The Athletic Ability Debate: Have We Reached the "Tipping Point"

A historical overview of athletes with a disability who have competed in the Olympic Games

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August 2008

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Oscar Pistorius, the double-leg amputee from South Africa, did not qualify for the 2008 Olympic Games but Natalie du Toit, a compatriot of his did, along with Natalia Partyka from Poland. These two athletes with a disability, Natalie, a swimmer and Natalia, a table tennis player, will compete in both the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Beijing. However, they are not the first athletes to compete in both versions of the Games: Naroli Fairhall (archery), Paola Fantato (archery) and Marla Runyan (athletics) have previously achieved that status with Fantato competing in the two Games during the same year. Additionally, there have been athletes with a disability competing in the Olympic Games since at least 1904, that being only the third version of the modern Games. Numerous examples follow in this article but there are likely many more that are not presented here, a situation we hope readers will help rectify.

Pistorius, who had the audacity to challenge the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF) on their ruling regarding his eligibility to compete against non-disabled runners, and won, has sparked a flurry of debate and a multitude of articles on the issue of equitable and fair competition. A 'Google" search of his name on July 14, 2008 resulted in over 528 000 hits, indicative of the interest his case has created. Runner's World is just one magazine that has featured stories on him including a technical summary of the independent study conducted on his legs for the IAAF in the article 'Zero Handicap' (Fitzgerald, April 2008, p.28).

Pistorius, however, is not alone. David Willey, Editor-in-Chief of Runner's World, cites numerous examples of runners with a disability who have achieved significant athletic performances. This includes Sarah Reinertsen, the "first female above-the-knee amputee to finish the Hawaii Ironman" and Scott Rigsby, the "first double amputee to finish" the same race (2008. p.16). These are but a few examples and the list did not even touch on those with disabilities other than amputees and their sport achievements such as blind alpine skiers, wheelchair racers, paraplegic climbers, cyclists with cerebral palsy or quadriplegic sailors.

There have always been people who have challenged, if not defied, others' perceptions of athletic ability and the connotation of an athlete. It seems though that this has caught the public's attention on a scale never before realized. The scope and scale of modern communication media has facilitated not only a broader, if not more vociferous debate, they have also assisted the advancement of equipment and aids for persons with a disability. Societal and personal attitudes, experience, medical science and technology have all contributed to this growing field of endeavour. When combined with the non-quantifiable human spirit, what is the limit for those labeled as disabled?

In modern times, there may be no greater, or at least more popular, manifestation of athletic prowess than the Olympic Games. The summer version of this international multi-sport Games event garners the attention of billions every four years and it is upon this stage that Pistorius challenged others' desire to draw hard lines in the sand. Of

course, as noted earlier, others before him have as well, but perhaps Pistorius represents what the author Malcom Gladwell (2000) refers to as the "Tipping Point." There have long been people competing in sport who don't fit the "normal profile", but it appears that now it has escalated to a level of popular debate amongst the general population.

Again, as accomplished as Pistorius is, his feats (no pun intended) are not a recent phenomenon. The fight for recognition by persons with disability as elite sports people is not new and to define an exact starting point is an exercise in futility. History is rife with examples of people with a disability doing fantastic things at the highest level of sport, but society, the international sport system and some media it would appear have until now, been relatively blind (no pun intended) to those achievements.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: one practical, the other more philosophical in nature. Pragmatically, it details those athletes with a disability, and specifically those with physical disabilities, that have competed in previous Olympic Games or will vie in the venues of Beijing. This will provide a starting point for comprehensive documentation of these outstanding athletes and their exploits. For those that know of other athletes with disabilities that have competed in Olympic competitions and have not been appropriately noted here, please let the authors know. The second purpose is to contribute to framing the broader debate on the future of the Paralympic and Olympic movements, specifically the inclusion of athletes with disability into the mainstream sport system, or perhaps exclusion of said athletes from the Paralympic Games, within the context of medical and technological advances.

As noted earlier, Pistorius is not unique, nor has his pursuit of being an athlete with a disability competing in the Olympic Games evolved in a vacuum. Like most societal changes, they have occurred over a period of time with many pushing the limits and barriers, most often in relative obscurity. Our work is to help create a compendium of those individuals who comprise this unique family. In direct terms, this article should be seen as a call to others to add to this volume of knowledge.

