

## **Promoting the Health and Human Rights of Individuals with a Disability through the Paralympic Movement**

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Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the United Nations and other large peacekeeping organizations have promoted an agenda of “Sport for Development,” that is, using sport as a cost-effective tool to stimulate international development and promote human rights within developing nations. In addition, sports and recreation have been proven to have a positive health impact on athletes by increasing physical activity and mitigating the effects of many chronic health problems. The Paralympic Movement is attempting to harness the potential of these positive impacts and provide both grassroots and elite sporting opportunities to individuals with a disability worldwide. This paper has been developed to outline the ways in which Paralympic sport can promote the concepts of health and human rights for athletes with a disability. It can provide coaches, government leaders, and potential funders with the tools needed to understand how the Paralympic Movement, in a unique and extremely effective fashion, can positively impact their target populations. In addition, it can be used to advocate for increased adaptive sport programming in all nations, regardless of level of development.



## HOW THIS DOCUMENT CAN BE USED

1. Members of National Paralympic Committees (NPCs) and other Paralympic Representatives can advocate for increased support for Paralympic programmes. This document can show potential donors and government leaders that access to sport is a right for all citizens, including those with a disability\*. In addition, it can tell the story of how access to Paralympic Programmes can lead to the economic and social development of a nation.
2. Athletes can become aware of the “bigger picture” surrounding the Paralympic Movement and how it is attempting to promote disability rights worldwide. They can use this information to promote both themselves and their peers with a disability who want to become involved in sport.

\* It should be noted that, throughout this paper, the phrase “with a disability” is used to describe individuals, athletes, groups of a national citizenry, and others who have unique physical attributes which traditionally place them within the minority group served by the Paralympic Movement. Realizing that this term often implies that one is at a physical or social deficit, neither the author nor the International Paralympic Committee wish for this implication to be associated with the term. We ask the audience to realize that the international norm of today is to use the phrase “with a disability” in a free and non-condescending manner.



## PROMOTING HEALTH AS A HUMAN RIGHT

*The International Paralympic Committee, the United Nations, and other International Organizations*

*“The Paralympic Games are a powerful demonstration of the vitality and achievements of disabled persons world-wide...” -Kofi Annan, United Nations Secretary General (letter dated 7 September 2004)*

The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) is the international governing body of sports for athletes with a disability. The IPC supervises and coordinates the organization of the Paralympic Summer and Winter Games and other multi-disability competitions on elite sport level, of which the most important are world and regional championships for the 13 IPC sports (for which the IPC functions as the International Federation). The IPC also develops sporting opportunities around the world for athletes of all levels; from grassroots to elite. In March of 2003 it approved a new vision statement: “To enable Paralympic athletes to achieve sporting excellence and inspire and excite the world.” In short, the IPC aims to create worldwide opportunities for athlete empowerment through self-determination. (Vision and Mission 2004)\* In addition to this expected mission, the IPC has recently increased its focus on development and continues to advocate for disability rights globally. (International Paralympic Committee 2003)

It is now widely accepted that participation in sports, as a means of providing consistent physical activity and training, can lead to improved physical and mental health for participants. Paralympic sport, by providing the opportunity for individuals with a disability to become amateur or elite athletes, has the potential to fulfil this role for an often-underserved stratum of society. Everyone has the right to be healthy and to access basic opportunities to participate in physical fitness and exercise. Regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religious preference, sexual orientation *or disability*, health is a human right. The Paralympic Movement has the ability to easily and proactively promote this agenda.

In addition to the IPC, many other international organizations have taken on the cause of promoting the right to health. For over 50 years, the focus on physical activity and sport as a means of achieving health for individuals with a disability has grown in the global discourse surrounding health and human rights.

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\* References available upon request

- Beginning in 1948, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and that all persons have the right to “a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family.” (United Nations) In the same year, the World Health Organization declared in its Constitution “the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being.” (World Health Organization)
- Thirty years later, in 1978, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) stated in its International Charter of Physical Education and Sport that every person is entitled to participate in sport, including especially women, young people, the elderly and those with a disability. (UNESCO)
- In 1993, the U.N. Standard Rules on the Equalization of Persons with Disabilities (Rule 11) was developed to encourage sports organizations to develop opportunities for individuals with a disability to participate at a level equal in quantity and quality as the population of persons without a disability. (United Nations)
- The UN has now established an Ad-Hoc Committee that is currently drafting the International Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities. Article 21 of this Convention states that “All persons with disabilities have the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health without discrimination on the basis of disability.” (Landmine Survivors Network 66) In addition, Article 24 outlines the right to “Participation in Sport, Recreation, and Leisure” and specifically notes that all individuals with disabilities should have equal access to sporting opportunities and facilities. (Landmine Survivors Network 77)

By integrating the two international ideals of the right to health and sport for development, the Paralympic Movement can gracefully and efficiently move this agenda forward.

