

Dr. Robert Steadward, President of the International Paralympic Committee, has committed his life to sport. Why?

He says, “Sport has been a very important aspect of my life because of the skills and lessons you learn from sport, because of the various characteristics that it develops in you. It helps to form a philosophy of life. You grow and mature with sport. You learn discipline from it. You understand the concept of fair play, getting along with people, competing in an environment of respect, working with teammates.”



The Paralympics in Society

Certainly it has been shown in much research that, while sport has value in anyone's life, it is even more important in the life of a person with a disability. This is because of sport's rehabilitative influence, and the fact that it is a means to integrate the person into society.

Quite apart from the physiological benefits, sport teaches independence. Those who participate in sport find they are much more accepted in sports clubs, sports organizations, and by the community at large. As soon as the community sees the person with a disability participating in sports, that person is looked on as an equal member of society, not as an appendage or as someone different, but someone capable of achieving the same level of skills that a person without a disability can achieve.

In fact, nowadays people with disabilities participate not only in high-performance sport, but in competitive sport, recreational sport and lifetime activities that improve their overall fitness and lifestyle, so important for everyone. Sport

has also created an opportunity for people with disabilities to participate and be role models for others. It has opened doors for all people with disabilities to be a more integral part of society. Sport is vital to people with a disability because they have the same need to achieve as people without disabilities. Sport provides opportunities to showcase to the world just what disabled persons can achieve, thereby providing much-needed role models. Sport also provides opportunities



for those with disabilities to take up the challenge to get fit, to become healthier, to look critically at their lifestyle, and to become equal contributors in society.

It's not surprising, given his philosophy, that Bob Steadward is the president of the second largest sport organization in the world. What is this Paralympic movement all about?

The Paralympics are often confused with the Special Olympics, where athletes with a mental handicap compete. Athletes with a mental handicap also compete in the Paralympics, but the focus of the Special Olympics is participation, not elite sport competition. All Paralympic athletes are elite athletes.

Like the Olympics, the Paralympic Games take place every two years, alternating summer and winter sports. The country hosting the Olympic Games also hosts the Paralympics, which immediately follow the Olympics. Events are Olympic events, or equivalents, with appropriate changes in



rules to allow for the functional ability of the athlete. The official aim of the Paralympic Games is “to unite competitors with a disability of all countries in fair and equal competition. No discrimination is allowed against any nation or person on the grounds of race, creed, religion, politics, or disability.”

The movement has grown dramatically since the first games in Rome in 1960. There 400 athletes with spinal cord injuries from 21 countries competed. In Atlanta in 1996, 103 countries sent 3195 elite athletes with disabilities including spinal cord injuries, visual impairment, cerebral palsy, limb amputations, les autres, and those with a mental handicap. They competed in 19 sports. Their results in several instances compared very favourably with results achieved in the Olympic Games.





