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We've made our mark!
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WE'D REALLY LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU
Whether you are a person with disability, or a parent, or a friend, or just someone who cares, we would love to hear from you.
Email us at: information@abilityfoundation.org

Published by Jayshree Raveendran on behalf of Ability Foundation
Ph: 91 9962386773 | 8939675544
Email: magazine@abilityfoundation.org

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

Friends.

That was some launch we had last month - the release of our first virtual, totally user-friendly, digital magazine!

I must say, we had waited for it with bated breath. While of course online magazines are dime a dozen today, are there any that are absolutely accessible? If there are, please let me know. I would love to join hands with them. As far as I know, there is just one magazine that you can see, read, listen to, access in sign language, has a large text option... and that is “Success & ABILITY”.

Back to the launch... The event began with Bombay Jayashri marking the beginning with a prayer in her melodious voice. Following this, Mr. C K Ranganathan and Ms. Revathy as Trustees, reiterated their faith in Ability Foundation and specifically “Success & ABILITY”, as also Mr. S. Krishnaswamy, our Advisor. Our correspondents Prof. Ketna Mehta and Mr. Sai Prasad gave a heart-warming recount of their association with us. Then followed the grand finale of the evening – Mr. Shankar Mahadevan who launched our digital version and also transported every listener to bliss in his amazing voice with a sublime song. To be sure, our cup of happiness was full to the brim that day.

As Ms. Revathy so aptly put it: “Success & ABILITY” is a “happiness magazine”. In keeping with this, our first issue of the COVID era was so too. More of a “making friends with COVID”, an acceptance of life as it prevails, that has seeped into all of us and the new normal that we have all absorbed. Thus, our inaugural issue, although dwelling on serious matters as COVID, brought forward articles that instilled hope and getting on with life.

Moving on, we have all been enthused about the Paralympics! Our very own warriors who brought home the gold, silver and the bronze. We cherish memories of Mariappan Thangavelu who won the silver in the men's high jump T63 and who had earlier featured on the cover of “Success & ABILITY” in January 2017. We have Ankur Dhama, who was part of the International Paralympic Committee, also the recipient of our CavinKare ABILITY Mastery Award 2016, and we have Devika Malik (daughter of Deepa Malik, our CavinKare ABILITY Mastery Award 2013 recipient), herself a high achiever, writing their perspectives of the Paralympics and on assistive sports technology. Sunil Jain opens his heart to Yashasvini about his passion for inclusive wheelchair tennis, while Dr. Ketna Mehta brings forth the need for nano-managing sports recreation.

All this as usual, fully accessible for your reading, seeing, listening pleasure. As always, I look forward to hearing from you... please do! Anything you want said. Privileged to be in touch.

Jayshree Raveendran
j.raveendran@abilityfoundation.org
“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does... Sport can create hope where once there was only despair.”
- Nelson Mandela

If you have been reading or watching the news or if you have scrolled through your social media this last month, you would have heard of the sporting extravaganza that was the Olympics in Tokyo as also the spectacular performance by our Paralympic contingent. But did you know that this contingent was able to win more medals this year than the 12 medals won in the history of Indian Paralympic participation? At Tokyo, our para-athletes finished on the podium in five of the nine disciplines they competed in. We finished 24th in the world on the medal tally. At a time when much of the news we are confronted with is of difficulty and crisis, the Tokyo Paralympics gave us a reason to celebrate, rejoice and pledge to take this forward.

The power of sports as an agent of change is undeniable. A blog published by the World Economic Forum hails sports as a means to “promote participation, inclusion, human values, acceptance of rules, discipline, health promotion, non-violence, tolerance, gender equality, teamwork, among others.” Through sport, we can impact individual lives as well as larger communities by changing mindsets and discriminatory norms. This is especially true for our sportspersons with disability, a community that has brought laurels to the country despite rarely receiving the accolades and attention of their non-disabled...
counterparts. To truly tap into the power of sports to create change, we must commit first to encouraging and supporting our very own para-sports people.

