

The Special Olympics Story

I am always happy to be asked to relate the history of Special Olympics because the origins of the movement, which is now world-wide, are closely tied to Canada. Most people who know about Special Olympics know that it was founded by the Kennedy Foundation in the US, and the driving force behind that founding was Eunice Kennedy Shriver, a sister of the late President, and wife of Sargent Shriver, the first director of the Peace Corps.

However, the idea of a sport program for people with intellectual disabilities was conceived in Canada several years before the first Special Olympics Games were held in 1968 in Chicago.

In the mid-sixties a young researcher at the University of Toronto, Dr. Frank Hayden, conducted a study of the fitness and motor skills development of children with intellectual disabilities. Remember, this was before these children were integrated into mainstream schooling – indeed most children and adults with intellectual disabilities were institutionalized and had very little interaction with non-disabled peers and with the life of the community.

Dr. Hayden's study showed that children with an intellectual disability were about half as fit as their non-disabled peers. They had poor posture, they shuffled as they walked, and they were ill-coordinated. These results came as no surprise to Dr. Hayden. Other studies had also noted these deficits. Where Dr. Hayden parted company with the wisdom of the day was in discerning the cause of the poor fitness levels and under developed motor skills. Conventional wisdom assumed these conditions were a result of the children's intellectual disabilities. Dr. Hayden showed that they were the result of a sedentary life style and that fitness and skill could be developed in intellectually disabled people through training. It seems obvious to us now, but at the time this finding was groundbreaking and even startling.

Dr. Hayden's next insight was equally valuable. He believed that a fitness regimen alone was bound to fail the vast majority of children with intellectual disabilities. He saw that sport, competition, was the spark, the motivation, these children needed; that the goal of training must be competition. Dr. Hayden said that he wanted to put this world into this world.

I will speak in a few minutes about how Special Olympics competition is arranged, but let me quote Globe & Mail sports writer Stephen Brunt on the centrality of competition in Special Olympics experience. He described a floor hockey game he saw between South Africa and Azerbaijan at the World Winter Games in Toronto in 1997:

“At the finish, there is joy for the winners, if little obvious agony for the vanquished, and the thrill for the athletes clearly comes not just from participation, but from competition. Anyone who has played a game has felt it, understands the difference between giving your absolute best in pursuit of victory and just showing up. The genius of the event.... The thing that separates it from every other feel-good/do-good program is that it remains that elemental spark.

Special Olympics does not betray its competitors, it does not patronize them, it does not rob them of that feeling. It does not turn the games into a show, a demonstration, which it certainly could. In tone, in substance, it is absolutely right.

“Let me win” goes the organization’s credo, “but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt!” Not just let me be here. Let me win.

Everyone competes according to their abilities. The playing field is level. And the simple experience of being in a different place, a different country, meeting other people, coping with travel, with life on the road, has value in itself, as a life experience.

But at base, this is sport, like any other sport, these are athletes who feel what other athletes feel.”

In the mid-sixties the generic sport world was hardly equipped to accommodate numbers of youngsters with intellectual disabilities; and there were experts in the disability field who weren't convinced sport would be a good thing for the intellectually disabled population. There was some doubt, for example, that this population could learn to play team sports.

Before long, an opportunity arose that Dr. Hayden believed would allow him to introduce people with intellectual disabilities to the world of sport.

Harry “Red” Foster, a Toronto businessman, was a key figure in the establishment of the Canadian Association for Retarded Children – now called the Association for Community Living. Red was looking for projects which would raise public awareness of the issues facing people with intellectual disabilities – projects the Federal government would fund in celebration of Canada’s centennial year in 1997.

Dr. Hayden presented Red with a plan to train youngsters across Canada in swimming and athletics, and then bring them to Toronto in the summer of 1967 for a national competition, an event sure to generate the publicity Red was looking for. The plan floundered because the Association didn’t have a national infrastructure or a mandate to organize this kind of training.

Dr. Hayden’s proposal attracted attention elsewhere, in Washington, DC, and Dr. Hayden was hired by the Kennedy Foundation to organize just such an event in the United States. The first games for people with intellectual disabilities took place in Chicago’s Soldier Field in 1968. Since this was an Olympic year, the organizers of the Chicago event decided to call it the Special Olympics. Thus began a movement which is now active in 150 countries with an athlete enrolment of 1.7 million children and adults worldwide.

