

## Wounded Soldiers Inspired Paralympics



Joe Kusumoto Photography

**S**hortly after World War II, Dr. Ludwig Guttman, a Jewish neurologist who had escaped from Germany, was trying to discover why prospects were so grim for his patients at Stoke Mandeville Hospital near London. More than half these wounded veterans were dying within a year after they had suffered spinal cord injuries.

Dr. Guttman decided sports might be a good addition to his program. He reasoned that athletics could not only improve the soldiers' fitness, it also could rebuild their self-esteem. Physical fitness training thus became mandatory at the National Spinal Injuries Centre, which Guttman had founded in 1944.

The patients responded so well that in 1948 Guttman decided to sponsor a competition to coincide with the Olympics. He organized the Stoke Mandeville Games, an archery competition that involved 16 wheelchair patients (14 men and two women).

By 1952, the concept had gained enough publicity to attract a team from the Netherlands, making the Fifth Stoke

Mandeville Games the first official international Paralympic competition. The event had added wheelchair basketball and swimming to its schedule.

Although the origin of "Paralympics" is a mystery, by the mid-1950s news media were using the term regularly. One report suggests the word came from combining "parallel" and "Olympics." Another contends participants referred to the event as the "paraplegic Olympics."

Historians generally agree that when more than 400 disabled athletes from 21 countries traveled to Rome to compete in the days after the 1960 Olympic Games, the Paralympics were officially born. This first Paralympics included archery, field athletics, basketball, snooker, swimming and table tennis. The U.S. won three of the 63 gold medals awarded for swimming that year. In each Olympic year since, the Paralympics have been held in the same venue as the Olympics.

Prior to 2001, when U.S. Paralympics was created as a division of the U.S. Olympic

Committee, Paralympics Chief Charlie Huebner says there were many groups in the United States attempting to organize sports competitions for athletes with disabilities.

Huebner says the tide really turned in 2003, when the USOC modified its mission statement to give equal emphasis to the Paralympics. As a result, the budget of U.S. Paralympics has grown from \$1.8 million in 2001 to \$11 million this year. The organization has developed Paralympic sports clubs to help develop athletes in 99 U.S. communities, with a goal to increase this number to 250 by 2012. U.S. Paralympics is also working with more than 6,000 military veterans who have disabling injuries.

In Beijing this past year, the Paralympics hosted more than 4,000 athletes from 148 countries, competing in 20 different sports. To ensure lively competition among swimmers at a similar level of function, Paralympic athletes are classified based on the type of disability and level of function. <<<

### From the USOC Mission Statement

... The vision of the USOC is to enable America's athletes to realize their Olympic and Paralympic dreams .... The USOC is recognized by the International Olympic Committee as the sole entity ... whose mission involves training, entering and underwriting the full expenses for the U.S. teams in the Olympic, Paralympic, Pan American and Parapan American Games.

### Notable Paralympic Swimmers

••• **Trischa Zorn, 45**, is reportedly the most successful athlete in Paralympic history, with 55 medals, including 41 gold, in seven Paralympics ranging from 1980 to 2004. Blind from birth, Zorn lives in Indianapolis, where she teaches children with disabilities.

••• Montanan **Erin Popovich, 24**, has won 19 medals, including 14 gold, from three Paralympics events. She was born with achondroplasia, a genetic disorder that restricted the growth of her limbs, and has endured more than a dozen surgeries.

••• Double-amputee **Rudy Garcia-Tolson, 21**, has already won three gold medals for the U.S. in his fledgling career, which includes two Paralympics. In 2007, Garcia-Tolson broke his own world record twice in the 200 IM, most recently at the Beijing Paralympics.

••• British Paralympics swimmer **Sascha Kindred, 32**, set world records for his category in the 200 IM and 100 breaststroke this past year in Beijing, upping his total medal count to 11, including six gold, in four Paralympic events since 1996. Kindred was born with cerebral palsy on his right side.