

The Paralympic Games: The Second Largest Sporting Event in the World and a Growing Force in the Olympic Movement

Started in 1960, the Paralympics Games have become a vital part of the Olympic movement. Meaning "Parallel Olympics", the Paralympics are recognized by the International Olympic Committee and are Olympic equivalent competitions for individuals with disabilities. The Paralympic Games offer a multi-sport, multi-disability competition for elite, world-class wheelchair, amputee, cerebral palsy and blind/visually-impaired athletes. The Olympic host country holds the Paralympic Games two weeks following the Olympics, utilizing the same city venue. Only the highest achieving athletes in each sport can qualify for the Paralympics. The 2000 Sydney Paralympics hosted 3,912 athletes, 250 from the U.S., who won 109 medals. The U.S. took third place in the medal count behind Australia (149) and Great Britain (131).

It is important to note that the Paralympics are distinctly different than the Special Olympics. The two, which are often confused as one in the same, are totally separate, developed by entirely different organizations, and have different objectives. The Paralympics provide world-class competition for elite disabled athletes at the highest level and are part of the Olympic Games. Those selected to compete by their country in the Paralympics are elite athletes that must qualify for competition along similar guidelines set for Olympic athletes. All Paralympic athletes must adhere to grueling training regimens and meet strict qualifying standards to be eligible for participation. Paralympians compete for gold, silver and bronze medals against the best disability athletes in the world. The Paralympic Games are not a participatory event in which everyone can enter and win a medal. Special Olympics, on the other hand, focuses on participation of everyone and involves athletes from ages 8 to 80 with mental retardation. All Special Olympic participants are winners and all receive medals. For more information, go to www.paralympic.org.

The Paralympic structure runs parallel with that of the Olympics. Recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the Paralympics are governed by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), which is a member organization of the IOC. The IPC recognizes five International Federations (IF) of Disabled Sports Organizations (DSOs), each representing their specific disability groups. Elite athletes wishing to compete in the Paralympics must be members of one of the affiliated DSOs. In addition, athletes must qualify to participate through a trials process established by the DSO for their disability group. Sanctioning and approval of selected athletes is reviewed and affirmed by the USOC to ensure fair and adequate competition opportunity. Selection criteria establishing the guidelines for competition eligibility is developed by the USOC in coordination with the IFs and the Paralympic Organizing Committee. Functional classification guidelines are provided to the Paralympic Organizing Committee from the IFs that govern the individual sports.

Without doubt, the XI Paralympiad held in Sydney, Australia was the most outstanding in the 40-year history of international disability sports. The Australians purchased over 1,100,000 more tickets for the 2000 Sydney Paralympics, than all the tickets sold at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996—with many of the more popular Paralympic competitions selling out day after day. The Australians came out to cheer on disabled athletes with the same enthusiasm they showed for earlier Olympic events — viewing both as the best in the world of sports. When Opening Ceremony television ratings were so much higher than anticipated, the Australian Broadcasting Company expanded its daily Paralympic coverage to 2 1/2 hours — breaking into regular programming for Aussie gold medal presentations. Disability athletes the world over can thank Australia for embracing all of its guests on an equal basis.