

Athlete First: A History of the Paralympic Movement

Review Number:

684

Publish date:

Friday, 1 August, 2008

Author:

Steve Bailey

ISBN:

9780470058244

Date of Publication:

2008

Price:

£50.00

Pages:

302pp.

Publisher:

Wiley and Sons

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Julie Anderson

The book spans a long history from the early inception of sport for wheelchair users in the 1940s and progresses to the Sydney Paralympics. Essentially an organisational history, written in association with the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), the book charts its 60-year history: from what was essentially a voluntary group of people at a hospital in the UK intent on the rehabilitation of Second World War ex-servicemen with spinal paralysis, to an official organisation in close association with the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Disability history is a relatively new sub-discipline. Although it will be some time before disability can be a category of analysis into cultural production and human identity in the same way as class, race and gender, it is to be hoped that publications in this field will raise the profile of disability as a distinct mode of historical inquiry. These histories with disability as a focus can broaden our knowledge and open up areas of investigation into historical continuity and change. They can also demonstrate the ways that social hierarchies are legitimated. Steve Bailey's book provides consideration of some of these analytical practices in its examination of the history of the Paralympic movement. There is little written on the sporting and leisure practices of disabled people, and examining these can tell historians about disabled people's activities, both socially and culturally in a given time and place. This book can also provide details for sociologists, anthropologists and policy-makers, as well as historians, about the nature of elite sport among disabled people, and demonstrate the similarities between people's desire to excel, regardless of whether or not they have a disability. No doubt one of the purposes of this work is to remove some of the stigma surrounding disabled people, as sport is viewed as a means for people to come together, regardless of race, gender or cultural identity. Sport can also divide, which is mirrored in the sporting movement for disabled people and their reflection of political issues within able-bodied sport in reaction to the Cold War, apartheid

and other events of the period.

This book will certainly be useful for students who are interested in disability sport. It provides details, including short histories of the many voluntary organisations that have been involved in sport for disabled people. There are other benefits of a publication such as this for historians, mainly surrounding access. Many historians have spent time, some of it dispiriting, in the careful study of minute books. Most historians applaud those of us with the intestinal fortitude to contextualise the records of those meetings. Additionally, the minute books from the Paralympic Committee are not in the public domain, so Bailey has had an insight that other historians who work in this particular field of study have not; therefore, he has done those historians a huge favour in providing a valuable interpretation of material unavailable to them.

The first historical chapter centres on the research and practices of neurosurgeon Ludwig Guttmann, who was central to the development of wheelchair sport in the UK. In 1944 Guttmann was asked to run a specialist Spinal Injuries Centre at a small hospital called Stoke Mandeville in Aylesbury. Part of the therapy was sport, which took the men's minds off thinking too much about their life spent in a wheelchair, and created a highly competitive atmosphere within the hospital. Experiments with sport as therapy took many forms in the early years of the hospital but the sports considered best for the men were archery and netball. In 1948 the first Stoke Mandeville Games were held in the grounds of the hospital, coinciding with the opening events of the Olympic Games in London. A yearly summer competition continued at the hospital until 1960 when the games were held in Rome following the able-bodied Olympic Games.

Rome was a catalyst for the expansion of the Stoke Mandeville Games and the next twenty years saw a movement toward combining sport for athletes with disabilities, and a move away from the isolation of sporting competition specifically for those in wheelchairs. It must be borne in mind that the Stoke Mandeville Games were only open to wheelchair athletes until 1976 Games in Toronto (the able-bodied Games were held in Montreal), where blind and amputee athletes participated. Bailey makes some connection between the protest movements of the late 1960s and the struggle for disabled people to gain the same rights as all citizens. Within this period of unrest, athletes with disabilities were changing both their social, and to a lesser extent, their sporting aspirations. Disabled sport reflected many of the issues of that period, although on a smaller scale. The question of apartheid in sport, a pressing question in able-bodied sport, was reflected in the concerns of organisations for disabled sport. Unlike able-bodied sport, multi-racial teams were fielded in disability sport by South Africa, which is an interesting juxtaposition. The number of competitions for disabled athletes grew internationally and regionally. The first Commonwealth Games for athletes in wheelchairs were held in 1962 and the first Pan-American Games were organised in Winnipeg in 1967. Winter Games were inaugurated in 1972. Bailey argues that this period was part of a significant change for the sporting federations in the establishment of a unified sporting movement for disabled people.

As the embryonic Paralympic movement develops it becomes more administratively organised and Bailey follows the action off the sporting field into the Committee room. He focuses on the inevitable progression toward a united Paralympic movement, and argues that the dominance of individuals such as Guttmann, rather than uniting, divided the disabled sporting groups, which caused problems in the initial stages of assembling all associations under the one umbrella organisation. An International Co-ordinating Committee (ICC) was established in the 1980s with a number of representatives from different disabled groups. Naturally there were controversies, as the ICC endeavoured to solve a number of long-term issues. The realisation that there was little point in mere athletic participation, that public appeal and spectators were one of the most important aspects to modern elite sport, resulted in decisions such as the combining of different ranges of locomotor classifications to make them more appealing to the watching public. At the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, wheelchair racing was held as a demonstration sport. This set a precedent for disabled sport to be featured at able-bodied Olympics although both games were kept entirely separate. Furthermore, the term 'Paralympics' continued to be controversial throughout this period, and it took some time before the debate was finally resolved.