Dr. Hayden made sure Canada was represented at the inaugural games, and Red Foster was so taken with the event that upon returning to Toronto he immediately set about establishing Special Olympics Canada. The second ever Special Olympics Games were held in 1969 in Toronto with 1,400 youngsters from 49 towns and cities in Canada and a US contingent from 10 cities competing in athletics, swimming and floor hockey.

The Games were the first public event conducted by a new and unique sport organization in Canada, one whose development for the next 20 years took place outside of and parallel to the generic sport system. In those years provincial Chapters were established, regional and provincial competitions were instituted and eventually an infrastructure for training and competition in 14 official sports was developed across Canada.

Thus Special Olympics functions as a Multi-Sport Service Organization (MSO) and as a National Sport Organization (NSO)

The fact that Special Olympics was established for a specific clientele and developed outside the generic sport world has had both positive and negative effects on the Special Olympics movement.

First, the positives...

1. It became evident early in its history that Special Olympics sport was an instrument for much more than the physical health and development of people with intellectual disabilities. Because the world of sport had been closed to them for so long, when the door did open, all the benefits of sport were discovered to be of particular benefit to this population. Thus the predominant feature of Special Olympics sport is its focus on sport as an instrument, a means to aid the physical, social, emotional and mental development of people with intellectual disabilities. Hence, the mission statement of Special Olympics Canada: “enriching the lives of people with an intellectual disability through sport.”

If we reflect on the effects that follow when someone joins a team or a sport club, we can easily enumerate a number of benefits to the individual, which will become amplified as the sport experience becomes more extended.

- Sport provides an entry point to a new community of interest and endeavour. Thus it addresses immediately one of the primary effects of intellectual disability, which is isolation. Special Olympics sport, moreover, provides our population with important relationships outside their peer group, the most important of which is the coach-athlete relationship. This relationship, between a disabled and non-disabled person

provides a gateway into a wider world for people with intellectual disabilities. In the Special Olympics community, in a way not possible in an integrated classroom or in the world of generic sport, the Special Olympics athlete is fairly measured, understood and appreciated by the wider community, in the first instance in the person of his coach.

- In Special Olympics Canada we have taken great care to ensure that the coach our new athlete encounters is trained and certified. This is of crucial importance because the first component of a successful sport experience is skill acquisition. If fundamental skills are not properly taught, an athlete's full potential cannot be realized.

The mastery of a new skill is a deeply satisfying experience for everyone, and that experience is particularly important to people with intellectual disabilities who must struggle to acquire other basic skills, such as reading, and fluency, and simple mathematical competence. By the very nature of their disability they frequently experience more frustration than satisfaction in academic pursuits and even in life-skills classes.

Sport provides an entirely different environment for learning than does a classroom. And because sport contains an element of play, both in the learning of skills and in their application in

competition, the learning process itself satisfies. We need only think of the enjoyment we derive from “playing” catch, or dribbling a soccer ball all on our own, or firing pucks for hours at a garage door, to realize that learning sports skills is fun, and fun is a powerful motivator.

We also know from our own experience that learning any skill gives us self-confidence and a sense of worth, and bolstering of self-worth is of particular importance in the population we serve. Sport is a powerful tool in this endeavour, and we see evidence of the Special Olympics experience of sport producing self-confidence and the joy of achievement time and time again.

- A crucial element in the acquisition of sport skills is physical fitness: training the body to respond quickly, and building endurance and stamina so that skills are not eroded by rapid fatigue. Increased levels of fitness and healthier lives are obvious and valuable benefits our athletes gain from Special Olympics.
- I have mentioned the centrality of competition in Special Olympics sport. I should note that Special Olympics athletes are classified by gender, age and ability into divisions – so that athletes compete against others of similar ability. This practice does not discourage excellence, as some have claimed. The measurement of performance remains at the heart of Special

Olympics sport, and athletes are encouraged to reach their potential. Performance is rewarded but the divisioning system ensures that less accomplished performers are properly valued and acknowledged.

- The competitive nature of sport, and the rules we construct to ensure fairness in competition, require yet another dimension of education, which is ethical tutelage. Sport can teach our athletes to be ethical. Sport holds up fairness as a moral good. Sport encourages, and even requires, coaches to teach athletes the difference between “losing” and “failing”.
- Yet another dimension of sport that is of great benefit to our athletes is its public nature. Games invite spectators, and give athletes the experience of performing in front of others, and giving pleasure to others. Our athletes experience the encouragement and approval of the public. At the local level the “public” are family and friends, but as they move through the competitive continuum our athletes perform in front of thousands of spectators, and attract the attention of local and national media. Our athletes experience something unavailable to them in any other field: the public, at local, provincial and national levels, investing its partisanship and pride in citizens with intellectual disabilities. This public recognition confers value not only on the

athletic performances of our athletes, but on their persons as well, contributing to an enlightened society that values all its citizens.

