

THE VIII WINTER PARALYMPIC GAMES

Winter Paralympic History

The Winter Paralympic Games have a much shorter history than those of the summer version with which many readers will be familiar. But as with the whole Paralympic movement the growth in participation, both in terms of the numbers of athletes and the quality of the performances has been and continues to be meteoric, as the table shows.

The number of participating countries has more than doubled in 25 years. Those early Games only offered events in alpine and cross-country disciplines. In recent Games the sports of biathlon and sledge-hockey have been added to the programme. During the 1976 Games and those immediately following, the competitor numbers included a wide range of participants. This phenomenon was not uncommon even in the early Olympic Games when men and women took part in many 'recreational' sports. So too in those early Paralympic Winter events there were those who took part just for the 'fun of it'. Today the story is different with very demanding technical

by Tony Sainsbury*



courses requiring a level of skill well beyond the 'holiday skier'. For a short period, ice sledge racing was included but a shortage of long course venues throughout the world has severely restricted the growth of this sport. Trials are currently being undertaken with a short course version and other new winter events for athletes with a disability such as curling which may be considered for future Games.

As for the different organisational models, the Sydney Paralympic Organising Committee (SPOC) on the one hand was a con-joined organisation with SOCOG with its

own Board and money separates functional areas, SLOC on the other hand is a single Organising Committee for both Games in Salt Lake City. Even the phrase 'joint organising committee' would be misleading for this very special organisational model as there are very few separate functional systems. Rather the chosen model of SLOC is based on an integrated approach across the Games viewed as one event - Olympic and Paralympics. It required therefore a very experienced individual to understand the dynamics of these different models and the Olympic/Paralympic interface. Therefore when the Paralympic 'expert of experts' Xavier Gonzales, "Xavi", following his role in Barcelona in 1992 and Atlanta in 1996, had completed his work as Director of Sport and Operations in Sydney he was quickly hired by SLOC 2002 to manage the strategic planning and coordinate the operational delivery of these VIII Winter Paralympic Games in Salt Lake City.

Athlete Categories and Classification

The sports and disciplines featured on the programme are offered to the athletes of the member nations of the International Paralympic Committee. These athletes come from the population with physical disabilities and visual impairments: therefore at these Games there will be no events for athletes who have hearing impairments or intellectual disability. Each sport has a system to evaluate the functional potential of each athlete and place him/her in the appropriate category. Therefore there will

Year	Venue	NPCs ¹	Participants ²
1976	Ornskoldsvik, Sweden	15	314
1980	Geilo, Norway	18	600
1984	Innsbruck, Austria	22	775
1988	Innsbruck, Austria	22	724
1992	Tignes, France	24	727
1994	Lillehammer, Norway	31	993
1998	Nagano, Japan	32	1065



be no single gold medal for the winner of the Men's Super G but a number of gold medals for this discipline depending on the categories represented. If a category has an 'entry by number' that is below a specified threshold then colocated categories are combined and a factor built into the system to ensure that the more severely disabled participants in such a combined event are not disadvantaged. This is the case in both alpine and cross country events.

To the casual observer some skiers in the same category, when not competing, will appear vastly different in terms of physical characteristics. But as with all Paralympic sports when placed in the correct category they have in fact the same physical potential to perform the sport even though they may have those differing disability characteristics.

Of course such systems in sport are easily recognisable. They are designed in a similar way to those that govern separate gender, age or weight categories in Olympic and other sports following principles of fairness and equity of competition. The SLOC team, ably led by Mitt Romney, the President and CEO, held very successful test events in the Alpine and cross-country disciplines in March of this year where many of next year's competitors took advantage not only to test themselves and the facilities but 'to

check out' the opposition at the same time.

