London 2012 Paralympic Games: bringing sight to the blind?

Nick Webborn

It may not go down in history as the ‘miracle of London’ but the 2012 Paralympic Games truly brought about changes in attitudes towards people with disabilities that will be enduring. Going into the Games there were doubters, ‘do not carers’ and people ignorant to the achievements of Paralympians. The Olympic Games was an unqualified success but how would the nation and people around the world respond to the Paralympic Games?

The day after Sarah Storey won Great Britain’s (GB) first gold medal she came into the GB Medical Centre to sign our medal board (figures 1–3). The front pages of the national newspapers were covered with her picture and the story of her gold medal performance. We knew that something had changed. Being a home games, there was certainly a greater media interest for ParalympicsGB going into the Games, but we were unprepared for the extent of the reaction to the sporting achievements of the athletes by both media and public. The coverage was unprecedented, the crowds of paying public were record breaking and people were clamouring for tickets or seeking the opportunity to glimpse a Paralympian.

The Paralympics were talked about on the tube or bus on the way to work by the usually reserved commuting public. It was news, it was interest, but moreover it was the sport. Sitting in the stadium of 80 000 people seeing David Weir win one of his gold medals was an electric and uplifting experience that I will not forget. The wall of sound that resonated around the stadium literally made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. People knew that they were witnessing an incredible sporting performance in its own right. It was not about the disability or sympathy but the sheer quality of the athleticism and the competition. It was captivating. This and hundreds of other moments of sporting competition helped to change the perception of what people with disabilities can achieve. The media coverage also brought the individuals into the homes and hearts of the nation as never before. It inspired and excited the audiences.

The London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) played its part in accommodating the athletes and providing wonderful sporting facilities. The athletes encompass a huge range of impairment types that have many different needs. Through adequate planning and preparation the 4000 athletes lived together in a village that met their needs and they trained and competed in accessible facilities. It is not rocket science, just planning and consideration of the needs of all. The volunteer force was also wonderful and conveyed the true spirit of the Games with many people with disabilities also working in a wide range of roles.

From a medical perspective, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) conducted the first injury and illness survey among Paralympic athletes at a Summer Games. Sport and exercise medicine trainees and consultants, who have a career now because specialty status was awarded in February 2005 for the International Olympic Committee evaluation committee visit, were able to contribute to the medical care of athletes. We have more medical practitioners working in Paralympic sports than ever before and

Figure 1 The front pages of national newspapers the day after Dame Sarah Storey wins the 1st gold medal for ParalympicsGB.

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for some it is the chosen preference over the perceived glamour of other professional sports. There remain issues around the clarity and scientific basis of the classification systems but the IPC and the international federations are constantly moving forward in this area. The media showed a lot of interest in the ‘boosting’ story—the intentional induction of autonomic dysreflexia to enhance exercise performance—but at least it brought awareness that there are different factors in the healthcare of Paralympians. Paralympic sports medicine is challenging.

The Paralympic values are courage, determination, inspiration and equality. The eyes have been opened of those who could not see them. The visibility of the Paralympic Games has been enhanced globally but we must not let the mist of time ever cloud the vision again. This will take continued effort from governing bodies, policy makers and the media but mostly from the athletes themselves, with their exceptional performances keeping them in the spotlight.

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