

Special Olympics and Paralympics: What's the Difference?

Special Olympics and Paralympics are two separate organizations recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). They are similar in that they both focus on sport for athletes with a disability and are run by international non-profit organizations. Apart from that, Special Olympics and the Paralympics differ in three main areas: 1) the disability categories of the athletes that they work with, 2) the criteria and philosophy under which athletes participate, and 3) the structure of their respective organizations.

The Athletes

Special Olympics welcomes all athletes with intellectual disabilities, (ages 8 and older) of all ability levels, to train and compete in 30 Olympic-type sports. To be eligible to participate in Special Olympics, athletes must have an intellectual disability; a cognitive delay, or a development disability, that is, functional limitations in both general learning and adaptive skills. (They may also have a physical disability.)

Paralympics welcomes athletes from six main disability categories: amputee, cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, visually impaired, spinal injuries and Les Autres (French for "the others", a category that includes conditions that do not fall into the categories mentioned before). To participate in the Paralympic Games, athletes have to fulfill certain criteria and meet certain qualifying standards in order to be eligible.

Sporting Philosophy

Special Olympics believes deeply in the power of sports to help all who participate to fulfill their potential and does not exclude any athlete based upon qualifying scores, but rather divisions the athletes based on those scores for fair competition against others of like ability. For Special Olympics athletes' excellence is personal achievement, a reflection of reaching one's maximum potential-- a goal to which everyone can aspire.

To participate in the Paralympic Games, athletes have to fulfill certain criteria and meet certain qualifying standards in order to be eligible. These criteria and standards are sports-specific and are determined by the IPC Sports Chairpersons, the Sports Technical Delegates and the relevant international sports organizations. The Paralympics are about elite performance sport, where athletes go through a stringent qualification process so that the best, or highest qualified based on performance, can compete at the Games.

Structure

Special Olympics is a global movement leading the world of sport for people with intellectual disabilities and is focused on building a worldwide network of athletes of all ability levels who compete in sports while creating communities of leaders committed to inclusion, acceptance, and dignity for all. With a Headquarters in Washington D.C. Special Olympics happens year-round in seven regions of the world, 170 countries and has 228 Programs operating on a daily basis to provide empowerment through 30 Olympics-type sports. There is an International Governing Board of Directors.

The Paralympics are run by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC). As the international representative organization of sport for athletes with a disability, the IPC comprises elected representatives from around the world. The General Assembly, its highest decision-making body, includes around 165 member nations, represented through their National Paralympic Committees, and four disability-specific organizations.