Alpine

In the alpine events there will be a variety of different approaches to negotiating the Paralympic runs of Snowbasin. Some competitors will use a sit-ski: basically a body-form seat (as in the driver's cockpit seats in Formula 1) with suspension on a single ski using ski-sticks with outriggers (i.e. a small ski attached to the bottom of the ski stick). There will be other participants who have one or more limbs missing and will traverse the course using a variety of combinations of skis and poles. For exam-



Peter Hemingway

ple a single leg amputee will probably use a single ski with the outrigger system on their sticks: there will be others who will use no ski sticks at all. Visually impaired skiers will either 'go it alone' if their impairment is minimal, whereas others will use a guide to give them verbal instructions on the way down as to the terrain and the time to turn, etc.

These competitors have my greatest admiration. To see a totally blind skier come down a Paralympic course only responding to the commands of another is 'awesome'. Sometimes the guide is so much a part of this duo and hyped up with adrenalin from the run that in looking at the scoreboard as they cross the line, s/he forgets to tell their partner to stop with imaginable consequences!

Cross Country

The cross-country events of Nordic skiing have to be regarded as among the toughest of any sport. The same range of skiers with disabilities as in alpine can be observed here. However it is the sit-skiers who use a seat with two skis underneath and short ski poles to propel themselves around the tracks who have my admiration here. To perform in this sport standing up is tough, but to do so only using one's arms (or a single arm) is phenomenal. The tracks at Soldier Hollow are located in the most beautiful of settings. The ability of the spectators to see the competitors progress around the courses must make this Olympic/Paralympic venue one of the most 'sport fan friendly' anywhere in the world.

Biathlon

As usual the biathlon course is located near the finish. I think the biathletes with visual impairments will attract particular attention or maybe it is just the rifle they will use for their



Ice Sledge Hockey

sport. In recent years shooting and blind athletes has ceased to be the subject of any universal joke (!) but a genuine sport using the sense of hearing to compensate for the lack of sight.

In this discipline a laser sensor sight is mounted on the rifle. The target instead of being the normal white outer going to black inner is designed conversely with a black outer and white inner. As the gun tracks across the target the laser sends a high pitched sound to ear-phones placed on the athlete as he drops onto the shooting mat. The competitor must judge when the sonic acquisition is optimal before firing.

This combined event of cross-country

skiing and shooting commands the same level of concentration and fitness whether performed by Olympic or Paralympic athletes. The only concession for biathletes with a visual impairment is that they do not carry the rifle around the course with them because of the time it would take in setting up this piece of very high tech equipment.

Ice Sledge Hockey

Only in the ice sledge hockey will there be a single set of medals - gold, silver and bronze as the six best teams fight it out for the title of Paralympic champion. In late October, the qualification for the final place next year has just taken place in Bremen, Germany with Estonia

emerging victorious. The other five places will be taken by Sweden, Norway, Canada, the United States and Japan are qualified.

For those who love the regular sport of ice hockey with its 'push and rush' and 'crash and bash', the sport of ice sledge hockey contains the same ingredients: it's just happening about 15 centimetres above the ice! The competitors use a two blade sledge instead of skates in which they sit. They propel themselves and the puck with a short version hockey stick with a point on the end. The rules are quite clear about how the 'spiked-end' should be used, but you know hockey players!! SLOC in preparation for this Paralympic event has already held a very successful

test event, namely the IPC World Championships in 1999.

Games infrastructure

It is not only in sports planning that SLOC has paid particular attention to Paralympic details but also in all

best Games ever': Salt Lake is well on-track for a similar accolade.

If one chooses just a couple of examples then one can understand why this is not some vain hope. The numbers of volunteers signing up are above the expectation of the

ager in Atlanta in 1996) and Tony Gorino and Village staff is outstanding. Their attention to detail and understanding of the needs and characteristics of elite athletes with a disability has guaranteed that nothing has been overlooked. They are



English biathlete Peter Young

the other important aspects of Games infrastructure. Many commentators and athletes too maintain that the defining success of a Games is often to be found in these infrastructure elements - transport, volunteers, village, ceremony arrangements, catering, security, etc. If any proof was needed for such an assertion then Sydney must be the most recent evidence of this marriage of outstanding sport and excellent support services - the perfect ingredients for the title of *'the*

Organising Committee and in my opinion, having attended some NPC training sessions are as committed as any I have witnessed. In addition I have never seen so many of them with so many languages: NOCs and NPCs alike will be delighted that communication problems should be minimal thanks to this special characteristic of the volunteer workforce in Utah.

