

# The Future of the Paralympic Games

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In 2019, I delivered the G. Lawrence Rarick Memorial Lecture at the International Symposium of Adapted Physical Activity (ISAPA) held at the University of Virginia. I was the incoming President of the International Federation of Adapted Physical Activity (IFAPA) and the title of my lecture was “Olympic and Paralympic Games: Convergence or Stasis.” I addressed the topic by reflecting on 25 years of service within the Paralympic movement, and the lecture was subsequently published in *Palaestra* (Legg, 2021).

For the purposes of this article on the future of the Paralympic Games, I will use this lecture as the foundation and then build upon my original thoughts reflecting on changes since 2019.

Predicting the future of anything, let alone a Mega Sporting event, is challenging at the best of times. I, like others, do not have a crystal ball, but this does not seem to stop us from ruminating about how or why things will change in the future. By discussing the future openly, however, perhaps we can consider our actions today and how they may have intended or unintended consequences for the future. Perhaps, too, this is one of humanity’s great differentiators from other species in that we have an ability or desire to dream about what a future looks like.

When considering the future of the Paralympic Games I would suggest that there could be a multitude of influences, but the one I will start with, and what will be the focus for this paper, is the interaction with the Olympic Games. While a formal agreement between the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and International

Paralympic Committee (IPC) was signed in 2001, the intersection of disability and the Olympic Games and movement can be traced back as far as 1904, and the second Olympic Games in the modern era (Legg, 2021). Here, George Eyser, an athlete who had a wooden prosthetic leg, competed in the Olympic Games and won medals in gymnastics. Since then, there have been a handful of other athletes with disabilities that have competed in the Olympic Games (Legg, Burchell, Jarvis, & Sainsbury, 2009), with the most recent examples including Natalie Du Toit at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Summer Games and Oscar Pistorius at the 2012 London Olympic Summer Games, both from South Africa, and Brian McKeever from Canada in the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games.

In American based sports, there are also multiple persons with disabilities competing at the highest levels. Examples include Shaquem Griffin, who played for the NFL Seattle Seahawks, Zach Hodskins, who played for the Florida Gators basketball team, and Arizona State Sun Devil wrestler Anthony Robles, all of whom had amputated limbs.

It is likely too that the number of people with disabilities competing against those who are able-bodied will only increase, particularly if you include online esports, virtual reality and augmented reality. Technology will blur the lines of where those who are able-bodied and those with disabilities can compete, by enabling people with disabilities the opportunity to participate and compete equitably against those who are able-bodied.

## A Merging History of the Paralympic and Olympic Games

While the interaction of disability and Olympic sport can trace its roots to 1904, as most readers of this Journal already know, it was not until following World War II and the growth of physical therapy for war veterans that the evolution of sport for persons with disabilities, and more specifically para sport, really began to develop. Again, as many readers of this Journal will already know, the first Paralympic Games were then held in 1960 (with the second held in Tokyo in 1964).

Even during this nascent stage of the Paralympic Games, there were connections being developed between the disability / Paralympic and able-bodied / Olympic movements. Dr. Ludwig Guttman, a Physiatrist at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital, where the Paralympic Games are said to have been created, was perhaps best known for hosting an archery competition for veterans on the front lawn of the hospital on the same day as the opening ceremonies of the 1948 Olympic Games, taking place a few kilometers away in London. Here Guttman postulated that his small wheelchair sport competition might one day evolve to become something similar to an Olympic Games. Years later, Guttman then approached the IOC to host a parallel set of Games alongside the already planned Olympic Games in Rome. Rebuffed by the IOC, Guttman decided to host his own Games in Rome, and this began the pattern of hosting parallel Games; one for the able-bodied and a second for those with physical disabilities, and often doing so in the same city or country. The two Games evolved with relatively little interaction or connections until 1988 when the host organizing committee in Seoul, Korea, decided to host both Games, albeit one after the other, but using the same venues and trying to ensure that both Games received the same levels of focus and attention. This precedent then set in motion what would occur in subsequent Games, with each city for both summer and winter versions of the Olympic Games following the Seoul Games, agreeing to also host both the Olympic and Paralympic Games. As noted earlier, this partnership was then solidified and made official in 2001 when it was formally agreed upon by the IOC and IPC that all future bidding cities “had to” host both the Olympic and Paralympic Games. The most recent update to the IOC-IPC agreement that now extends the original agreement to 2032 provides further clarity and connections related to marketing, increasing the visibility of the Paralympic Games and enhancing the Paralympic brand (IOC, 2018). What this now means is that all IOC companies and corporations which are part of the top-tier Olympic sponsorship scheme will automatically become main sponsors of the Paralympic Games (Morgan, 2018). Examples of this include global companies such as Coca-Cola, Atos, Panasonic, Samsung, Toyota, Visa, Alibaba, Bridgestone, Dow, GE, Intel, Omega and P&G.

