



# Sport, Disability and the Olympics

An exploration of the status and prophetic role of the Special Olympic Movement in light of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games.



## Nick Watson

Nick Watson is a Senior Lecturer in Sport, Culture and Religion at York St John University, a founder member of the Centre for Sport, Spirituality and Religion and is part of a church leadership team.

Reflection on disability sport to date has primarily focussed on issues surrounding embodiment, competitive classification, social exclusion, biomechanical study of prostheses, governance and media and cinematic representations of athletes with disabilities. Theological analysis has been virtually non-existent. This is not surprising, considering that historically the world Church (the Catholic community have arguably led the way in inclusion and provision for the disabled) has had a poor record in regard to the inclusion of those with physical or intellectual disability in ecclesiological praxis. In recent times though, there are very positive signs of change.<sup>1</sup>

My aim in this article is to provide some provisional thoughts on how Christians may understand disability sport. In particular, I will focus on athletes with intellectual disabilities and the Special Olympics, the *movement* that represents them, who I contend are an incarnational prophetic message for the big-business world of professional sport.<sup>2</sup>

### The Modern Sporting Institution: Setting the Scene

Consultant psychiatrists working in sport have noted that thoughts of weakness, vulnerability and humility are an 'anathema' to the modern able-bodied professional athlete.<sup>3</sup> I do not in any way denigrate the quest for excellence in sport or any other human endeavour (e.g. music, dancing, art, parenting, preaching, peeling potatoes, etc.), determined performances, disciplined training regimes and the emotional intensity that often characterise modern sports participation and fandom.

But there are voluminous amounts of evidence that demonstrate that modern commercialised professional sport is plagued with moral and ethical issues. More often than not, these are rooted in a prideful heart, that seeks to 'win-at-all-costs', resulting in cheating, verbal and physical violence, alienation in relationships, doping, political boycotts, financial greed and corruption, self-exaltation and on the horizon genetic performance enhancement technologies for athletes.

It is therefore interesting to consider Paul's paradoxical ministry of 'power through weakness' (the self-emptying gospel of Christ), described in 2 Corinthians, and the self-exalting cultural setting of first-century Corinth. Is not this in many ways a mirror-image of the self-promoting, celebrity culture of today and twenty-first century sport? As theologian, Amos Yong notes, 'Paul would be critical of the values that prevail over the contemporary culture of sport. More precisely, when read across the Corinthian letters, Paul's model athlete is less the champion of the Isthmian games than today's Special Olympian.'<sup>4</sup> The provocative image of a disabled wheelchair athlete on the front cover of Jonathon Lamb's recent commentary of 2 Corinthians, also further illustrates this link.<sup>5</sup> In relation, there is a consistent biblical mandate that also permeates the classical writings of Thomas á Kempis, Oswald Chambers, Francois Fenelon, Andrew Murray and CS Lewis, which instructs us 'to humble ourselves' (e.g. Phil 2.1–11; 1 Pet 5.5–6), that is, we must *choose* to prefer others and not exalt ourselves in the quest for a worldly reputation or riches. Success, status and winning, while neutral concepts in themselves, when corrupted by humans for selfish ends, are values diametrically

opposed to the gospel. As Oswald Chambers counsels, 'our Lord's teaching is always anti-self-realization ... his purpose is to make a man exactly like himself'.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, according to modern cultural standards of success, *Jesus Christ was the greatest failure in human history*, he was 'crucified in weakness' (2 Cor 13.4), something that was clearly prophesied by Isaiah (52.13–15; 53) in the suffering servant discourse.

Arguing from this standpoint, radical Christian scholars, such as William Stringfellow and Jacques Ellul, and more recently the Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann, claim that many of the national, political and institutional structures of Western industrialised societies are to some degree driven by the principalities and powers (e.g. Lk 8.29–33, Gal 4.3; Eph 1.21; 6.12; Col 1.15–16; 2.15). Conversely, more liberal theological voices have often confused (even supplanted) the meaning and spiritual reality of the 'principalities and powers' with earthly forces/institutions themselves. There is a middle ground here that John Stott communicates well: if 'we become too negative towards society and its structures ... we find it hard to believe or say anything good about them, so corrupt they do appear. Advocates of the new theory warn us against deifying structures; I want to warn them against demonizing them. Both are extremes to avoid.'<sup>7</sup> Thus, I fiercely champion the *potential* good of sport but also argue the case that the *institution* of professional commercialised sport is one edifice in the modern tower of Babel. Herein lays the prophetic potential of athletes with intellectual disabilities and the movement that represents them, the Special Olympics.

### The Special Olympics: An Incarnational Prophetic Sign?

'God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God' (1 Cor 1.27–29, NLT).

