lane as they ran towards the finish line. This was not always successful and occasionally led to accidents. Sharon Myers, an American paraplegic athlete and swimmer, was injured when a blind runner veered off the track and ran into her. Sharon suffered a seven stitch cut on her cheek, a black eye and a knee injury when she was thrown from her chair (Torontolympiad Daily News, 19762).

### **The influence of South Africa on disability sport**

The issue of the impact of the South African team's participation in the 'Torontolympiad' upon the organisation of the Toronto Games is a complicated one. Given the space available for this chapter only a broad overview will appear here<sup>2</sup>. South African teams had competed at the Paralympic Games since Tokyo, 1964 and at all of the Games held at Stoke Mandeville in the intervening years with the exception of 1969. According to Guttman (19761) up until 1975 South Africa sent alternate teams of black participants and white participants to the Stoke Mandeville Games, although it appears to have been the all white teams that competed in the 'Paralympic' Games. Barrish, the Chairman of the South African organisation later pointed out that 'whilst the practice of the Association was one of non-discrimination, the environment within which it had to operate

37

continued to be a discriminatory one. For this reason, the activities of the Association over a long period were a microcosm of the social battle that was going on in South Africa' (Barrish, 1992).

### **South Africa and the 'Torontolympiad'**

With the next Paralympic Games due to be held in Toronto, Greig (2005) claims the first hint for the organisers that the participation of a South African team might cause problems came in May 1974 when the Canadian Minister for Health and Welfare released a statement informing all sports federations that it would not fund athletes travelling to South Africa because of its apartheid practices. As the Federal Government had promised funding of Canadian \$500,000 for the Games the organising committee sought clarification from the Minister who in November 1974 wrote urging

that South Africa not be invited as their presence would have embarrassing repercussions. South Africa was duly notified that it would not be invited. However, both the ISMGF and ISOD of whom the South African organisation was now a full member in good standing were against the expulsion and as such following a meeting in May 1975 the organising committee informed the South African organisation that a team would be welcome provided they had integrated trials and sent an integrated team (Grieg, 2005; p. 57), which may well have had some impact upon their decision to send their first ever integrated team to Stoke Mandeville in 1975. In the end South Africa sent a team of around thirty (Coetzee & van der Merwe, 1990; p. 83) including nine black athletes. The political ramifications of South Africa's participation impacted upon both the financial situation for the Games and also the number of countries participating. Eight countries withdrew either before or during the Games on the order of their governments. These were Kenya, Sudan and Yugoslavia who did so before the Games and Cuba, Jamaica, Hungary, India and Poland who turned up in Toronto, but either departed prior to the start of the Games or like Poland competed for several days (winning enough medals to place seventh in the medal table and withdrew. Jamaica for sintacen remained and watched the Games. They even took part in the Opening Ceremonies but didn't wear the official hat). Poland finally pulled out after a failed appeal to the organising committee to have the South African team thrown out (Guttmann, 1976; p. 233).

#### **Athlete reaction to political intrusion**

Reports of athlete reactions to the intrusion of politics into their Games appear to show that, in general, the intrusion was resented and unwelcome. Indeed on Thursday 5th August, having won the class 3 discus event, Eric Russell, a university student from Brisbane, Australia, refused his gold medal in protest at the intrusion of politics into the Games. Russell claimed he was upset by governments, stressing he meant all governments, attempting to mix sport with politics (Torontolympiad, Daily News, 1976).

THE TORONTO OLYMPIAD FOR THE PHYSICALLY DISABLED

38

However, following a press conference where Russell explained his actions to the media, and statements were made by Dr. Jackson and Dr. Guttmann, Russell finally accepted his medal from Dr. Guttmann.

#### **Mixed messages from the Federal Government?**

Despite the fact that the Federal Government stopped its funding from the Toronto Games and despite the withdrawal of several countries from the Games due to the participation of the South African team, there appears to have been no attempt by the Canadian Government to prevent the entry of the South African team into Canada. Whether this was as a result of the mounting media and public support for the Games and the integrated South African team's participation or whether it was merely a reflection of the low importance the Government associated with the Games themselves and their potential impact is hard to assess. What is clear is that the media and public support for the Games was sufficient to have a direct impact upon what the Federal Government did next as will be shown in the final section.

#### **Pre-Games media coverage of disability and disability sport**

The way the media portray people with disabilities and disability sport can have a major impact on how other groups and individuals within society view them (Brittain, 2009; p. 72). According to Greig (2005) prior to Canada being awarded the Games media coverage of people with disabilities, and athletes with disabilities in particular, was virtually non-existent within Canada 'confined to the lifestyles section or in a human interest area of the newspaper and rarely, if ever, could be found within the sports pages' (p. 97). In fact Grieg goes on to claim that 'within the early to mid 1970s, persons with physical disabilities were seen as cripples and were generally pitied by the majority of society' (2005; p. 97).

