



THE 2021 PARALYMPICS: AND WHY THEY MATTER

By Mihika Mishra

A vast majority of people have heard of the Olympics. They are a prestige for those competing in them, and a wonderful source of entertainment and inspiration for those watching. They are a way to unify many people through sports, honor, and individuality. People of many countries come together, compete and win at the Olympic games.

The Olympic Games have a huge audience. In the US, a recent survey shows that around 77% of US adults surveyed plan to watch some part of the Olympics, and according to the survey estimate, that is around 3 out of every 5 American adults. Data like this proves the popularity of the Olympic Games and can help audiences project their growth into the future.

What most people consider a “twin” of the Olympics is on the rise, and they are the Paralympic Games, this year held in Tokyo, soon after the Olympics.

The Paralympics encompass individuals from various categories of impairments and allows them to compete.

According to the Olympics website, the paralympic games will encompass multiple types of disabilities to promote inclusion in the games: “The Paralympic Movement offers sport opportunities for athletes with physical, vision and/or intellectual impairments that have at least one of the following 10 eligible impairments: Impaired muscle power, Impaired passive range of movement, Limb deficiency, Leg length difference, Short stature, Muscle tension, Uncoordinated movement, Involuntary movements, Vision impairment, Intellectual Impairment.” This wide range allows for many, many people to shine.

The Paralympics, in their primary incarnation, were called the Wheelchair Games and were held in London in 1948. They were first launched by a doctor who believed that “sport therapy” could help veterans recover from major wars such as World War 2 at the time. He believed that sports therapy could “enhance the quality of life” for disabled veterans. The first official Paralympics then were held in 1960 in Rome, Italy, and were open for those with wheelchairs only. The Paralympics have grown exponentially since then, and they first received global notice in 1988 when they were twinned with the Olympics. Many years have passed since then, and today, the Paralympics are the second-largest sporting event in the world, second to only the Olympics.

However, the Paralympics are not the most covered in the media. The Olympics for Specially Abled People are a shining example of what can be considered discrimination of coverage.

According to many surveys conducted both now and in the past, the Paralympics have shown a surge in popularity and support. Surveys from Dentsu.co have shown that in the past two Paralympic Games, their popularity is rising; 51.7% of respondents observed the 2016 Rio Paralympics and 65.1% were audiences to the 2018 PyeongChang Paralympics. In 2016, a #FillTheSeats campaign greatly contributed to the spread of the Paralympics and might have played a key role in helping the 2018 Paralympics hit a record high of 320,000 in ticket sales. The Paralympics, however, have only received this attention recently. In their early stages, the Paralympics were given little to no media coverage, and many were not widely aware of them even after they received more recognition. Even just a few years ago, they were not as broadly celebrated or observed as the Olympics. Some think of this as discrimination of media coverage, discrimination that hampers the progress of the Specially Abled Community.

For example, many people are familiar with Simone Biles, Michael Phelps, or Usain Bolt, however, not many people have heard of Deepa Malik, Brad Snyder, or Devendra Jhajharia. The media and society are yet to shine as much light on Paralympic athletes as it does on Olympic ones, and as a result, the public misses out on the amazing stories of survivors, veterans, and fighters.

One such story can be taken directly from the example aforementioned: Brad Snyder. Lieutenant Brad Snyder was a key player in the Navy. Having graduated from US Naval Academy as a certified Naval Architect, Snyder started his career as an Ensign in the Navy. Over the years, Snyder became the Swim Team Captain in his final year. He was deployed to serve in Iraq in 2008, and a few years later, in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, while stationed there, Snyder was severely injured by an IED: an Improvised Explosive Device. Though the rest of his wounds were not lasting, Snyder did suffer complete vision loss following the accident. His eyes had to be surgically replaced with prosthetic ones. As part of his rehabilitation, Snyder was in the water once again. After months of training, Snyder was able to earn a spot on the United State's National Paralympic Team, and his Paralympic career launched from here. In the 2012 Paralympics of London, Snyder competed in seven different events and brought home two gold medals and one silver medal. In fact, his victory in the 400-meter freestyle occurred exactly one year after he sustained his vision loss. More notable victories of his can be directly taken from his personal website: "Brad medically retired from Naval service in 2013, and three years later returned to the Paralympic Games, this time in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Brad competed in five events, earning three Gold medals, one Silver medal, and broke a World Record that had stood for over thirty years." Through all of his achievements and accolades, Brad Snyder stands as a beacon of perseverance and the power of rehabilitation and sports.



Another notable figure comes to the Paralympics from India, named Devendra Jhajharia. Jhajharia is the first Indian Paralympic player to win 2 gold medals, winning his first gold for the javelin throw of 2004 and the second in 2016 when he beat his own record. Jhajharia is currently being supported by the Olympic Gold Quest which is a nonprofit organization that improves accessibility for Indian athletes to the Paralympic and Olympic Games. Jhajharia lost almost half of his left arm at the age of eight when he was climbing a tree and accidentally touched a live electric cable. Jhajharia was able to receive medical attention in time, however, the doctors were forced to amputate part of his left arm. Jhajharia was noticed by a coach in 1997 at his school's sports day festival, and his training progressed from there. Jhajharia has immense reverence for his coach, even dedicating his medals to him and thanking him for all the help along the way. Today Jhajharia is still an athlete and is planning on competing at the 2021 Paralympic season and is ready to aim for a 3rd gold medal for his country. Devendra Jhajharia is a symbol of competitive spirit and bravery to many in India, ready to show the world once again the capability of his country.





She has won 23 international medals and 51 regional and state medals. With an involvement even in motorsports, Malik was the first person to ever receive a license for an invalid (modified) rally vehicle, which she pursued for months together. Malik even holds a LIMCA World record for the longest pan-India drive completed by a paraplegic woman. Malik is also given many corporate roles in sports committees due to her achievements; the most significant being her presidency of the Paralympic Committee of India; she was elected into the position in 2020. Malik has also been awarded accolades for her inspirational story and background such as the Rotary Woman of the Year Award in 2007. Recently, she undertook the daredevil challenge of doing what she calls a Raid de Himalaya. It is an 8-day 1,200-kilometer drive that includes a climb through the Himalayas and a visit to some of the most remote locations in the area such as Leh, Shimla, and Jammu. With her stunts, achievements, records, and accolades, Deepa Malik shines a bright inspiration for young women; both able-bodied and disabled alike. She inspires a brighter and more equal future for the Specially Abled Community and is great encouragement for people and athletes looking to push their limits and better themselves in whatever field they are in.

All these stories explained above can serve as fuel to a torch of inspiration. It is up to the people, the public, the media, and the audience to share this information with others, raise awareness about the groups going unnoticed. For all anyone knows, one person may be able to bring a call to action for the next Micheal Phelps of the Paralympics.

The good news is that with progressing technology, people are able to raise more awareness than ever. They are able to encourage friends and family to watch and support the Paralympics, encourage people on opposite ends of the globe to educate themselves, learn more for their own benefit through the use of the ever-growing internet.

The recent increase in the popularity of the Paralympics keeps everybody; athletes and audience alike; hopeful for the bright and promising future where Paralympic athletes are able to shine with equal recognition, rights, pride, and honor alongside Olympic-athlete counterparts. This Paralympic Season, let that become the mission of the supporters, audiences, and media: this Paralympic Season, the responsibility is of the public to bring Paralympic athletes to the top!