In addition to this change in marketing, since the original agreement in 2001, the two Games have continued to converge in areas such as signage and messaging. In

Vancouver 2010, for instance, for the first time a count-down clock was created for both Games, both IOC and IPC flags flew at city hall, and a board member of the host organizing committee represented the Paralympic movement. London 2012, meanwhile, adopted similar logos for both Games with the only exception between them being the IPC having the agitos and the other having IOC rings in the top corner (Legg & Gilbert, 2011). The logo, meanwhile, for the 2024 Games in Paris is the same for both Games, and in Tokyo, the French Olympic and Paralympic worlds were further brought together using the same French team's name – Nous sommes l'Equipe de France – #UneSeuleEquipe.

## Inclusion of Athletes with Disabilities in the Olympic Games

A second way in which the Olympic and Paralympic movements have intersected is with the inclusion of athletes with disabilities into the Olympic Games directly, but competing in Paralympic specific competitions in demonstration / exhibition status events. This began in 1984 at the Winter Games in Sarajevo and was followed at the Summer Games in Los Angeles. The winter demonstration / exhibition events were repeated in 1988 in Calgary, while the summer events were held again from 1988 to 2004 (Legg, Fay, Hums, & Wolff, 2009). The IPC had requested that this model be expanded in the number of events, but the IOC declined, and ultimately it was decided to end the partnership. Perhaps, though, it was a model ahead of its time as this model has been pursued in other events including the Canada Games and Commonwealth Games, but with the events being granted full medal recognition.

## Inclusion of National Olympic and Paralympic Committees

A third example of how the Paralympic and Olympic Games have merged is at the national levels, where some countries have combined their National Olympic and Paralympic Committees. One example is the United States, with the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) (Pavitt, 2021). In other nations like Canada, meanwhile, the organizations remain separate, although they do share several initiatives related to programming and at times fund development. Whether one model is better than the other is open for debate. What is not, is the growing

number of nations choosing the combined model. In Canada, as well, it is perhaps worth noting that the disability sport administrative system that was created following Canada's hosting of the 1976 Toronto Olympiad for the Physically Disabled (which would eventually be recognized as the Paralympic Games) has significantly contracted. In 1976, six organizations were created to provide the administrative support and leadership for para sport in Canada. This included the Canadian Wheelchair Sport Association (CWSA), Canadian Blind Sport Association (CBSA), Canadian Cerebral Palsy Sport and Recreation Association (CCPSRA), Canadian Amputee Sport Association (CASA), Canadian Association of Disabled Skiing (CADS) and the Canadian Federation of Sport Organizations for the Disabled (CFSOD). CWSA is now focused solely on wheelchair rugby, CCPSRA on boccia and CADS on grassroots adapted skiing and snowboarding. CFSOD, meanwhile, evolved to become the Canadian Paralympic Committee (CPC). The reality then is that the able-bodied sport system has slowly taken over the responsibilities for the para sport system created 45 years ago. This is also happening globally, where able-bodied sport is increasingly responsible for what has been the para sport or disability sport system.

## Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

The fourth trend that I foresee impacting the convergence of the two Games is the global movement related to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). In every other marginalized group referenced in conversations about EDI such as gender, sexual orientation, and race, there has been significant inclusion within the Olympic Games. I am not arguing that it is perfect, but the trends suggest that it is improving, and disability, I would argue, will be the next demographic where this occurs.