*“The Paralympics are one of the world’s most prominent events where people with disabilities show their tremendous talent and energy. We take this opportunity to admire the skill and determination of these athletes, but at the same time we must reflect upon the fact that globally, too many people with disabilities do not enjoy even the most basic human right.” -Dr. Etienne Krug, Director of the WHO Department of Injuries and Violence Prevention, International Paralympic Symposium on Disability Rights*

## I. PROMOTING HEALTH THROUGH PARALYMPIC SPORT

### *Participation in Sport Improves Physical and Mental Health Outcomes*

The benefits of participating in organized sport versus simply being “active” have been shown to have unique impacts beyond that of physical conditioning. Organized sport fosters positive socializing influences such as interactions with teachers and coaches, and the requirements of team membership may establish constructive incentives for both youth and adults. In addition, the necessary time commitment of organized sport may divert people, especially youth, from negative influences. (Jones-Palm & Palm 2004)

For individuals with a disability, the physical and societal barriers to participating in physical activity and sport are often difficult to overcome. One recent survey showed that 56% of people with a disability reported participating in no daily exercise, versus 36% of people without a disability. (Rimmer 2004) Discrimination and lack of access in several key areas have been shown to discourage individuals with a disability from participating in physical activity and sport. A number of studies show that, within developed countries, some of these include:

- Inaccessibility of sport facilities and equipment (i.e. front entrances of buildings, shower and bathroom areas, adaptive exercise equipment) (Rimmer 2004) (Tregaskis 2003)
- Cost of participating in sport activities (Rimmer 2004)
- Lack of adequate and knowledgeable coaching (Sherrill & Williams, 1996)
- Negative attitudes and behaviour of persons without a disability who may work in sport facilities or instruct physical education (Rimmer 2004) (Leiberman 2002) (Grimes & French 1987)

For individuals with a disability living in less developed nations, these barriers to participation in physical activity and sport may become even more inhibitory. Although similar areas are identified as being problematic, the societal stigma and less progressive nature with which potential athletes are treated creates an even harder road to success. In many cases coaches are non-existent, and the cost of quality equipment such as prosthetics or sports wheelchairs is unreasonable. (Crawford 2003)

*“We don’t have a sufficient amount of facilities, keep in mind that what we are using is for the able bodied. There is no single facility [that can be used] by the disabled people all the time. We have to come to the able-bodied and request from athletes to give us a few hours so that we can train in their facilities.” –Marcus, Table Tennis coach, Kenya*

Paralympic sport, by providing sport opportunities for individuals with a disability, has infinite potential to promote a positive image of disability and improve health throughout all regions of the world. In a recreational environment, athletes with a disability can find strength and companionship in sport, thus increasing the chances of compliance to a wellness plan that includes physical activity as a form of preventative medicine. In a competitive arena, athletes with a disability can benefit from achieving superb physical fitness and, mentally, from gaining the identity of “athlete.” When care is taken in promoting the Paralympic Movement and providing both developmental and elite opportunities, health benefits can be attainable for all.

- Athletes can decrease the risk of obesity and all secondary health concerns associated with obesity. These include but are not limited to: diabetes, stroke, cancer, osteoarthritis, and respiratory distress. (Kumar 261) Currently, many studies have shown increased rates of obesity in individuals with a disability. For example, children with spinal cord injury have been shown to have an increased risk of obesity due to the decreasing resting metabolic rates and muscle mass that often result from living a sedentary lifestyle. (Liusuwan 2004)
- Athletes can be more aware of their health and therefore more likely to participate in health maintenance and preventative health practices. This includes paying attention to personal hygiene, nutrition, and making positive behavioural health decisions such as avoiding smoking and excessive alcohol consumption. (Rimmer 1999)
- Athletes, specifically those who acquire injury later in life, can regain the greatest amount of functional mobility that is possible for their type of impairment. Muscle strength, dexterity, and coordination will be maintained at a pre-injury level or will improve concurrently with athletic training. Research has shown that a sedentary lifestyle and low fitness make movement with a wheelchair much more difficult. (Pate 1995) Mobility becomes easier with physical fitness. Another study showed that for an experimental group of subjects with spinal cord injury, an aerobic and strength training program undertaken for 9 months improved not only maximal power output and strength, but also showed positive improvements in stress, pain, and depression. (Hicks 2003).
- Athletes can gain confidence, self-esteem, and identity through participation in sport. This will result in a more positive self-image and lead to a decreased risk of depression and other mental health

