



Editorial

Paralympics / Atlanta Style

1952 was the year and Stoke Mandeville was the location of the first disabled games which were staged under the guidance of Sir Ludwig Guttmann. In 1984 the Olympics were held in Los Angeles, but unfortunately the Paralympics were not part of that activity and ultimately were held in two parts, one in Long Island a year later and the second part at Stoke Mandeville. The United States disabled community has long felt embarrassed by the events of 1984. Through the efforts of representatives of the various disabled sports organizations within the United States and the Board of Directors of Shepherd Center, the right to hold the Paralympic Games in Atlanta was awarded by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) following a presentation to the IPC in Tignes, France at the 1992 winter Paralympic Games. This resulted in the 1996 Paralympic Games being held between August 16th and 25th, 1996 with 104 nations participating in 17 sports, 14 of which were also Olympic events.

Initially, the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games (ACOG) was approached about aligning the Paralympic Games within the Olympic effort. Two opportunities were given to ACOG to develop this participation, however, on both occasions the answer was no. ACOG did agree to become a sponsor by providing \$5 million in cash and \$10 million of in kind contributions towards a budget of \$48 million in cash and a similar amount of in kind dollars. Another obstacle that was overcome concerned the term and symbol of the Paralympics. The International Olympic Committee had sanctioned the term, but the US Olympic Committee did not approve of this term until the 1984 games. The symbols for the Paralympics which were composed of the five Olympic colors in designs shaped like 'guppies' was not sanctioned. This disagreement was ultimately resolved by reducing the number of five guppies to three. The US Olympic Committee additionally was contacted about becoming a sponsor of the Paralympics and agreed to a loan of \$1 million in the early phases which was ultimately repaid. Additionally, the US Olympic Committee agreed to fund the cost of sending the US Paralympic athletes to Atlanta. The final contentious issue was over the Paralympic mascot, Blaze. The character had been developed by soliciting the involvement of many different groups, but especially children. As events unfolded, Blaze became more popular than the Olympic mascot. Because of this popularity and the fact that Blaze might have potential post Olympic use, the rights of Blaze were given to the disabled sports association so the royalties would become a legacy for future disabled athletes.

In the two years prior to the Paralympic Games, the organizing committee had several challenges. One was to raise enough money and the second was to solicit enough volunteers. These two tasks had to be undertaken in an atmosphere of the Olympic effort which was in the magnitude of \$1.7 billion while requiring 100,000 volunteers. Ultimately, these goals were achieved with the Atlanta Paralympic Committee obtaining almost \$100 million of cash and in kind contributions and recruiting 25,000 people to stage the games.

How successful were the Games? It is estimated these were 'the best Paralympic Games ever'. The 1996 Games were the first where tickets were sold for the events rather than being given away. It was felt by the Atlanta Paralympic Committee Organizing Board and the paid staff that giving the tickets away somehow sent the wrong message and that was one of lessened value. The truth is that you value more those things for which you pay a price. During the Paralympics, there were 1,113,000 seats available and 503,000 of these were filled for a 45% occupancy. One hundred and sixty five thousand attended the athletic events, and approximately 71,000 people watched basketball, and 60,000 enjoyed the swimming competitions. The occupancy for power lifting was 90% and goal ball was 80%. Opening events, which were also televised, were sold out and over 50,000,000 people watched that extravaganza. During the course of the 10 days of events, 1574 medals were awarded and 268 world records were set. The 1996 Games certainly were the second largest athletic event in the world.

There were many highlights of the Games, but for the people in Atlanta, in Georgia, and in the United States, the highlights will probably be an increased awareness about disabled persons within this country. No longer will these people be someone to be tolerated. They have gained a new respect in that their participation in all areas of life is one of contribution. Juan Samaranch, the President of the International Olympic Committee, stated in his closing remarks to the Paralympic Congress that if the Paralympic and Olympic movements were to come closer together, it would be necessary for the disabled sports to speak in a more common voice. Hopefully the fulfillment of that advice will be the ultimate legacy of the 1996 Paralympic Games.

Dr David Apple
Associate Editor