If we accept that sporting locales are frequently characterised by values and behaviours that are the antithesis to the Christian gospel, it is then proposed that the weakness, vulnerability, openness and humility that is often demonstrated in Special Olympians (and other types of disability sports) carries an incarnational prophetic message. Following other disability theologians, I in no way suggest that those with intellectual disabilities are foolish but that their lives interrogate and critique culturally bound notions of 'normality' and self-worth. In this way, the *movement* acts as a foil, an intentional offence from God to an institution built largely on human effort and driven by a secular self-exalting spirit. Sporting demi-gods, such as David Beckham and Tiger Woods (until recently), often

act as sources of existential meaning and identity for many sports fans (i.e. a pseudo-religion). The enduring forces of secularisation (1800–) on Western modern social history have left a spiritual void that sports now partially occupy. The aesthetic, communal, ritual, mythic, symbolic, heroic and transcendent features of modern sports provide new liturgies for participants and fans, which substitute those of the Christian tradition. Consider, for example, the ritual and communal dimensions of the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympic and Paralympic games. These evolved in-part, from the vision of the founder of the modern Olympics, Baron de Coubertin, who regarded the philosophy of Olympism as a 'universal humanistic religion' bathed in ritual and ceremony. This is something that theologian, Ashley Null, suggests is 'completely antithetical to Christian doctrine'<sup>8</sup> and which has led to many of the ethical quandaries that now permeates the sports realm, not least the idolatrous worship of sporting icons.

This said, it is an extremely positive shift in cultural norms, that a number of high-profile physically disabled athletes have in recent times become celebrities, thus providing positive role models for the disabled community. To my knowledge, however, there are and never have been, any Special Olympians who have attained 'celebrity status' in the orbits of Western media. This reflects a series of deeply entrenched (and unconscious) societal values that marginalise and devalue those with intellectual disabilities. China's so-called 'celebration of the Paralympics' at the 2008 Beijing Olympiad, perhaps demonstrates a more conscious marginalisation, oppression and devaluing of the disabled (e.g. sex-selective abortion and genetic foetal testing to identify abnormalities with the goal of abortion), which was largely a smoke-screen for their continued emergence on the global stage. Indeed, many Olympics scholars and human-rights organisations (e.g. Amnesty International) seriously questioned the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) decision to allow China to host the 2008 games, noting that the 'moral authority' of the IOC as a force for 'global peace' (one aspect of the philosophy of Olympism) was consequently diminished. Here is an example of where 'strength and power' (in making the decision in defence of human rights), rather than 'weakness and vulnerability', would have been the Christ-like response from the IOC. Returning to the notion that the Special Olympic movement has an incarnational prophetic message for the big-business world of sport, I argue, building on the framework of Wolf Wolensberger,<sup>9</sup> the following ways in which it fulfils this mandate:

*People with intellectual disabilities are much more public and visible and are internationally recognised.* The Special Olympics, which is the world's largest organisation for persons with intellectual disabilities serves 3.1 million athletes (children from eight years and adults) and their families in 175 countries and has 805,000 volunteers, 244,000 coaches, 500,000 officials and organises 44,136 international and

## Notes

1. J Swinton, B Brock, A Yong, J Hull, H Nouwen, S Hauerwas and J Vanier have all made insightful contributions.
2. Ideas and sections of this article are based upon two previous publications: NJ Watson, 'Special Olympians as a "Prophetic Sign" to the Modern Sporting Babel', in NJ Watson & A Parker (eds), *Sports and Christianity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York, Routledge, 2012); NJ Watson & A Parker, 'Christianity, Disability and Sport: A Case Study of the Role of Long-Distance Running in the Life of a Father and a Son who is Congenitally Blind and has Profound Intellectual Disabilities', *Practical Theology* (under review).
3. D Begel & RW Burton (eds), *Sport Psychiatry: Theory and Practice* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2000).
4. A Yong, 'Running the (Special) Race: New (Pauline) Perspectives on Disability and Theology of Sport', *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*.
5. J Lamb, *Discovering 2 Corinthians* (Leicester: Crossway Books, 1999).
6. O Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour, 1935, 2 September, 'The Sacrament of Sacrifice').
7. J Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), p. 274.
8. A Null, 'Finding the Right Place: Professional Sport as a Christian Vocation', in D Deardorff & J White (eds), *The Image of God in the Human Body: Essays on Christianity and Sports* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), p. 325.
9. W Wolfensberger, 'The Prophetic Voice and the Presence of Mentally Retarded People in the World Today', in W Gaventa & C Coulter (eds), *The*

*Theological Voice of Wolf Wolfensberger* (Binghamton, New York: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2001), pp. 11–48.

10. T Shriver, 'Opening Address of Timothy Shriver (CEO)', *Special Olympics Global Congress*, 7 June (2010), Marrakech, Morocco. Available online: [www.specialolympics.org/slideshow-global-congress-photos.aspx](http://www.specialolympics.org/slideshow-global-congress-photos.aspx) (accessed 15 September, 2010).

11. RJ Farrell, PRE Crocker, MH McDonough & WA Sedgwick, 'The Driving Force: Motivation in Special Olympics', *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly* 21 (2004), pp. 160, 164.

12. G Stallings & S Cook, *Another Season: A Coach's Story of Raising an Exceptional Son* (New York: Broadway Publishing, 1997), p. 66.

13. J Kersh & GN Siperstein (2010), 'The Positive Contributions of Special Olympics to the Family', available on the Official Special Olympics website [www.specialolympics.org](http://www.specialolympics.org), p. 4.