For instance, there has been tremendous growth in the participation of women in the Olympic Games. As but one example, women only began competing in the Olympic marathon in 1984. The 2022 Beijing Games were described as “the most gender-balanced Olympic Winter Games in history, with women accounting for a record 45 per cent of the athletes” (IOC, 2022). The Summer Games in Tokyo were also “the first gender-balanced Olympic Games in history with 48.8% women’s

participation,” and “It is a milestone that has been a long time coming, particularly because, when women started competing at the games in 1900, they made up just 23 of roughly 1,000 athletes” (DW, 2021).

The increase in participation and interest in women’s sports has also been seen outside of the Olympic Games. In the United States, for instance, with more brand support and viewership, women’s basketball may be the National Collegiate Athletics Associations’ (NCAA) most popular sport (Christovich, 2022; Rigdon, 2022). It is also worth noting that growth has not been simply lauded and seen as progress, and instead, three congressional lawmakers recently sent a letter to NCAA President Mark Emmert accusing the organization of making “inadequate progress” in addressing “historically disparate” treatment of male and female athletes (Associated Press, 2022). There are also a multitude of examples globally where women’s sport is acquiring sponsorships ahead of their male peers, with the women’s soccer program in Australia being but one example (Lewis, 2022). “Priceline Pharmacy, Cadbury, Pantene, Rebel Sport, Commonwealth Bank: these are just some of the major brands that women’s football – both the W-League and the Matildas – has attracted to the sport in the past six months” (Lewis, 2022). The LPGA has trended upwards in overall tour prize money from \$67 million in 2019 to \$90 million this year (Associated Press, 2021). Accounting firm KPMG and insurance company Aon have recently entered the women’s golf space as part of inclusion efforts, and as a final example of the growth of women’s sport, British broadcaster Sky Sports dedicated 24 hours of airtime to women’s sports with women’s cricket, soccer, golf, netball, and boxing available across two channels (Sky Sports, 2022). A Nielsen Sports report also stated that 84% of general sports fans find women’s sport more “inspiring” and “progressive” than the male version, which is seen by many as being more “money driven.” But according to a 2018 Statista report, women’s sports receive only 0.4% of total sports sponsorships. In a market with global sports sponsorships worth \$106.8 billion, just \$427 million is being spent on women’s sports. A year after this report, ad revenue from the 2019 Women’s World Cup was reported as being 10% higher than the men’s tournament in 2018. While change is occurring, clearly more needs to be done. The potential upside, however, for both the sponsor and athletes seems significant (Legg, 2021).

For the LGBTQS+ community, according to Outsports, “the Tokyo Olympics had at least 185 publicly out LGBTQ athletes, a record number with more out athletes than all the past Summer and Winter Olympics combined” and this was “more out LGBTQ athletes in Tokyo than all the previous Summer Olympics combined” (Outsports, 2021).

The Aboriginal / Indigenous / First Nations people are also having more presence within the Olympic movement. A bid to host the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Vancouver / Whistler in 2030 is being led by Aboriginal First Nations (Larson, 2022). “Officials from the Lílwat7úl (Lílwat), x̱məθkʷəy̱əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) nations say the parties have agreed to consult on the feasibility of pushing the bid forward. Elected Councilor Wilson Williams of the Squamish Nation said getting Canadian Olympic Committee and Canadian Paralympic Committee support is a step forward in inclusivity and ‘not being invisible in our own lands. [The bid] is going to be a first of its kind, but also ... in regard to the land we lived on for such a long time ... our stories of who we are, where we come from as Indigenous peoples for the four Nations, and respectfully, all [First] Nations throughout Canada,’ said Williams” (Larson, 2022).

As I noted earlier, I would argue that athletes with disabilities have yet to receive similar acceptance and profile within the Olympic movement, particularly when compared to the other marginalized groups just described. But this is changing in high performance sport outside of the Olympic movement. As but one example Sportsmedia, in an attempt to list the best overall athletes, created a formula to compare the world’s best sportspeople and get an ultimate World Sport Ranking, and in 2020, it included athletes with disabilities (<http://sportsmedia.net/world-sport-ranking/>). Major corporations are also highlighting persons with disabilities in their marketing campaigns and this will be discussed later.