This commitment to promoting para-sports is necessarily a collective endeavour. Our performance in Tokyo was without question driven by our para-athletes’ determination and hard work. However, it has also been fuelled by an increase in awareness and funding around sports and its importance. The rise of social media and the popularity of OTT platforms have made it possible for each of us to tell stories hereto unheard of. According to an article published by the Economic Times on August 20th 2021, corporate spending on sports development and Paralympics support has seen an increase in the last four years. Khelo India, a national government initiative under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, was launched in 2018 and marks the promotion of sports among persons with disabilities as a key vertical. Even as our para-athletes focus on bettering their performance, it is the responsibility of corporates, governments and civil society organisations to create an environment conducive to and celebratory of sports.

The year 2021 has been a milestone in the trajectory of Indian para-sports. Even as we celebrate, let us pledge to further this cause. We must commit to tangible, actionable collaboration to build a conducive ecosystem around the country for sportspersons, particularly those with disability.

This commitment should include:

- Research and documentation dedicated to para-sports, bridging the data gap that exists in public platforms today on performance, requirements and successes
- Inclusive media content that spotlights para-athletes, celebrating their performance and telling their stories
- Encouragement of sports in our classrooms all over the country, pushing young children to explore opportunities that sports has to offer
- Access to scholarships, schemes and other resources for sportspersons in need of assistance
- Governance and policy decisions that treat para-athletes on par with their non-disabled counterparts
- Accessible infrastructure for sportspersons with disability
- Increasing corporate funding beyond the current Rs. 292 crores, acknowledging that sports constitutes less than 4% of annual national CSR spending according to the study published by the Economic Times. A report by FICCI further shows that rural sports & Paralympics accounted for 2% of CSR expenditure in the five years preceding 2018.

Together, let us pledge to celebrate the journeys of Manish Narwal, Pramod Bhagat, Yogesh Kathuniya and so many others who made us proud in 2021. Let us promise to tell their stories, create multimedia on parasports that are accessible, and bridge the awareness gap that exists today. Let us commit to making this just the beginning of the Great Indian Para-sport Celebration.
THE PATH OF THE PARALYMPICS
The Paralympics are an international sporting event for players with disability. They began in 1948 with the Paraplegic Games, where soldiers injured in World War II participated. The first Paralympics was held in 1960. The Paralympics is hosted at the same venue as the Olympics. Players are classified on the basis of their disability and compete across ten categories. The Tokyo Paralympics 2020 saw the participation of 4500 athletes from more than 160 countries.

India’s tryst with the Paralympics began in 1968 and we won our first gold medal in 1972 for swimming. Counting the latest Tokyo Games, we have had a total of 31 medals come our way.

While it is important to celebrate these achievements, we also need to question these performances to see if they are the result of the Paralympic movement in India. Government policies, growing support from the media, and encouragement from the average citizen have all contributed to India’s rapid improvement in Paralympic performance. That said, to take it to the next step, we need private institutions to come forward and provide a more supportive environment to our Paralympic athletes.

In some other parts of the world, public programs are conducted to spread awareness about the Paralympics. Para-athletes are provided facilities on par with their Olympian counterparts. Government policies are framed on the basis of equality. In India, the status of our para-athletes is rather discouraging.

Across our country, the differences between our Olympians and our Paralympians are quite stark. While Olympians automatically receive acceptance and recognition in society, this is something that takes far more time for most Paralympians. In an effort to be sensitive, people often create barriers in the path of para-athletes. Intentionally or unintentionally, people ascertain that athletes with disability cannot perform certain actions or complete certain tasks on their own. While they think they are helping, they are only actually making them more vulnerable. Para-athletes thus begin to doubt their own capabilities.