#### **Pre-Games/Pre-South Africa issue publicity**

Despite the claims by Grieg (2005), as mentioned above, regarding media

coverage of disability in Canada; Guttman (1976) claims that prior to the South African issue, which first arose in May 1974, the Canadian press, radio and television were apparently fully supportive of the Games in Toronto and were 'fully active in arousing interest in this venture of sport and humanity' (p. 226). Dr. Jackson and Dr. Guttman apparently gave a number of lectures as well as a large number of press, radio and television interviews in order to both drum up support for the Games as well as make people aware of the existence of the Games.

The media appear to have almost entirely sided with the organising committee in its battle with the Federal Government over the participation of the South African team. It is possible this stemmed from a view that

39  
'big brother' was picking on a section of the community that perception dictated was unable to defend itself, but whatever the reason it played a major part in allowing the Games to go ahead despite the withdrawal of the Federal Government funding. There was some media commentary that came down on the side of the Federal Government, mainly within the anti-apartheid lobby, but this was all but 'drowned out' by the overwhelming support from the majority of the media for the actions of the organising committee.

#### **Games time media coverage in Canada and elsewhere**

According to Greig (2005) newspapers such as the Toronto Star, Globe and Mail and the Toronto Sun all ran extensive coverage of the Games, the majority of it appearing on the sports pages. This coverage, supplemented by television broadcasts from the Games, was seen by Canadians nationwide. Greig (2005) goes on to claim that the widespread media coverage led to overwhelming public support for the Games by serving as 'an educational tool and an outlet for awareness for the Organizing Committee' (p. 97). These claims appear to be shared by Dr. Guttman, founder of the Games, who wrote 'The Canadian press, radio and television media played a most active and very important part from the beginning and throughout the Games, and no praise is high enough for the support our Olympics received by these media' (Guttman, 1976; p. 232). However, with regard to media coverage of the Games in other countries Guttman bemoaned the considerable variance in the amount of coverage, particularly in relation to the coverage given to the recently finished Montreal Olympic Games, which Guttman claimed revealed 'an astounding lack of appreciation of the value of the sports movement of the disabled in educating the public' (Guttman, 1976; p. 232). Even in his own adopted country of Great Britain, where he had founded the Games, Guttman described the coverage as 'miserable' and was particularly scathing of BBC television for continuing 'its previous policy of giving as little coverage as possible to our disabled athletes, who have kept the flag flying for Great Britain in the World of sport' (Guttman, 1976; p. 12).

#### **Media Impact upon the finances of the Torontolympiad**

Once it was known that the 'Torontolympiad' would have a half million dollar hole in the Games budget due to the withholding of the Federal Government finance the media coverage of the Games played an important role in helping to plug that gap. By making the public aware of the ongoing battle between the organising committee and the federal government and by raising public awareness of and interest in the Games the media helped in two ways. Firstly, by making the public aware of the financial problem they played their part in helping to persuade more than ten thousand people to donate funds in addition to the financial support and support in kind

THE TORONTO OLYMPIAD FOR THE PHYSICALLY DISABLED

40

provided by the business community (Jackson, 1977). Secondly, by raising public support for the Games ticket sales which were far in excess of what was expected including the opening ceremony, which was a twenty thousand seat sell out. In the end the organisers were able to break even, despite the loss of the Federal Government funding.

The impact of this widespread media coverage of the Games and the effect it had upon the attitude of the Canadian public towards both disability sport and the way the Federal Government had acted in withdrawing its funding for the Games appears to have been enough to make the Federal Government feel the need to play down the negative publicity it had been receiving. The Federal Government took the decision that although it would not provide financial backing to the Games themselves it would, however, still provide the same amount of money to be used to promote disability sport and recreation and its organisation within Canada.

### **Games Legacy**

The overall impact of the 'Torontolympiad' upon both future Paralympic Games and especially upon attitudes towards disability and disability sport within Canada was immense. Below are outlined just a few of the key impacts of these Games.

### **Change in attitude to disability in Canada**

The lessons learned by both the media and the public in Canada following the 'Torontolympiad' appear to have been quite marked. Athletes with disabilities found themselves on page one of the sports section with bold headlines and large photographs, which was something not previously enjoyed. Jackson (1977) also claims the public learnt valuable lessons from the widespread media coverage. They apparently learnt that 'the physically disabled are human individuals with emotions, ambitions, fears, likes and dislikes, similar to anyone else' and also that they 'are capable of exceptional achievements if given the opportunity' (Jackson, 1977; p. 69). The overall message appears to have been the importance of removing the perceptual, attitudinal and architectural barriers present within Canadian society in order to allow the physically disabled to contribute to and partake fully within it.