## Fewer Cities Bidding to Host the Olympic and Paralympic Games

The fifth trend that I believe will influence a convergence between the Olympic and Paralympic Games is a significant decline in the number of cities bidding to host

the Games (The Economist, 2021). As a result, I would argue that there is potential for a city that does indicate an interest in hosting to require that both Games be held together and not one after the other. This decision could simply be cost saving, as by hosting both Games together, the host city and organizing committee would only need to have one opening and closing ceremony. There would also be the benefit of not having to shut down a city or region for an entire month and a half. There would clearly be issues in scheduling but these could be resolved, as discussed later.

This issue of declining numbers of cities can be seen from twelve cities that bid to host the 2004 Olympic Games versus five for 2020, and just two for the 2022 Winter Games (Ludacor, 2018). The choice of the 2024 and 2028 Games was then awarded at the same time, in part, perhaps because only Paris and Los Angeles remained interested in hosting either Games. Perhaps working against my argument is that the decline in bid cities matches the timeline where the bid cities were 'required' to host the Paralympic Games, but cities had already begun this without formal requirements in 1988. Also, it would seem that the recognition of the economic potential of hosting disability sport is growing. Adapted sports in the United States for instance, was found to generate up to \$134 Million in annual impact (Callahan, 2022), so it is not inconceivable to think that as cities look for ways to argue the impact and benefit of hosting Mega events to their voters, that arguing the benefits of hosting adapted sport might be significant.

## Handicapitalism

This last comment leads then to a final trend, and perhaps the most impactful, which is the connection between disability and economics. This can be further divided into the UN Sustainable Development Goals of economic growth, innovation and perhaps reducing inequalities.

Under the heading of economic growth, I would argue that the two Games will move closer together because the able-bodied sport system is recognising the financial potential of the para sport system. As noted earlier, the para sport system is perhaps following the same growth trajectory as women's sport, albeit a few decades



lagging, but the IOC may see this trend emerging and realize that investing in para sport now is a prudent and values-based investment strategy. This would mimic what is happening in business with the Global Investor Group, representing \$2.8 Trillion, appealing to companies to be more inclusive (Disability:IN, 2022).

Evidence also seems to indicate that people are paying attention to the Paralympic Games, and that the future upside is significant. Nielsen data from 2018 showed the number of people indicating an interest and the total number of people wanting to watch and know more about the Paralympic movement was rising (Legg, 2021).

Presented at the IPC Marketing and Media Summit 2018, the Nielsen research reflected responses to the question: Please indicate how much you agree with each of the following characteristics regarding the Paralympics (Paralympic Games/Paralympic Winter Games)/Olympics (Olympic Games/Olympic Winter Games). Results included 1000 citizens from Australia, Japan, UK, and USA, aged 16-69. Examples of where the Paralympic Games were seen more positively than the Olympic Games included descriptors such as “impressive,” “respectful,” “friendship,” “authentic,” “unique,” “fair,” and “peace.” There were also several examples where the Paralympic Games scored lower than the Olympic Games, but these could be perceived as positive perceptions. Examples here include whether the Games were seen as “political” and “commercial.” The Nielsen research also showed that the Paralympic Games were strongly related to “value orientation” with positive responses to the question: Please consider if you rather agree or disagree to the following statements about the Paralympics (Paralympic Games/Paralympic Winter Games). Positive responses included statements such as “Paralympics communicate the right values” and “Paralympics stand for the true spirit of sports.” Strong responses were also forthcoming for statements such as “Companies that engage in Paralympics show that they are socially responsible,” and “Companies which sponsor the Paralympics are more likable” (Legg, 2021).

The Nielsen results thus seem to suggest that Paralympic sport can allow companies to be viewed as authentic and community focused. Data also suggests that consumers will pay more for products produced by socially responsible corporations.

