

Games Para-excellence



BY JAMES ROY

*'Even a smile can inspire; a laugh can bring a tear
Witness a victory, as belief overcomes fear'*

Don't focus on the disability, focus on the ability," South African sprinter Oscar Pistorius told the world before the Paralympic Games began in London on August 29. The Olympic Games for disabled sportspersons have been following the Olympics since 1960, and though they haven't been looked at with the same fuss and fanfare as their predecessor tournament, they continue to be a landmark event in the lives of many generations around the world.

London 2012 completes a full circle of a grand legacy which began in England with World War II veterans (with spinal cord injuries) on wheelchairs being given opportunities in outdoor sports thanks to one German neurologist Dr Ludwig Guttmann in 1939. Since then, man-made wars have ceased to exist but man has evolved to newer and more complicated disabilities. The Paralympics 2012 have occurred in an age where science is the biggest religion, with machines exploring Mars and some more giving the limbless hopes to fight and win. It was only fitting that one of our modern geniuses Dr Stephen Hawking inaugurated this second-largest sporting event of the year. "We are all different. There is no such thing as a standard or run-of-the-mill human being but we share the same human spirit" is what he had to say. The event is defined more by celebration than competition.

That said, the competitive spirit isn't something disabled persons have been short on, since the first Paralympic Games in Rome. The desire to beat the clock, outrun the rival and reach the pedestal has only grown in stature. And as if we needed more proof that Paralympic athletes too boast of the same human fabric as others, we saw Oscar Pistorius give a disgraceful reaction after losing his 200m final, an event he's won repeatedly. On the other hand, cyclist Jody Cundy's hunger to win translated to flared tempers when he was disqualified. 'Disabled' they may be, but they're not different in grey areas than any other Olympians!

Closer home, Girisha Nagaraj made India proud by winning a silver medal in the men's high jump event. Born with a twisted left ankle, Nagaraj leaped to a distance of 1.74 metres. While the medal surely did us proud, we must also applaud the ones who came close to it - swimmer Sharath Gayakwad (with a dysfunctional left hand) clocked a time of 1:07.12 in the 100m butterfly, which unfortunately was short

TODAY MARKS
THE END OF
THE WORLD'S
LARGEST
EVENT FOR
PERSONS WITH
DISABILITIES,
THE LONDON
PARALYMPICS.

THIS ABILITY

WE LOOK AT WHAT MAKES
ATHLETES THE SAME AS
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THEM DIFFERENT

of a final birth by 0.62 seconds. If you're a lover of sport, you'll know that Gayakwad won our hearts the moment he dived into the water.

Though the Indian contingent is marred by controversies created by many abled administrators, there's no taking away from the athletes, each of whom are currently living their dreams. Naresh Kumar Sharma, who's paralyzed from waist down, has his eyes on the target in the Air Rifle event. Rajinder Singh Rahelu, an Arjuna Awardee will represent us in the 67.5 kg power-lifting event. Rahelu lives with infantile paralysis, but the child in him never gives up. For our 10 representatives, and for that matter any contingent, the joy of being able to run against a roaring crowd after having lost both legs, the coolth of water as they swim across the pool, the whisper of air as they leap to set new records and the comfort of just participating is an achievement.

Hawking, who's an iconic figure on a wheelchair, went on to say, "However difficult life may seem, there is always something you can do and succeed at." It is not an affront to those who are severely affected but a gentle reminder for all to never give up. Limits are meant to be exceeded."

In a country where nobody apart from those who play with a bat and ball manage to leave their marks behind, we might forget this year's incredible story of the armless gymnast or the paralyzed cyclist. But then for these special achievers and their circles of supporters, the finishing line was when they got selected to participate and everything else is just a by-product.

(This is part of a series of articles that celebrate the intriguing lives of persons with disabilities, an initiative of Trinayani, an advocacy trust. To read the past features, visit www.trinayani.org, trinayani.contact@gmail.com)