### **Training of administrators, officials, volunteers, coaches for disability sport**

The 'Torontolympiad' made use of over three thousand volunteers to help run all aspects of the Games. They worked as officials, administrators, translators, drivers and a whole host of other functions without which the Games would not have been able to operate. In order to ensure the volunteers could do their jobs in the most effective manner possible the organising committee introduced training programmes and 'as a result of the

41

initiative of the organizing committee in training volunteers, officials and administrators, the infrastructure was in place to promote and facilitate disabled sport in Canada' (Greig, 2003; p. 10). Perhaps the best testament to this fact is that many of these volunteers continue to be involved in disability sport in Canada today up until this very day. The author has even had the privilege of meeting one or two of them.

### **Federal money put into disability sport in Canada**

Prior to the 'Torontolympiad' disability sport in Canada was not very highly developed or organised. Canada had first competed in the Paralympic Games in Tel Aviv in 1968, a year after the formation of the Canadian Wheelchair Sports Association (CWSA) in 1967. There had been little or no previous Government involvement in the running of disability sport in Canada, so the provision of nearly half a million dollars by the Federal Government not only provided the opportunity to better organise and support disability sport, but also provided it with a kind of legitimacy in terms of government and public support that had previously been absent. A Coordinating Committee comprising the Canadian Blind Sports Association, the Canadian Amputee Sports Association, the Canadian Association of Disabled Skiing and the CWSA was set up in order to most effectively use the money in taking disability sport in Canada forward. This Co-ordinating Committee would eventually become the Canadian Paralympic Committee (CPC);(CPC Website, 2009).

### **Success of multi-disability games**

Despite the few organisational difficulties outlined earlier the multi-disability

nature of the Games was declared a huge success. The Games brought athletes with a variety of physical disabilities together in the spirit of sport and fraternity and showed the people of Canada, if not the world, what they were really capable of achieving if given the opportunity. Finally, they helped pave the way for the Paralympic Games to become the sporting mega-event that it is today, with the successful incorporation of further disability groups into the Games including athletes with cerebral palsy in 1980, athletes in the Les Autres group in 1984 and athletes with an intellectual disability in 1992.

### **Conclusions**

Prior to 1976 the Paralympic Games were small, only attended by athletes in wheelchairs and relatively unknown and unheard of outside of the disabled community. Therefore, they were almost untouched by the kind of nationalist agenda and economic politics that plagued the Olympic Games. The Paralympic Games were all but ignored by the outside world. However, in 1976 events such as the Soweto riots, the New Zealand rugby tour of South

THE TORONTO OLYMPIAD FOR THE PHYSICALLY DISABLED

42

Africa, the African boycott of the Montreal Olympics combined with the fact that the Paralympics were to be a much larger multi-disability event for the first time and were to be held in Canada, whose Federal Government had co-sponsored a UN resolution against apartheid in November 1975, suddenly focused the world media spotlight upon the movement in a way never before encountered. Unfortunately, once the issue of South Africa's participation in international disability sport became an issue of media attention it became impossible to go back to the way things had been prior to the Toronto Games. In fact at one point Dr. Robert Jackson, Chairman of the Games organising committee in Toronto claimed the Games 'were a victim of worldwide media and had become a political pawn'. In the case of some of the countries that forced their athletes to withdraw from the 'Torontolympiad' this may well be true, but in terms of the media coverage the positive approach they took had a huge impact upon the outcome of the Games. The combination of the South African team's participation in the Games, the Canadian Federal Government's response to it and the positive media response to the Games impacted not only upon the success of the 'Torontolympiad', but also the future of disability sport in Canada and the future of the Paralympic Games themselves. Despite a rocky and uncertain build up to the Games the legacy that they left can still be seen today in the organisational structures of disability sport and the government and public support they still receive. It can also be seen in the success of the Paralympic Games today, which has almost trebled in size since the 'Torontolympiad' and has proceeded to become the second largest multi-sport event in the world after the Olympic Games.

### **Notes**

1. Apartheid is an Afrikaans word meaning 'apartness'. It came about at a time when imperial rule was receding and enforcement of segregation was being relaxed. However, South Africa went against the world trend by strengthening barriers between blacks and whites and attempting to rationalise it in terms of ideas about racial purity (Cashmore; 1996). Whalley-Hammell (2006) claims that the function of this ideology was to preserve, protect and perpetuate minority white power and that ideology and power, in combination, served to maintain power and dominance with such effectiveness that the white minority group wielded the majority of power and the statistical majority was accorded minority status. Laws were often enforced through police brutality, thus using fear as a means of ensuring compliance. Where there was any form of attempt to protest or challenge the status quo it would often end up with the protesters being seriously injured or in certain cases with large numbers of protesters losing their lives such as in Sharpeville (1960) and Soweto (1976).

2. Readers wanting a more detailed account are recommended to consult Greig (2005) and Brittain (2011).

43

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THE TORONTO OLYMPIAD FOR THE PHYSICALLY DISABLED  
44

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