illnesses. Studies have shown that physical inactivity is a leading factor in the deteriorating physical and psychological health of individuals with a physical disability. (Coyle 1995 & Santiago 1993) In addition, it has been shown that for individuals with an acquired mobility disability, members of an “active” experimental group evaluated their physical appearance and health more highly than in comparison to a “non active” group with similar disabilities, and were also more concerned with their fitness. (Yuen 2002)

*“Wheelchair racing has improved me physically in my upper body strength and mentally it has really enriched my life because I now have the confidence to address large groups of people. Just recently I have been invited into a local school to do a morning assembly and spoke to 200 kids about how I train myself and about my personal achievements. I could never have done that before. It has also improved my self esteem....” -Anne Olympia, Wheelchair Racing, Kenya*





## II. THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RATIONALE FOR PARALYMPIC PROGRAMMES:

*Improving the Health of Entire Populations and Investing in Human Capital*

If we see sport as a tool for economic development, then it is undeniable that healthy individuals with a disability will be able to use their improved health status, along with the life lessons learned through sport, to contribute to the economic and social growth of their nation. As the disability community is the largest minority group in the world, it is easy to see the enormous potential that people with a disability have to contribute to their nations while reciprocally gaining the respect and dignity they are entitled. Approximately 10-15% of all human beings have a disability, representing 600 million people worldwide. (Sibilski 2000) In the European Union, a region considered to be quite industrialized and progressive in terms of social policy, still only 26% of individuals with a self-perceived “severe disability” earn an income, compared to 64% of the able-bodied population. 48% of these individuals report living on disability benefits. (European Commission 2001) Globally, it is estimated that the annual loss of GDP due to having so many people with a disability out of work is between US\$ 1.37 trillion and 1.94 trillion. (Metts 2000)

Sports can give these citizens the physical and mental skills they need to seek and maintain employment, which increases productivity and causes a ripple effect of decreasing social welfare costs. In addition, a healthier population reduces the nation-wide burden on a public healthcare system. In the United States, it was found that for every \$1 spent on physical activity, \$3.20 is saved in medical costs. (Pratt 2000)

“No country can afford to turn its back on ten percent of its population.”  
-ILO/UNESCO/UNICEF/WHO Proclamation of December 3, 1997

In addition, Paralympic sport has the unique ability to quickly and effectively impact the social and environmental framework that surrounds all individuals with a disability. In as much as physical activity and sport can improve the physical and mental health of the athlete, the surrounding social fabric must also respond and be willing to embrace the changes that are made possible through athlete empowerment. Indeed, *disability is a perceived state*. It is defined by the physical environment and social perceptions that surround an individual. How can the Paralympic Movement be the lever for change on all of these levels?

### a) Social Perceptions

Paralympic sport gives the public exciting images that instantaneously redefine disability. Outdated adjectives such as “impaired” and “handicapped,” are replaced with “strong” and “capable.” This direct impact is achieved through direct spectatorship of the Paralympic Games themselves as well as

World and Regional-level events. The Paralympic Movement has the power to secure media opportunities and engage thousands in simultaneous viewership. Though this, disability is very quickly turned into ability in the eyes of entire societies. A perceived disability disappears as the social perceptions surrounding an individual become accepting, inclusive, and motivating. Over 300 million viewers watched the Sydney 2000 Paralympic Games.