Before that, however, it is likely important, particularly for those new to the Paralympic Movement to provide a brief overview of it. Whereas the Olympic Games and Olympic Movement celebrate a modern history beginning in 1896, the initial seeds of the Paralympic Movement began after World War II resulting, in part, from vastly improved medical knowledge and evacuation procedures regarding spinal cord and other previously fatal injuries. This, in part, translated into a longer life expectancy for persons with spinal cord injuries and thus created a need for increased emphasis on rehabilitation.

In 1944, Neurosurgeon Sir Ludwig Guttmann at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Aylesbury, England, recognized how sport could decrease boredom during the rehabilitation process and he incorporated more modern forms of rehabilitation. Within four years, sport as therapy developed into an official competition that included participants from other hospitals, and eventually an annual competition was established called the Stoke-Mandeville Games. The first National Games were held in 1948 to coincide with the London Olympic Games, with the first International Games being held

at Stoke Mandeville in 1952. Guttmann's next step was to host the games outside of England and parallel them to the Olympic Games. In 1960, his dream was realized with the staging of an event in Rome. Since that time, the Paralympic Games have been held every four years, parallel to the Summer and Winter Olympic Games cycle with the 1988 Games in Seoul establishing the current practice of hosting them in the same city, utilizing the same infrastructure and venues. The Summer Paralympic Games have grown from 400 athletes representing 23 countries in 1960, to 3,806 athletes from 135 countries in 2004 in Athens. (International Paralympic Committee, 2008).

While inclusion, and issues related to it, played a significant role in the development of the Paralympic Games, it was not until 1984 that events for athletes with disability occurred within the structure of Olympic Games. In the Los Angeles Olympic Games, the top eight international male and female wheelchair athletes competed in the 1500 and 800-metre track events respectively, while events in alpine skiing for amputee athletes were held earlier that year at the Winter Olympic Games in Sarajevo. What has not been as clearly understood, however, has been the 'invisible inclusion' of athletes with disability in the Olympic Games as "regular" competitors.

The first athlete with a disability, that we are aware of, that competed in the Olympic Games was George Eyser. Eyser, an American gymnast, participated in the 1904 Summer Olympics, earning six medals: 3 gold in rope climbing, long horse, and parallel bars; 2 silver and a bronze in side horse, horizontal bar and combined exercise. Eyser competed with a wooden left leg, having lost his leg after being run over by a train (Gillon, 2008; International Olympic Committee, 2008a).

It seems that it was not until the 1928 Olympic Games that another athlete with a disability participated. Oliver Halassy from Hungary competed as a swimmer and water polo player without a left foot, the foot having been amputated following a childhood streetcar accident. As a swimmer he was the European Champion at 1500 metres and won 25 Hungarian National titles. He won silver in the 1928 Olympic Games, and gold in both the 1932 and 1936 Olympic Games and years later was admitted to the International Swimming Hall of Fame (Clay-Large, 2007; Water Polo Legends, 2008).

In 1938 another Hungarian, Karoly Takács was a member of the national pistol shooting team. Takács had lost his right shooting hand during a military exercise and after spending a month in the hospital, secretly taught himself to shoot with his other hand. The following year, he won the Hungarian pistol shooting championship and was a member of the Hungarian team that won the automatic pistol event at the World Championships. The next two Olympics, in 1940 and 1944, were cancelled because of World War II, but in 1948 Takács qualified for the Hungarian Olympic team in the rapid-fire pistol event. Takács won the gold medal and beat the world record by ten points. Four years later in Helsinki, Takács successfully defended his Olympic title to become the first repeat winner of the rapid-fire pistol event (Beijing 2008 Olympic Games, 2008).

Also in 1952 at the Helsinki Olympic Games, Lis Hartel of Denmark competed in dressage. Hartel had been paralyzed below the waist due to polio and gradually through

rehabilitation she reactivated most of her muscles, yet remained paralysed below the knees. Prior to the Olympic Games she competed in the Scandinavian riding championships and finished second in women's dressage and in Helsinki earned the silver medal – the first woman to compete against all men in dressage. Four years later in 1956 at the Olympic Games, she won another silver medal (International Olympic Committee, 2008b).

