I urge everyone to look at individuals with ... disabilities in a
different light. If given a chance, these individuals can make a mark
in whatever discipline they are guided through. If guided well, they
will excel in whatever they attempt to do. (Nelson Mandela)1

‘More ability, less disability’ – these sentiments were uttered by a
veteran wheelchair tennis player during the Paralympic Games, which
aim to emphasise participants’ athletic prowess, not their disability.

The Paralympics have a rich history and reflect the humanity
and determination of one man.2 Ludwig Guttmann, a neurosurgeon
who fled Nazi Germany for England at the start of World War II,
volunteered to take charge of a 26-bed spinal unit catering for
paralysed servicemen at Stoke Mandeville Hospital.

Convinced that participation in sport might restore confidence and
self-esteem to these disabled veterans, Guttmann had Stoke Mandeville
host an archery competition for men and women with spinal cord
injuries, to coincide with the 1948 Olympics. Dutch veterans joined
their British counterparts in 1952. In 1960 the first official Paralympic
Games, held in parallel to the Olympics (hence the name), hosted athletes
paralysed servicemen at Stoke Mandeville Hospital.

By the 1980s, sitting volleyball and basketball had been added to
the programme and the Games were held in different cities each
year. However, the most significant development occurred in 1989,
when the first Paralympic Games were held at Stoke Mandeville
Hospital. The Games, held in parallel to the Olympic Games, were held
in a dedicated and purpose-built facility.

The Paralympic Games, like the Olympic Games, are about
friendship, and an active and healthy lifestyle that puts some of
us ‘abled’ to shame. Of greater importance may be the change in
accessibility to buildings, pavements and public spaces and decree
improvements in public transport; and the South African medal
winners have received the same incentive bonuses as those who
triumphed in the Olympics, following Sports Minister Fikile Mbalula’s
announcement that ‘anything less would be discrimination’.4

We are fortunate that the Ministry of Sports and Recreation created
Dissa (Disability Sports South Africa) with the stated objective of
providing ‘access to all persons with a disability to sports and
recreation, enabling them to achieve their potential’.5 Partnered
with private institutions and sponsors,6 funding for disabled sportsmen
and women has been secured.

More will be required, for while technology and engineering are
promoting disabled athletes’ success,7 they are expensive. BMW and
Honda are said to have helped refine the special wheelchairs that,
with their angled wheels, permit greater manoeuvrability, speed and agility ... but each costs more than a million rand. State-of-the-art blade-shaped
carbon-fibre prostheses such as those that enable Oscar Pistorius to run
just as fast as he would have had he been born with fibulas (but note, no faster) come at one and a half million rand each.

Competing with athletes from richer countries is a struggle for
athletes with disabilities, who require special equipment and training.
War-ravaged Cambodia, for example, has thousands of disabled
athletes, but her top wheelchair racer used a donated racing chair and
top sprinter, a below-knee amputee, ran on a blade not specifically
designed for sprinting. Already the ‘money gap’ is apparent ... the
countries ranked highest in the medal stakes are the wealthy ones.

However, if it can be afforded, the technology is potentially stunning
in its implications. Hugh Herr, head of the Biomechatronics Research
Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, predicts that
the day will come when artificial limbs will be invented that will exceed the
speed and efficiency of biological ones.8 Then Paralympic athletes will qualify
with ease for the Olympics, as did Pistorius, but will be compelled to use
less advanced technology to ensure a level playing field with their able-bodied
fellow competitors!

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