b) Environmental Change

Paralympic sport can change the **physical environment**. The legacy of the Paralympic Games themselves promote accessible infrastructures through both direct action (accessible transportation, communications, housing, etc.) and legislative change. In areas outside of the direct reach of the Games, National and Regional Paralympic Committees create direct impact by ensuring the creation of assessable training locations for their athletes, and advocating for accessibility in educational and employment opportunities

c) Individual Athlete Empowerment

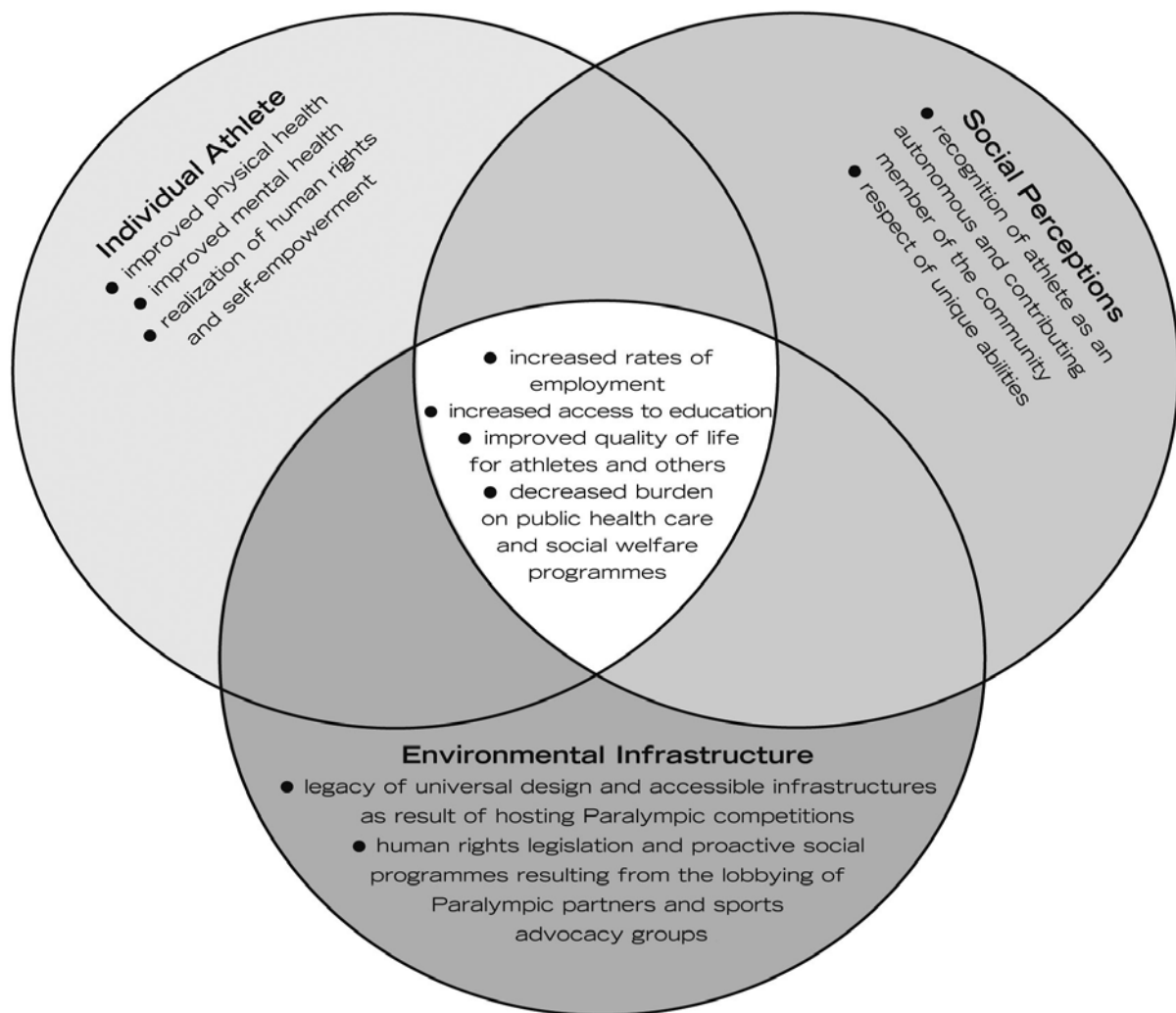
These broad-based impacts must occur in order to create opportunities and empowerment for the ultimate beneficiary of the Paralympic Movement: the athlete. For individuals with a disability, the opportunity to identify with this movement is a simple and quick way to gain an identity and take pride in being a healthy, active, and socially engaged. Getting involved in sport starts a positive cascade of events.

