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Paralympics and veterans

Sports and recreation are essential components of medical rehabilitation. Through these, people with disability learn to adjust to a new self-image; build strength, stamina, and coordination; and learn adaptive skills that help them throughout their life. Sports are also an important means for helping society at large learn about disability and removing some of the stigma associated with having a disability.

The pinnacle of many adaptive sports is the Paralympic Games. The Paralympic Games have their origin both in medical rehabilitation and in association with veterans. Although the first Paralympic Games are credited with being held in Rome in 1960, their early beginnings start in 1948 [1]. Shortly after the end of World War II, Sir Ludwig Guttmann recognized the need to provide sport and recreation outlets for the cadre of wounded, injured, or ill British soldiers under his care at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Aylesbury, England [2]. In 1948, he organized the first Stoke Mandeville Games (SMG), and the participants were patients at the hospital. Most of them had incurred spinal cord injuries during the war. The SMG were very popular among the staff and participants, and news spread quickly to continental Europe. In 1952, the first International SMG was held with several more participating countries [2].

Simultaneously, restless American veterans receiving care in Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals were developing wheelchair basketball. Around the time that the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) was formed in 1946, wheelchair basketball also began to grow as a sport [3]. Since its origin, the PVA has supported sports and recreation as important modalities for the health and well-being of its members and all veterans with disabilities. In 1960, 400 athletes from 23 countries around the world started a truly international Olympic-style competition [1].

The Paralympic Games continue to grow and evolve. The numbers of athletes and the types of disabilities have expanded to become more inclusive. In 1976, the Paralympic Games family included individuals with major limb amputations and those with visual impairments [2]. Expanding populations also increased the number of sports. In 1980, athletes with cerebral palsy were invited to participate in the Paralympic Games [2]. The 1984 Paralympic Games were held in both New York City, New York, and at Stoke Mandeville Hospital. This was because of fund raising and organizational challenges that caused an organizational and financial rift between the organizing committees. This set back the Paralympic Games movement and sounded an alarm for change. That change took place when the International Coordinating Committee for World Sports Organizations for the Disabled (ICCWSOD) officially formed the Paralympic Games and retroactively included events back to 1960 [2]. The Paralympic Games were established

to parallel the Olympic Games, and from 1988 forward, the Paralympic Games and Olympic Games have been held in the same city in the same year, sharing many of the same venues [1]. In 1989, the ICCWSOD was retired and the International Paralympic Committee was established with 160 member countries headquartered in Bonn, Germany [1].

The Paralympic movement is greater than the Paralympic Games. The motto for the Paralympics is “Spirit in Motion” [1]. The following driving principles of the Paralympics demonstrate that the movement extends beyond sports and seeks to achieve equality and independence for all people with disability around the globe [1]:

- “Transcendence: Courage and achievements of the athletes participating to go beyond their limitations.
- “Equality: Both a statement of fact and an aspiration, encouraging people with disabilities and of different cultures to be viewed as equal.
- “Integration: Reflects the pursuit of providing equal access to all.”

The Paralympic movement has paralleled the disability rights movements, and both have contributed greatly toward creating opportunities for people with disability and changing societal perceptions. For example, in the early 1980s, inventive wheelchair athletes began to create the racing wheelchair as a unique piece of sports equipment. Before this time, racing wheelchairs were modified everyday wheelchairs. After specially designed racing wheelchairs revolutionized the sport, athlete times dropped rapidly and nearly every competition resulted in new records. When the 1984 Paralympic Games arrived, wheelchair racers were faster than runners at distances greater than 1,500 m [4]. The world’s top athletes converged in Los Angeles, California, including 16 wheelchairs racers. Eight women competed in an exhibition 800 m wheelchair race, and eight men competed in an exhibition 1,500 m wheelchair race. Sharon Hedrick (United States) won the 800 m, and Paul Van Winkel (Belgium) won the 1,500 m on a world event broadcast around the globe [2].

Veterans have also long been an important aspect of the Paralympic movement. Veterans were the first participants and have competed in every

Paralympic Games. The United Nations declared 1981 the “International Year of the Disabled.” That same year, the VA created the National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG). The first NVWG were held in Richmond, Virginia. Through the collaboration of the VA and PVA, the NVWG have grown to nearly 600 athletes from the United States, Puerto Rico, and Great Britain, becoming an integral part of the rehabilitation and reintegration programs for the VA [4]. Although the NVWG are designed as a rehabilitative sports program for veterans of all ages who use wheelchairs, the NVWG have also been the launching point for the athletic careers of many Paralympians. Some of these Paralympians return to the NVWG each year to coach and inspire other veterans to excel. Similarly, the VA started the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic (NDVWSC) in 1987 [5]. In collaboration with the Disabled American Veterans, the NDVWSC has grown to nearly 400 athletes per year. Although the NDVWSC is noncompetitive, many winter Paralympians have participated in the NDVWSC and some received their first skiing lessons there.

The participation of U.S. military veterans in the Paralympic Games began to wane in the 1990s and 2000s, largely because of the aging of Vietnam war era veterans and decline of wounded, injured, and ill veterans. Since Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, more wounded, injured, and ill veterans are searching for more demanding activities to test themselves and to challenge the perceptions held of the potential for this generation of war veterans. This resulted in a growing interest in the Paralympic Games and the creation of the Paralympic Military and Veteran Sports Program (PMVSP), a collaboration of the VA, Department of Defense (DOD), and U.S. Paralympics. The PMVSP offers sport and recreation activities at many military bases and several VA medical centers and helps talented veteran athletes pursue their dreams of competing in the Paralympic Games. It requires extreme dedication, discipline, talent, and training to qualify for the Paralympic Games team. Participation by U.S. veterans in the 2008 Summer Paralympics (Beijing, China), and the 2010 Winter Paralympics (Vancouver, Canada) was under 10 percent, but we are optimistic

for greater numbers in the future. One means for accomplishing this is the “Warrior Games,” organized by the DOD and U.S. Paralympics as an interservice Paralympic Games-style event. The VA and DOD have created programs to support talented veteran athletes competing in international competitions. Wounded and injured servicemembers eligible for continuation on Active Duty or Active Reserve may qualify for their service’s branch of elite athlete programs. The VA also has a program that provides veterans who are elite athletes and members or potential members of a Paralympic team with a stipend to support their participation.

The NVWG, NDVWSC, and Warrior Games offer U.S. military veterans opportunities to develop their skills, develop positive perception of self, and strive toward achieving their athletic and life goals. Some will springboard from these events to the Paralympic Games, but all veterans will have changed from the experience.

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This article and any supplementary material should be cited as follows:

Cooper RA, Nowak CJ. Paralympics and veterans. *J Rehabil Res Dev.* 2011;48(10):xi–xiv.
DOI:10.1682/JRRD.2011.11.0209