Also in 1956, Wilma Rudolph became an American sporting icon in athletics. In her childhood, Rudolph had suffered through polio, scarlet fever and pneumonia that lead to whooping cough, measles and chicken pox. As a result, she required leg braces until the age of nine. Seven years later she won a bronze medal in the 4x100 metre relay at the 1956 Olympics and in 1960 she set a world 200 metre record (22.9) at the U.S. Championships. Later that same year at the Rome Olympics she competed in the 100 metre, 200 metre and 4x100 metre relay. After equalling the world record of 11.3 seconds in the semi-finals of the 100 metre, she won the final by three metres. Three days later, she won the 200 metre event and then anchored the U.S. team to a world record in the semi-finals of the 4x100 metre relay, then won gold in the finals. The following year, Rudolph posted a new record of 11.2 seconds in the 100 metre and led the U.S. to another world relay record (International Olympic Committee, 2008c).

Sir Murray Halberg, from New Zealand was another athlete with a disability that competed at the Rome Olympic Games. Halberg suffered an injury during a rugby game as a youth that left his left arm paralyzed. His focus moved to running where he excelled at middle distance. Halberg was named to the NZ Olympic team for both the 1960 and 1964 Games, winning the 5000 metre event in Rome (Connor, 2001; Wikipedia, 2008).

Another New Zealander Neroli Fairhall was paralyzed from the waist down due to a motorbike accident but took up competing in sport from a wheelchair. Fairhall started in athletics at the 1972 Paralympic Games but moved into archery where she went on to win gold medals at the 1980 Paralympic Games and the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane. Although she was denied the opportunity to compete at the 1980 Moscow Games due to the international boycott, Fairhall managed to qualify again four years later and competed in the archery events at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games where she finished 35th (New Zealand Olympic Committee (2008). When asked by the media if she thought she had an advantage sitting down to shoot her arrows, she replied, “I don’t know, I’ve never shot standing up” (International Olympic Committee, 2008d). Her last Games were the 2000 Paralympic Games in Sydney. Fairhall was the first paraplegic to compete at an Olympic Games and apparently the first athlete to have competed in both the Paralympic and Olympic Games.

Other persons with a disability competing in Olympic Games in the 1980s and 1990s included Jim Abbot, an American Major League baseball pitcher who was born missing his right hand. Abbot won a gold medal (demonstration event) at the 1988 Seoul Olympics on the USA baseball team, pitching a win for the Americans over Japan in the final, before starting his ten-year professional pitching career (Abbot, 2008).

Also in 1988, an athlete with a disability competed that some have described as "the greatest medley swimmer in Olympic history". Tamás Darnyi of Hungary was 15 years old, when he lost the vision in his left eye as a result of being hit by an icy snowball three years earlier. Darnyi entered the 1988 Olympics as the world record holder in both the 200m and 400m medleys. In Seoul he won both races, establishing new world records in each event. At the Barcelona Games in 1992, Darnyi successfully defended both of his Olympic titles and completed an eight-year stretch during which he was undefeated at either distance" (International Olympic Committee, 2008e).

Pyambuu Tuul, a blind marathon runner from Mongolia, ran in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics (Sports Illustrated, 2008). Blinded by an explosion at work in 1978, Tuul underwent cornea transplant surgery in 1991, which restored partial sight in one eye. This allowed him to race without the use of a guide and set the stage for him to compete in Barcelona.

Paola Fantato, an Italian archer, followed in Fairhall's footsteps by competing from a wheelchair in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics in both women's team and individual events (Reuters, 1996). Fantato had been paralyzed by polio in her youth and cited participation in the Olympic Games as "a dream come true". She had helped the Italian national team win the 1996 European Archery Championship title where she spoke strongly of the social integration value of sport (Mascagni, 1996). Fantato has a strong Paralympic career having competed in five Games, 1988 through 2004, winning eight medals (5 gold, 1 silver, 2 bronze) in individual and team events, including the bronze in 1988, one spot ahead of Neroli Fairhall in 4th.

Marla Runyan is an American two-time Olympian who is legally blind due to Stargaard's disease. A versatile athlete, she competed in the heptathlon in college but after 1996 focused on middle distance running events. Also after 1996, Runyan no longer competed in Paralympic competitions where she had earned ten World Records in track and field events (B3 classification) along with five gold medals during the 1992 and 1996 Games. Runyan then qualified for the USA Olympic team in 2000 and 2004 in the 1500 and 5000 metre track events (Runyan, 2008). Injury prevented her competing in Athens in 2004 but in Sydney in 2000, she was the 8th fastest 1500 metre female runner in the world.

This then brings us back to 2008 where at least two athletes with a disability will compete in the Beijing Olympic Games.