There is a lot of progressive development happening around our country today. At this moment in time, especially in the context of our performance in Tokyo, I would like to see every Indian come together and contribute to the progress of our para-athletes. The acceptance and encouragement that currently exists only in urban areas needs to spread to our villages as well. Spreading awareness in rural areas is especially important since most of our para-athletes hail from small towns and villages. It is important to spread information amongst average citizens about the disability community. Only if we spread awareness and enable sensitivity within the larger society, our para-athletes will be able to transcend the social bias that they currently face. Only then will this lead to showcasing of their talents to the maximum. It is this future that we must all work towards...together.

Ankur Dhama is a 2018 Arjuna Awardee, an Asian Para Games medalist and the recipient of the CavinKare Ability Mastery Award in 2016. He is currently a member of the International Paralympic Committee.
Sports connects the world. We have experienced this time and again and more recently with the Tokyo Paralympic Games.

With the pandemic looming large over the last two years, the sheer joy and relief that the Tokyo Paralympics brought to the world and to India has been palpable. This was reflected well in the Games motto for this year, "Stronger Together and United by Emotion". Sport unites us, brings us together in the grand celebration of the human spirit of resilience, excellence, persistence, courage and ability.

This becomes even more apparent in disability sport, as we have just seen in the historic performance by Team India at the Tokyo Paralympics. Engagement in sport transforms
society’s perception towards people with disabilities and draws focus to their skills and capabilities, challenging the falsely held notions towards people with disabilities as liabilities.

With equitable opportunities, people with disabilities have consistently proven to be productive members of society. It is clear that the gap lies not in our will and capability, but in the opportunity and accessibility of mindset and built environment. As a disabled young woman, athlete and founder of Wheeling Happiness Foundation, a non-profit focused on empowering people with disabilities, I have seen the forward leaps in the lives of young people with disabilities when we make opportunities and mobility aides available to them in their desired fields; be it advocacy, fashion, education or sports.

Sports and assistive technology have a symbiotic positive relationship. Assistive technology can be simple and low-tech like an active wheelchair or basketballs and goalballs with jingles inside to enable visually impaired players. It could also be more complex technology around sport-specific designed wheelchairs, prosthetic advancements, and so on. Advancements in assistive technology continue as disability sports grows as a competitive discipline. Today, the Paralympic Games are the world’s third largest sporting event after the Olympics and FIFA. With these advancements, physical activity for people with disabilities is no longer limited to being viewed only as a rehabilitative or therapeutic tool. It is a world class competitive activity.

Since the Rio Paralympic Games in 2016, Indians have begun to recognise para-sports more than ever before. The last five years of sustained attention has brought us grand, historic results from Tokyo! The role of proper and well-researched use of top-quality assistive technology is apparent for all to see in the in the stellar results of Team India’s performance. World Record making Gold Medalist Sumit uses 3 different types of prosthetic legs across daily life, practice and competition; Bhavinaben used a table tennis robot to train for a myriad of

According to the International Paralympic Committee, ‘assistive tech is any tech that gives people with disabilities more independence. Assistive tech can improve access to any part of life where disabled people face barriers, from eating to travel, sport to work.’

L-R: Devendra Jhajharia, Singhraj Adhana, Sumit Antil, Avani Lekhara, Nishad Kumar, Yogesh Kathuniya, Sharad Kumar, Sundar Singh Gurjar, Mariyappan Thangavelu, Bhavinaben Patel (Credit: Times of India)
strokes and became the first Indian to win a table tennis medal at the Games; the wonder-girl double-medalist Avani Lekhara availed computer-aided precision training at home while the pandemic had shut down shooting ranges.