In terms of the Olympic/Paralympic Village the work and commitment of Richard Tyler, (Village General Man-

particularly sensitive to the crucial interface between the two Games, the time of transition and the need to avoid duplication in the interests of economy.

This does not mean they have not had some interesting challenges. The decision to use the officers' houses of the old Fort complex as part of the International zone is particularly imaginative: this area will be the focal point for retail and information services. This is but one example along with many others as evi-

dence of a very solid partnership between SLOC, the University of Utah and both State and Federal Governments.

As a consequence of these relationships, there will be a rich legacy from the new University housing built for the Games: housing that meets the requirements of the USA's ADA legislation (3) and which will result in increased opportunities for residential, higher education for students with a disability in the State of Utah. The problem with examples no matter how deserving is that they ignore the hundreds of other similarly dedicated staff in SLOC.

Conclusion

Finally, the earlier part of this piece referred to different Paralympic Games organisational models. During the Sydney Paralympics and then later in June 2001 at the IOC headquarters in Lausanne, the IOC and IPC signed agreements of understanding and cooperation for the future. The second agreement which shall be in effect from the 2008 and 2010 Paralympic Games, addresses the general scope and organisation of the Paralympic Games, with the aim of creating similar principles for the organisation of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. It seems that the choice has been made to favour the SLOC model of a totally integrated approach, where functional structures cover all aspects of both Olympic and Paralympic preparations.

There is a view that while this model is ideal for a Winter Games because the Paralympic numbers are smaller and the event structure less complex than when it comes to Summer Games it may be that the model tried and tested in Sydney may prove to be the most effective. This conundrum is for another day.

Note:

⁽¹⁾ *NPCs = National Paralympic Committees*

⁽²⁾ *Participants = athletes and their support staff*

⁽³⁾ *ADA Legislation. This Act reinforces in law the rights of people with disabilities to a barrier-free life in terms of architecture, access to services, etc.*

* Chef de Mission for five British Summer Paralympic teams; Consultant for SPOC; Duty Manager at the Sydney Olympic/Paralympic Village, from January 1999; Consultant in the NOC/NPC Services Division at SLOC since March 2001.

The VIII Paralympic Winter Games will be held from **7-16 March 2002**.

Emblem: The SLOC Paralympic emblem represents the totality of the elite athlete and was first shown at the Nagano Paralympic Winter Games in March 1998. The IPC motto - Mind, Body Spirit - was the inspiration for the SLOC Paralympic emblem. The emblem includes a flowing graphic of three distinct marks: a sphere near the top, representing the global unity of the Paralympic movement; and two broad, fluid lines below representing the elite athlete in motion. Beneath the athlete is the IPC Emblem which consists of three tae-geuks (blue, red and green marks) that symbolize the most significant components of the human being, again, mind, body and spirit.

Mascot: On 29 March 2000, SLOC introduced Otto the Otter as the official mascot of the 2002 Paralympic Games. As a symbol for the elite Paralympic athlete, Otto embodies vitality, agility and nature's whimsical spirit.

Paralympic Village: The 2002 Paralympic Village is located on the Uni-

versity of Utah campus in Salt Lake City. Most of the 45-acre compound will be within the historic Fort Douglas area. The Village will open on 1 March 2002.

Participants: About 1,100 athletes and officials from as many as 40 countries are expected to participate in three sports i.e. in 25 medals events.

Tickets: SLOC estimates more than 325,000 tickets will be available for sale.

Venues: Three competition venues include the E Centre in West Valley City; Snowbasin Ski Area near Ogden; and Soldier Hollow in Wasatch Mountain State Park. All Paralympic venues are less than a 60-minute drive from the Paralympic Village and Main Press Centre.

Ceremonies: The Paralympic Opening Ceremony will take place on the University of Utah campus at Rice-Eccles Stadium, while the Closing Ceremony will be held at the Utah Olympic Oval.

Volunteers: An estimated 6,000 volunteers.