Natalie du Toit, from South Africa has a single below the knee amputation and competes as a swimmer. She competed in the Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games in 1998 and just missed qualification for the Sydney Olympic Games in 2000. She competed in both able-bodied and events for elite athletes with a disability for South Africa in the Commonwealth Games in Manchester in 2002, winning the coveted David Dixon Award, yet narrowly missed out on qualification for the Olympic team in 2004. In 2008 she qualified for the open water event in Beijing, which is making its debut on the Olympic programme (du Toit, 2008).

The second athlete with a disability competing in the 2008 Olympic Games is Natalia Partyka from Poland who will compete in table tennis. She is a highly decorated athlete in both able-bodied and Paralympic competitions with her first international success being two gold medals in the European Championships for Cadets (ITTF) and a silver in the team event in the 2004 Athens Paralympic Games (Carter, 2008; Wikipedia, 2008). Her acquisition of medals has continued to be prolific with multiple medals at European Championships, IPC Table Tennis World Championships, European Junior Championships, European Championships for Disabled and World Junior Teams Championships.

Oscar Pistorius, as noted earlier, worked hard as a 400 metre runner for the right to compete in the Beijing Olympic Games but unfortunately failed to qualify. He will no doubt look to London in 2012 as his Olympic debut (Klein, 2008). Pistorius was born in South Africa without a fibula in both legs and had his legs amputated as a child just below the knees. Pistorius's case has been noteworthy as a ruling from the IAAF stated that he was ineligible to compete in the Olympic Games due to his prosthetics providing him an unfair advantage; a ruling that was later overturned by the Court of Arbitration in Sport (Klein, 2008). Pistorius, regardless of the ruling, was not selected by South Africa as a member of their Olympic relay team but will compete in the 2008 Paralympic Games.

As noted earlier, one of the reasons why Pistorius's case seems to have captivated a large audience may be that his example has reached the "tipping point" in that a far greater number of sport leaders are beginning to ask fundamental questions regarding sport vis-à-vis disabilities, especially regarding the inclusion of athletes with disability in regular competition.

The first question is broad: where should athletes with a disability compete at the international level? Presently, athletes with disability can compete in either the Paralympic or Olympic Games as long as they meet the criteria set out by sport governing bodies. The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) constitution notes that participation be open to those "who cannot reasonably participate in able-bodied competitions" (International Paralympic Committee, 2008). In the case of Pistorius, he was originally denied the opportunity to compete against able-bodied competitors because of the perception of advantage. Does this matter in the eyes of the IPC definition noted above? A follow up question is then should athletes with disability be able to compete in both the Olympic and Paralympic Games? Does competing in one relegate the other to a second rate status or can both be seen as equal yet different? Even further, is the separation of the two Games and movements morally suspect at its very core (Miah, 2008)?

In a fulsome debate around inclusion, its polar opposite, exclusion must also be carefully examined. The IPC perhaps needs to create a process for exclusion of a sport, mirroring the one they have for inclusion. Within the context of sport development, if a sport has developed at all levels to be fully inclusive, including the Olympic Games, should it remain on the program of the Paralympic Games? As a consequence of sport

development maturity, that is, fully inclusive, the sport could then be excluded from future editions of the Paralympic Games. This would create space for new sports and different categories of athletes with disability who currently have few or no opportunities to participate in the Paralympic Games. Archery and shooting are sport examples; while longer distances in swimming and track for athletes with visual impairments, as well as certain athletics disciplines for arm amputees, are examples of events where the level of impairment may be immaterial to their performance.

A second question is where does this discussion lead, especially considering technological advancements? Will athletes with disability be referred to as bionic (Miah, 2008), and super-abled (Adelson, 2008) and if yes, how does this impact their ability to compete against the able-bodied? How is a prosthetic different than other forms of technological enhancement or technology doping referred to by Anderson (2008) such as the LRZ swimsuit, pre-emptive Lasik eye surgery, and carbon sole shoe implants? And will a society that is obsessed with "dying their hair, squeezing Botox into their aging bodies or fudging taxes" (Blair, 2008, R.3) even care?

These are vexing and important questions that will greatly impact the future of the Paralympic Movement and Games. Pistorius's athletic prowess has certainly brought them into focus but as noted earlier, it is not only appropriate, but essential to recognize those that have blazed the trail before him. The performances of these outstanding athletes with a disability, many cited here, have clearly manifested that "Citius, Altius, Fortius" is not an exclusive domain of those so called "able-bodied" athletes, but rather it is the realm of all those with athletic ability who aspire to sport excellence.

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