These are only a very few examples of how assistive technology has enabled sports to grow, coupled with the right knowledge and training of experts and coaches as well as the sheer grit and determination of the athletes. Beyond running blades and prosthetics, we also see implements like racing wheelchairs; specifically designed basketball and badminton wheelchairs; specified ‘throw frames’ used by athletes to perform seated throws; adapted release braces in archery that allow archers to shoot with their feet, and so many more. There is in fact a unique game in the Paralympics called the Club Throw for athletes with severe spinal cord injuries resulting in impairment in lower and upper limbs including very limited use of digits (fingers). The Club is a light weight wooden object which, along with the use of glue, enables athletes to grip the Club before the throw. It may be considered parallel to the hammer throw in the Olympics.

According to the International Paralympic Committee, ‘assistive tech is any tech that gives people with disabilities more independence. Assistive tech can improve access to any part of life where disabled people face barriers, from eating to travel, sport to work.’

Assistive technology in sport, as in life, gives people with disabilities a level playing field, allows for the spotlight to shine on our capabilities, and gives us mobility and freedom. Here is hoping and believing that the day is not far when, whether it is the field of play, recreation, sport or daily life; it is a fundamental right accessible by all to keep up with the advances in assistive technology and embracing all that it offers.

Devika Malik
Co-Founder, Wheeling Happiness Foundation

(The author is a Forbes 30 under 30 honouree & National Youth Award winner)

Credits: BBC, Tech Crunch, disabilitiesports.uk, mentalfloss, The Guardian.
What would it be like if persons with disabilities had the opportunity to live a life of complete participation and contribution? This was a question that sat heavy on Sunil Jain’s mind, prodding him on towards a path of introspection, self-reflection and dreaming big. The founder of Astha Foundation, Sunil is also the Chief Enabler at Indian Wheelchair Tennis Tour (IWTT) and is on a mission to use wheelchair tennis as a tool for social change.

Speak to Sunil about tennis and the passion shines through. “It is such a wonderful game for personal development,” he says. “Whether you are a person with or without disability, it brings perspective into your life.” Through tennis, Sunil and his team at IWTT strive to bring about inclusion and personal transformation. Their program First Serve creates awareness about wheelchair tennis, encourages current players to coach communities, and trains future players by providing them access to coaches, courts, food and accommodation. The organisation is also building accessible courts for players with and without disability to come together.
This way, Sunil believes, tennis can foster inclusion and empathy. “Especially if we catch players young,” he is quick to add.

Much of IWTT’s approach is rooted in the inherent advantages of wheelchair tennis as a sport. The sport follows most of the same rules as non-disabled tennis, with the only exception of allowing players on a wheelchair to return the ball on two bounces. Sunil saw this as an excellent opportunity. In 2014, two years before IWTT was officially launched, he organised a jugalbandhi tournament, where doubles teams, each with one player on a wheelchair and one non-disabled player, came together in a series of friendly matches. The success of this event sowed the seeds of what would grow into IWTT.

Since its inception in 2016, IWTT has conducted over 10 tournaments. Each tournament comes with a Rs. 2.5 lakh cash prize. The number of wheelchair tennis players in the country has grown from 27 to over 90 during this time. “When we began, we had four women players across India,” Sunil recalls. “Now we have over twenty-one. We are even participating in the Tennis Premier League on a team with non-disabled players!”

In Sunil’s eyes, the key to scaling this impact lies in building awareness. “Sports, especially para-sports, has not penetrated into our community,” he rues. “In 2011, I had not even heard of para-sports and the Paralympics. Access to sport is still not universal. Its inherent potential is not available to everyone.” To address this, IWTT consciously builds awareness around para-sports, particularly wheelchair tennis. When the organisation was launched in December 2016, Sunil decided to make it a celebration like no other. The team put up multiple hoardings in the city of Bengaluru and invited tennis player Rohan Bopanna as the chief guest. They conducted a tournament, the Tabebuia Open, named after the flower that blooms only in the winter. “If a beautiful flower can blossom in the cold winter, wheelchair tennis will flourish in the world today,” Sunil explains.