14. D McCasland, *Oswald Chambers: Abandoned to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers), p. 84.

15. J Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourself by Accepting One Another', in NL Eiesland & DE Saliers (eds), *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 121.

16. C Whitney-Brown, *Jean Vanier: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), pp. 167–8.

regional competitions around the globe each year. The 7,500 athletes that attended the summer 2011 Special Olympics in Athens, in terms of numbers, far surpasses the projected 4,200 Paralympic athletes that will compete at London 2012. This has led Timothy Shriver (CEO) to call the Special Olympics a 'civil rights movement of the heart – powered by sport'.<sup>10</sup>

*Non-disabled and disabled persons are sharing their lives, often living together.* This is personified in L'Arche communities where those with disabilities (especially intellectual disabilities) and 'assistants', live together in a 'spirit of mutuality', learning from one another. Jean Vanier agrees in principle with Wolfensberger that persons with disabilities carry a prophetic message. Disability sport organisations and events, for example, the Special Olympics and Paralympics that have spawned thousands of regional and local events worldwide, to some degree offer this community spirit through relationships and social support. This is supported by the results of studies that have examined the motivations for athletes participation in the Special Olympics, in which they found that 'athletes identified friendships in the program as the key reason they enjoyed Special Olympics ... the importance placed on relatedness by these participants was striking'.<sup>11</sup>

*Disabled people are gentling others,* through their vulnerability, weakness and presence. This, I would argue, is Wolfensberger's most pertinent point for the sports world. It is suggested that those with intellectual disabilities have a 'gentling' influence on others, making them more compassionate, patient and tender in relationships; a humanising influence on others, through which we *meet* with the vulnerability and brokenness of others. Similarly, Timothy Shriver suggests that it is 'soul power' that gentles others and leads them to consider spiritual and relational issues. Ideally this would always be the case. However, it is also important to acknowledge that persons with intellectual disabilities can be violent, stubborn and very challenging in their behaviour, something that any parent of a disabled child or carer will testify to. The 'hardening of the heart', rather than gentling, is then always a potential outcome for those who are in regular contact with individuals with intellectual disabilities.

In wider sporting circles, the story of Gene Stallings, a highly competitive professional American football coach who has a son with Down syndrome, provides a good example.<sup>12</sup> Through his relationship with his son, Stallings quickly realised that he 'was becoming more tolerant, more compassionate, and it was carrying over into work'. This is supported by research that indicated increased patience, benevolence, tolerance, appreciation of health and family, improved relationships/friendships and a 're-examination of personal values' as the result of consistent interaction with a family member with intellectual disabilities.<sup>13</sup>

I also have experienced something of this in my coaching disability sport and spending time in a L'Arche

community. People with intellectual disabilities often see beyond our masks and defences, in that they seem to have what some disability theologians have called a 'spiritual antennae' that is not determined by intellectual capacity (1 Cor 1.18–31). In their vulnerability and transparency they relationally touch recesses of our hearts that we may not normally reveal, for fear of appearing weak or incompetent in front of others due to defensive pride and/or fear of difference. The spiritual giant, Oswald Chambers, experienced something of this, when he was on the brink of psychic collapse and in a spiritual desert during his inward journey of abandonment to God. During a Christian meeting that he was leading, a girl with intellectual disabilities, known as 'daft Meg', approached Oswald and placed a bunch of withered flowers on a table next to him. Tied to the flowers was a piece of paper that, said, 'With love from daft Meg'. Oswald described this as a 'tender touch from the Father conveying His presence and love'.<sup>14</sup> It is then interesting to note, that in the tradition of the Special Olympics, each athlete is not only given a medal but also 'a hug' after competing, something that unfortunately in modern society, may be questioned because it could encourage 'inappropriate social behaviour' with strangers.

## Conclusion

Let us hope and pray that the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games are a force for good, celebrating human excellence, building communities and positive international relations. In turn, let the Christian community wholeheartedly support Lord Coe's vision of a 'positive legacy' for this sporting mega-event in our nation, as demonstrated by the work of the inter-denominational Church organisation, More than Gold. But I also ask Christians to pause and remember that our Lord's gospel was not one of success, winning and competition. Conversely, it was characterised by a 'theology of vulnerability' and an ethos of 'downward mobility' that is seldom witnessed in the sports world. In Jesus words, 'the first shall be last, and the last shall be first'. Moltmann, recognised this in stating that 'a person with disabilities gives others the precious insight into the woundedness and weakness of human life'.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the Special Olympics have a prophetic message for the world of sport and a Church which at times can be too closely linked to the celebrity culture of the age, rather than those broken in mind, body and heart ... the marginalised, addicted, homeless and lost: 'There is a beautiful story of a young man with a disability who wanted to win the Special Olympics; he got to the hundred meter race and was running like crazy to get the gold medal. One of the others running with him slipped and fell; he turned round and picked him up and they ran across the finishing line together last. Are we prepared to sacrifice the prize for solidarity? It's a big question. Do we want to be in solidarity with others? ... We have to look at the poorest and the weakest. They have a message to give us'.<sup>16</sup>