Bailey states that the 1988 Seoul Games heralded a new era in Paralympic sport. While this is probably because the sporting organisations were working better together than previously, this is also because the

Paralympics began to imitate the able-bodied games more closely, in both positive and negative ways. Similarly to able-bodied sport, there was more focus on the nation and less on the disability. The Seoul Games were held in the same venue as the able-bodied games, which, Bailey points out, had not happened since 1964. Ongoing controversies such as logos, inclusion of athletes and the measurement of disability still continued but organisationally, the ICC handed over control to the International Paralympic Committee, which was more closely associated with the IOC.

The final section of the book, and over half of it, focuses on the work of the modern International Paralympic Committee until 2004. Certain issues continued to be problematic, including: technical problems, levels of disability for competition purposes, the relationship with the IOC and the inclusion of athletes with an intellectual disability. Problems were evident at the Sydney Paralympics, including allegations that the Spanish basketball team did not meet the criteria for the correct levels of intellectual disability. Doping offences and the altering of physiognomy were increasing and elite sport for those with disabilities continued to resemble that of able-bodied people. Other issues included methods to improve athletic performance that were the preserve of the disabled sporting body. Another on-going issue was changing the attitude of the public so they were aware of the elite professional attitude of the attendees at the Paralympics. Members of the public had not changed their attitude about disabled people and their levels of competition. Spectator levels were low and it continued to be difficult to raise public awareness. However, closer ties with the IOC meant the financial future of disabled sport was more secure than it had been previously. Moreover, the games for those with disabilities had changed from the custom of medical and rehabilitative practice to an elite national and sport specific sporting event.

While Bailey's book is certainly useful as a reference for any study that focuses on the Paralympics, there are ways that the book's scope could be broadened and therefore made more appealing both as a scholarly work and the story of the Paralympics. What makes wonderful research fodder can make less exhilarating reading. One feels that Bailey connects much more closely with the early history of the Paralympics, with all its notions of 'making do' and its reliance on the voluntary help and makeshift equipment and theories about those in wheelchairs, which is the focus of this area of international sport. Although this is a study of 'elite' sport, there was an opportunity in this book to historically contextualise sport played by disabled people, as it has a longer history than Bailey gives it, although he does provide some background on the World Games for the Deaf. In the pre-history of the Paralympic movement Bailey does provide a fascinating account of the development of sport for wheelchair users. It is not clear if this part of the book was supposed to provide an overall history of disabled sport, but there is a substantial amount of documentary evidence that exist detailing disabled people playing sport prior to the 1940s which is not mentioned. Crowds would turn out in London to watch the blind men of St Dunstan's, which was a hostel for blind ex-servicemen from the First World War compete in their Saturday Sports. The final of the rowing competitions for St Dunstan's were held at Henley, the same location as the Oxford and Cambridge boat race. Other homes for wounded soldiers from the First World War such as the Star and Garter held many sporting competitions. The One-Armed Golfers Association had their first tournament in 1933 at the Burgess Golfing Society of Edinburgh. Similar to the ethos of Stoke Mandeville in the 1940s, sport, particularly for those who became disabled as a result of war, was supposed to restore both a sense of manliness and confidence in a changed environment. This association between war and sport as a type of therapy for those disabled in the conflict is overlooked in its earliest inception.

What might have made the story of the Paralympics come to life more vividly was a broader context. It is easier for a reader to connect with events outside the boardroom, as opposed to a picture of a series of meetings, decisions and internecine disagreements which are less interesting. In relation to drug testing for example, it might have been useful to make more of what was reported in newspapers and other media especially surrounding controversies in disabled sport. Concern surrounding the use of drugs in sports by disabled people has a long history, the first International Medical Congress on Sports for the Disabled was held in 1980. In addition to the anxiety caused by the misuse of anabolic steroids and stimulants, the question of drugs used to control a number of conditions associated with various disabilities was raised. [\(1\)](#) Did a disabled person taking a legal drug constitute performance enhancement? There are a number of

interesting articles in *Sports Illustrated* one of which Bailey mentions which described the myriad ways that disabled people could gain an unfair advantage. One article in 1995, not mentioned by Bailey, details athletes practices of retaining urine in dangerous quantities to increase blood pressure to improve performance. [\(2\)](#)

Try as he might, one gets the feeling that the organisation has constrained his historian's story-telling ability, and at some points becomes reportage, although Bailey, to his credit, tries to avoid it.

While sport for disabled people will probably never have as much appeal to the general public as able-bodied sport, this book helps to polish away any conception that elite disabled athletes are not as anxious to win as their able-bodied counterparts, in an attempt to remove the notion of 'overcoming' that is so prevalent for able-bodied people when they consider the achievements of disabled people. Bailey's message is clear: this book is not about people demonstrating archery for rehabilitative purposes in the grounds of a hospital any longer. There has been immense progression in disability sport which this work clearly demonstrates. Paralympians are elite athletes and are now taken more seriously as competitors. Despite this change in attitude there are still issues affecting participants. As Tanni Grey noted in her biography, 'no matter how many times you tell them a racing chair is a piece of sporting equipment like Steve Backley's javelin, they still respond with the patronising attitude about how brave and wonderful you are'. [\(3\)](#)

Notes

1. S. Oseid, 'Doping control for the disabled sportsmen?', in *The First International Medical Congress on Sports for the Disabled*, ed. H. Natvig (Oslo, 1980), pp.18-29. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. R. Hoffer, 'Ready, willing and able', *Sports Illustrated*, 14 August 1995, 64-76, 74. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. T. Harrison, *Tanni: The Inspiring Story of a World-Class Athlete*, (London, 1996), p.174. [Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/684#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3659>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>