Initial participation in sport leads to an individual attaining better health. He/she is obtaining the physical life skills needed to keep up with a fast-paced society. In addition, through finding and overcoming the challenges met when learning a sport, the athlete also learns mental life skills such as confidence and perseverance. These lessons may at first seem abstract, although they will quickly translate into other areas of life. An athlete with a spinal cord injury may learn to transfer in and out of cars and can go up and down curbs, or an athlete with a visual impairment can learn to navigate the streets that lead into town.

As these skills are acquired, the athlete begins to see the potential for success in all areas of life. He/she is able to attend school and seek education. The athlete has gained the skills needed to become physically mobile and transfer out of the home and into the school environment. The mental attributes of confidence and determination have also been built through sport and allow the individual to take this first step. In many nations, the athlete will see

the example that has been set by other successful individuals with disabilities, and the success of their peers will become motivating rather than intimidating.

Please see the following chart as a pictorial representation of this concept. The three larger rings represent our three primary areas of impact as have just been outlined: individual athlete, social perceptions, and environmental infrastructure. When these three areas of impact are simultaneously effected, as can be achieved through the Paralympic Movement, then the results presented in the overlapping region can be achieved.



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*“Participating in sports not only benefited me in terms of my physical health, but it helped me develop life skills that enabled me to embark on the path to*



*becoming a successful attorney, author and public speaker.” - Linda Mastandrea, Wheelchair Racer, United States*

*"Sports for us are very important [because] you see it has helped me to perform my daily activities very easily. I used to be very nervous to do anything, but since I'm playing [tennis], I am doing everything without nervousness. It has helped me for mobility in spite of no mobility infrastructure in Nepal." -Deepak K.C., Wheelchair Tennis, Nepal*

Although these concepts may seem abstract, in many nations the potential for sports programmes to lead to sustainable development is being discovered.

- Beginning in 1992, the government of Poland has implemented a “Quota-Levy-Incentive” System, which establishes employment quotas for companies regarding the hiring of individuals with a disability. Businesses that do not adhere to government regulations are fined and money is directed into the Polish State Fund for People with Disabilities. This Fund is then used to finance and direct proactive programmes that serve citizens with a disability and promote a progressive model of development. Under this program, 106 athletes and 44 support staff were funded to attend the ATHENS 2004 Paralympic Games and an extensive media broadcast was produced that allowed able-bodied Polish citizens to follow the success of their athletes. In addition, the number of employees with a disability within Poland has increased from 80,721 in 1992 to 174,000 in 1998. The unemployment rate for citizens with a disability is consistently equal to that of citizens without a disability. (Sibilski 2000)
- The National Paralympic Committee in Pakistan partnered with The World Bank and other national corporations in their nation to create an annual art and music expose which will serve to raise funds for Paralympic programmes. The event raises awareness about the opportunities for athletes with a disability in Pakistan, while also professionally bringing business and public interests together to create sustainable support for the programme.
- In Iran in 2003, nearly 3,000 persons with a disability, 1,500 of which were girls and women, were introduced to Paralympic sport through the planning and implementation of “Paralympic Day.” A nation-wide festival, this annual event brought potential athletes from around the country to Tehran, where they were able to try several Paralympic sports and learn about physical fitness, nutrition, and preventative health practices. Expenses were covered by the government of Iran, several municipalities, and private donors.
- In the United States, The Hartford Insurance Company has become a major donor to the U.S. Paralympic Team and has incorporated an athlete incentive programme into their sponsorship. Within this



programme, athletes can make appearances for The Hartford and receive income in turn for promoting the company's "Ability Philosophy." Because The Hartford is a leading supplier of disability insurance to large employers across the United States, this programme creates incentives for injured or chronically ill employees to return to work and become inspired by athletes with a disability.

Although the Paralympic Movement has made great strides to spread this message into developing areas of the world, more programs are needed to give persons with a disability the opportunities to determine their own course in life. Sport teaches values. Sport gives all people, regardless of physical ability, the opportunity to see the best within themselves. When one sees photos of Paralympic athletes competing for gold, regardless of sport or level of disability, it is easy to see the drive and passion in their eyes. It is undoubtable that this passion will then translate into advocacy with educational and career endeavours. Sport, as you can see, promotes success in all areas of life.



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