“In the Nielsen Global Survey of Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability, conducted Feb. 23–March 13, 2017, 30,000+ internet-connected consumers were polled in 60 countries in the Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and North America. The results suggested that 66% of consumers were willing to pay more for brands committed to positive social and environmental issues” (Legg, 2021). This research also demonstrated that people who rated companies as more likable, were more likely to provide a recommendation to others and buy products from these companies themselves. Sponsoring the Paralympic Games would thus seem to be just plain good business, and perhaps we are already seeing this play out with several companies that are not necessarily connected to the Olympic movement profiling persons with disability in their advertising. Examples here include Mattel, Tommy Hilfiger, Target, Nike, and Gerber. “The reality is that the relationship between sport and society is changing faster than ever before, and brands are seeking an authentic purpose. Sports are also rethinking what they stand for, and diversity in sport is accelerating. It is still far from perfect, and examples of tokenism and inspiration-porn persist” (Legg, 2021), but change is happening.

This transition is perhaps best represented on a global scale by The Valuable 500 (<http://www.thevaluable500.com>). ‘Launched in 2019 at the World Economic Forum’s Annual Meeting in Davos, Switzerland, the Valuable 500 calls on business leaders to foster innovations enabling persons with disabilities to realize their potential value in society, business, and the economy’ (Valuable 500, 2019). It is the only global business CEO collective focused on disability inclusion in business, and more than 340 leading companies from 31 countries have committed to putting disability inclusion on their business leadership agenda. They represent a total revenue of over USD 4.5 billion (EUR 3.8 billion) and over 12 million employees with many IPC partners and suppliers already participating, including Airbnb, Atos, Channel 4, Citi, Coca-Cola European Partners, Dentsu and Ottobock (Valuable 500, 2019).

Other examples where global brands have embraced accessibility and inclusion and have not already been profiled, include IKEA and the ThisAbles project. This project was conceived to allow people with special needs to enjoy the quality of life provided by IKEA products, and as part of their vision to “create a better everyday life for as

many people as possible.” To do this, they joined forces with the non-profit organizations Milbat and Access Israel, and created a line of products “that bridge some of the gaps between existing IKEA products and the special needs of people belonging to these populations” (IKEA, 2022). Starbucks is another example that has committed to a higher standard of accessibility for their customers with disabilities, with examples including sign language instruction for staff (Fantozzi, 2022). Zwift provides another exemplar where they added disabled athlete representation to their platform after completing a large research study with Challenged Athletes Foundation (Dabbs, 2022), and this example also reinforces the comment earlier about technology’s ability to increase the ability of those with and without disabilities to compete against one another. “Zwift’s research has shown true-to-life equipment and avatar integration is essential for representation, with hand cycles, trikes, and amputee avatar customisation also all needed within the app to make the product a success. With increased numbers of adaptive athletes exclusively using virtual platforms like Zwift for reasons of safety and security, the giant is facing increased calls for inclusion” (Dabbs, 2022). Finally, is the connection between disability and professional able-bodied sport, with one example being the Seattle Kraken of the National Hockey League (NHL). This franchise, known for its progressive attitudes and actions towards climate change, also hired Chanel Keenan as an “intersectionality consultant.” She has a disability herself, and her role is to help the team better understand fans who have a disability. “How can I shed light on a community that isn’t embraced in the traditional way, in hockey? I know I can’t be the only disabled fan of this sport. There has to be more” (Sachdeva, 2022).

Technology companies in particular seem poised and ready to address access for persons with disabilities, with companies such as Samsung, Google, and Microsoft already trying to differentiate themselves as leaders in this regard. Jeff Bezos, CEO of Amazon, was quoted as saying that “Day 2 is stasis. Followed by irrelevance. Followed by excruciating, painful decline. That is why it is always day 1.” Perhaps for this reason I would suggest that the connection between technology, Paralympic sport, and inclusion will continue as companies recognize the “handicapitalism” benefits of equality and diversity driven innovation, and a move from philanthropy to foundational societal change.

## A Convergence of Two Games?

I began this article with the question as to whether the Olympic and Paralympic Games would converge, remain the same, or separate. I have argued that the trends seem to indicate a closer relationship and merger between them, but how could this manifest itself practically?