2. Another positive effect of the parallel and somewhat independent development of Special Olympics was the decision to secure its status as a charitable organization, and to create within Special Olympics the means to be financially self-sufficient. This was particularly important at the national level because until recently, we had very limited access to Sport Canada funding.

The result of this positioning was an entrepreneurial culture that placed a premium on marketing and public awareness. Boards of directors were built with these areas in mind, and Special Olympics drew its key Board leadership from the business community. We developed strong media partnerships, secured national media exposure of our major games and found corporations that were eager to be associated with a nation-wide sport organization that had added appeal as a cause.

There were negatives attached to this parallel development, the major one being the difficulty of developing a mature sport culture while battling the perception of a segregated culture that “wasn’t quite sport.”

While Special Olympics Canada intends to retain its marketing and public awareness capacity, we have spent a good deal of time and effort over the past decade developing closer ties to national sport organizations, the Canada Games Council and to Sport Canada, and we have worked to build the credibility of the Special Olympics experience through out National Games Committee, our National Team Program and our commitment to quality coaching.

National Games Committee

SOC holds national games every second year, alternating between summer and winter games.

All aspects of our national games are organized and monitored by the National Games Committee supported by SOC professional staff. This committee structure allows us to bring in expertise from outside the SO organization – which then becomes part of the organization.

The Committee established a rotation system for hosting national games so that we don't have provinces mounting competing bids. Once a community is identified as the host community, a Games Organizing Committee (GOC) is formed and the Games Committee and staff support the GOC, monitor the Games agreement and conduct a professional evaluation of the Games to capture best practices for future host committees.

National Team Committee

Special Olympics world games are also held every two years, again alternating between summer and winter sports. The national team chosen to represent Canada at the world games is selected based on performance at national games.

Our athletes aren't able to train at national centres and compete in a series of lead-up events to the world games – but what we are able to do, under the guidance and direction of the National Team Program Committee, is establish a team orientation camp shortly after selection, do fitness assessments and create a training program for each athlete, who returns to his own community to be supervised by a monitoring coach during his training regimen. The program also involves sport specific mini-camps in the lead-up to games. We have seen terrific results from this program, not only in impressive medal results, but in the across-the-board improvement in the achievement of personal bests by our athletes when it counts most: on the world stage.

Coach Development in SOC

Another indication of SOC's commitment to improving the quality of Special Olympics sport was the appointment in 2001 of Dr. Mary Bluehardt as Director of Coach Development. Mary has worked in collaboration with yet another national committee, the Coaching Committee, made up of a representative of each of the 12 provincial and territorial Chapters. The Committee meets twice yearly and has been

focussed primarily on effecting the transition to competency based education and training (CBET) of coaches. Because we are multi-sport, this involved liaison with 13 different NSOs.

Special Olympics coaches continue to receive their sport specific technical training and certification through the national sport organizations. SOC supplements this training with a component designed specifically to equip coaches with knowledge and skills pertinent to working with athletes with intellectual disabilities.

For years this supplemental training was offered through NCCP approved level one and level two SOC courses. With the transition to CBET the SOC courses have been redesigned for two streams: the community sport coach and the competitive sport coach.

The competitive coach curriculum has received conditional NCCP approval, which is soon to be final, and in January we will submit the community coach curriculum for approval. This new curriculum also involves the design of a learning facilitators' program to enable highly skilled facilitators to conduct both competition and community coach workshops.

The facilitator training program and the competition and community coach workshops are all considered professional development opportunities by the CAC for all coaches, not just Special Olympics coaches.

In addition SOC, with Dr. Bluehardt's leadership, has helped to develop other supplementary courses and models for NSOs and their coach education programs on coaching athletes with an intellectual disabilities.

Thus the National Games Committee, the National Team Program and the Coach Development office at SOC have all helped to move Special Olympics into the sport mainstream, to the ultimate benefit of the athletes themselves.

SOC will continue to see sport as a means to the development of the whole person and a particularly congenial and effective instrument in the development of people with intellectual disabilities. SOC also sees that the quality of the developmental opportunities for our athletes is directly related to the quality of the sport experience; that is, to excellent training, adequate competitive opportunities and especially to the quality of the athlete-coach relationship.

Thank you.