Sunil has big dreams for the future of wheelchair tennis in India. IWTT has set out to transform the sport in India, adopting a 360-degree approach that works on everything from grassroots awareness to governance reform. In the short run, IWTT is encouraging players to engage with and create communities. Over time, the team hopes to expand its scope to other racquet sports as well. In five years, IWTT wishes to be consultants for the promotion of accessible sports across India. In the meantime, as far as tennis is concerned, the milestones are clear – participate in the 2022 Asian Games, win an Asian Games medal in 2026, bag a Paralympics medal in 2028, and impact at least 1000 lives with every medal won. Driven by Sunil’s big dreams and IWTT’s strong convictions, the future of wheelchair tennis in India looks exciting.
Jyoti Chugh Verma, my friend from The Times of India, gifted me an unforgettable recreational experience of a lifetime. She took me sailing off Gateway of India in the mid-1980s. The joy of the early morning winter breeze with the soft waves lapping close and the sweaty activity of managing the sails and observing the beauty of the ocean and skies in the stillness are memories embedded for life. Nostalgia!

Thirty-five years later, Mumbai’s beautiful coastline and yachting as a sporting recreational activity is today out of bounds for people with disabilities on wheelchairs. Such is the case for almost every kind of therapeutic sports recreation in India. We Indians may be proud and excited about our 19 Paralympian winners but we see only their smiles, not the struggles, strife or misery that lie behind their successes. That they bring laurels to their country is only an afterthought as they are persons with disabilities.
Personally, I have always been adventurous and sporty, representing my school in basketball, throwball and baseball. During college, I coached for badminton, played garba and dandiya as well as visited discotheques and danced to peppy music!

Recreational wheelchair sports rehabilitation has been an integral therapeutic group activity at our NGO Nina Foundation too. The needs, aspirations and dreams of a human being remain unchanged, disability notwithstanding. In fact, the very first milestone for us was sponsoring wheelchair cricket and throwball trophies for our national sports in 2000!

I dream of golf courses, athletics, dirt biking, swimming, archery, wheelchair racing, and green parks - all with a sign that says 'Open for All!' The new definition of ‘winners’ are those humane people who empathise, enable and execute infrastructure design and projects, enabling every citizen to participate in every recreational activity right from the thinking phase. Thinking holistically and bringing about wheelchair access to locker spaces, to sports stores, washrooms, changing rooms, cafes et al. There needs to be training for all coaches, trainers, lifeguards and all the staff including the security personnel who seem to think that ‘wheelchairs harm the curated basketball, tennis or badminton courts; but they do in fact, hurt the self-esteem and confidence of the wheelchair user!’

As part of social community service, we should also encourage our youth to volunteer and support players with disability, wheeling them from their home or workplace to the gymkhana, stadium, court or ground and relieving their family members. This new breed of empathetic doers can convert them from mere cheering spectators to true winners. Enabling such an India – with the freedom to live, work and play - would be the real respect and honour to eighty million persons with disabilities in the country.

Work-life balance, fitness, exercise, a break

Recreation is not a secondary concern for a democracy. It is a primary concern. The kind of recreation people make for themselves, determines the kind of people they become and the kind of society they build.

- Harry Allen Overstreet
from routine, going out in the sunlight, socialising and releasing endorphins or ‘happy hormones’ – everyone needs these!

One of the items on my bucket list is to play badminton with my brother Dhaval like we did in our younger days. Indian Gymkhana is close by, I have my sports wheelchair and racket, and Dhaval is ready to serve. The only hitch is that the court is on the first floor without an elevator! Do I hear some empathetic members making this accessible for all? Let us keep in mind that a fit mind and body is for the benefit of all... not just for mine!

In the words of Harry Allen Overstreet: "Recreation is not a secondary concern for a democracy. It is a primary concern. The kind of recreation people make for themselves, determines the kind of people they become and the kind of society they build."

*Dr. Ketna Mehta*
*Founder Trustee, Nina Foundation*  
*Editor, One World*