First, there might be a possibility of hosting events similar to the Special Olympics / Unified Games model whereby a certain number of athletes need to be able-bodied, and others must have impairments. Paralympic sports such as wheelchair basketball or Para ice hockey could easily be adapted for this approach, and this could also be extended to mandate gender participation. Relay races in swimming and athletics could also accommodate this style of participation. From a Games management perspective, an argument as to why the Games could not be merged is the sheer size of both Games. Perhaps an opportunity here could be to host the two sections of a merged Olympic/Paralympic Games one after the other with a middle two days used for the transportation of athletes in and out of the host city. Athletes, dignitaries, and officials would then be able to attend either the opening or closing ceremonies. The Canada Games use this model, and this allows relatively smaller centres to host the Games, as at no time are all the competitors and officials present in the host community.

The Canada Games also present an interesting model for a merged Olympics and Paralympic Games. The Canada Games host events for athletes with intellectual disabilities (under the jurisdiction of Special Olympics) and para athletes with physical or mobility impairments, in addition to those who are able-bodied. In athletics and swimming for instance, events are held for all three classes. At no time do the three classes compete against each other, but instead, they participate in races that follow one another. The Canada Games first held events for para athletes in 1993 for the Summer Games and in 1995 for the Winter Games. Special Olympics events, meanwhile, were added in 2001 and 2003. The Commonwealth Games also use a similar model where they include five competitive events for athletes with physical

disabilities, and these are held during what had previously been a Multi Sport event for able-bodied athletes only. This process began in 1994 in Canada and was mandated at the 2002 Games held in Manchester. What would need to be negotiated if a merger did occur would be the number of events, and I am not supporting the loss of competitive opportunities.

Another practical change could be what athletes are called, and potentially the loss of the term Paralympian and/or the Paralympic Games. From a more philosophical perspective, my friend Eli Wolff makes the argument that we do not talk about female versus male Olympians. We also do not talk about Olympians with different cultures or sexual orientation. They are all “Olympians.” So why are persons living with disability the only demographic (with a few exceptions) not able to refer to themselves as Olympians? I recognize however, that there are many Paralympians who are very proud of this title and have no interest in aping or mimicking the Olympic movement. The reality is that for every potential change to the current situation, there will be pros and cons, detractors, and supporters (Legg, 2019). I also acknowledge that the assumption here is that the larger Olympic Games subsumes the smaller Paralympic Games – but perhaps this would not happen. What the pandemic taught us perhaps more than anything else is that we may have made a number of assumptions.

Perhaps with a merger of the Games, there might be further diversification or an entirely new model of sport, and terminology. Martin Block’s (1999) article about inclusion in physical education, “Did we jump on the wrong bandwagon?” could provide a template for challenging our own assumptions about inclusion in sport. Disability inclusion and the confluence of technology discussed earlier could accentuate the “RedBullification” of traditional sports, where promoters are continually looking for ways to create new, interesting, and innovative experiences. I acknowledge this might be met with great resistance and animosity, and I also acknowledge that as a person who is able-bodied, I view this potential future from an ablest perspective which comes with its own biases and blind spots.

Recognizing these limitations, I still support the hypothesis that the Olympic and

Paralympic movements will continue to merge. I acknowledge that this choice is not without challenges, and my hope is that we continue to question and challenge our own assumptions and ultimately ensure that ALL persons with disability are afforded the appropriate opportunities to play and compete.

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# パラリンピック競技大会の未来

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パラリンピック・ムーブメントの歴史はオリンピック・ムーブメントと複雑に絡み合っており、これは今後も変わらないだろう。だが、パラリンピック・ムーブメントとオリンピック・ムーブメントそして両競技大会が一体化するのか、それぞれに独立するのか、あるいは現状のままなのかは不明であり、これが本稿の検討テーマである。仮説として、この両ムーブメントと競技大会は今後融合し続けることが考えられるが、その理由としては、スポーツ内外におけるいくつかの世界的動向が挙げられるだろう。例えば、国・ローカルレベルのパラリンピックスポーツのガバナンスの変化、障がい者アスリートの健常者スポーツへのインクルージョンの進展の遅れ、社会やビジネスにおける世界的動向としての平等・ダイバーシティ・インクルージョン、開催に意欲的な都市を確保するためのメガイベントが抱える課題、障害文化の経済・政治力の増大などである。