

► OPINION

Paralympic positivity making waves in Australia

SUMMER 2023 IS A QUIET TIME for the Paralympics. The movement is just more than a year removed from the Beijing 2022 Winter Paralympic Games, an event greatly diminished by the tail end of a global pandemic, European war, and the degenerative reality of every country's unique domestic politics.

Said another way, we'd bet most SBJ readers didn't see much Paralympics coverage coming out of Beijing. It was a quiet show.

Additionally, the previous Summer Paralympic Games (Tokyo 2020/21), were delayed a year and heavily compromised by the pandemic's attempted knockout punch. That combination means it's been more than five years since the Winter 2018 Pyeongchang Paralympics in South Korea.

Invisibility is bad in the content business, and to say the pandemic was a challenge for the Paralympic movement is a massive understatement. The realities of a global virus affected athletes with impairments (and the underfunded organizations supporting them) much more than able-bodied entities.

This shouldn't be a surprise since the nature of staging a mega-event competition once every two years means Paralympians rarely receive regular media coverage. As a consequence, brand-building (for Paralympic events, teams and athletes) is reduced and while a recent investment surge benefited NCAA athletes via name, image and likeness, that surfable wave probably looks like a ripple to Paralympians.

We'll grant sport industry cynics hollering how Paris 2024 is a year away and Los Angeles 2028 is an exciting long-term prospect for Paralympians. Additionally, the next Winter Paralympics are set for the mountains of Italy in 2026. All three events will deliver spectacular venues certain to celebrate the Paralympics alongside the Olympic Games.

But let's be honest, a year is a long time to wait. Especially when all's quiet on the Paralympic front.

That's why a recent press release from Australia caught our attention and encouraged the creation of this column. The topic? The Queensland government, as trumpeted by Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk, was announcing a major partnership with the University of Queensland in advance of the 2032 Brisbane Paralympic Games.

The details outlined the government's support for a Paralympic Centre of Excellence situated at UQ's St. Lucia campus. More specifically, the Centre's mission is to support the preparations and training of Australian para-athletes building up to the 2032 Games.

This investment is no small undertaking. It's the equivalent of a Power Five Division I university redirecting funds that would have gone to football or basketball into new Paralympic training venues, equipment labs/workshops, testing facilities, and athlete support. Some might suggest that would be unimaginable, if not unthinkable, in the U.S.

Having this Centre based at a major university brings leading professors (physiologists, biochemists, bioengineers, nutritionists, psychologists and

so on) into play while simultaneously motivating a talented student workforce. All up, it means teaching and research opportunities in the classrooms, labs, education centers, residence settings, cafeterias and other places where higher education can mingle easily with governmental or corporate goals.

This is a classic legacy program and indicative of what these Brisbane Olympic Games may deliver. Think of it: a 50/50 partnership where the Queensland government and a major university each provide \$44 million (Australian). And that's before an expected additional investment from Australia's federal government.

The Queensland Paralympics Centre, which should open by 2028, is expected to feature at least 22 new staff positions and services for almost all of the 23 Paralympic sports, not to mention the possibility of UQ becoming (potentially) the permanent home of Paralympics Australia.

"We will be using sport as an alternative mode of rehab and therapy for all people with disabilities," said Dr. John Cairney, head of School for the [College] of Human Movement and Nutrition Sciences, University of Queensland. "Done correctly, it can create a pipeline for high performance parasport by increasing participation for everyone regardless of ability."

To us, Cairney's observation is key. Journalists tend to write primarily about elite performers. Professionals, Olympians, or in this case, Paralympians. But an egalitarian sport-centric center catering to anyone who wants to use parasport to enhance their life is certainly notable.

Noting that of 4.3 million Australians with a disability, only one in four participates in sport (but 75% want to participate), Palaszczuk said, "This is what legacy is all about: creating the long-lasting benefits to our community long after the [Paralympic] Closing Ceremonies."

It should also create sustainable victories for Paralympic athletes, the Queensland government, Australia's citizens, Brisbane (as a sporting hub) and a university (as a first mover).

Looking closer to North America, we sat down with Karen O'Neill, CEO of the Canadian Paralympic Committee, to talk all things Paralympics. O'Neill has been leading her organization for more than a decade, highlighted by her recognition as Sports Media Canada's Executive of the Year in 2018. This came after Team Canada's highly successful performance at the Pyeongchang Games.

Australia's **Madison de Rozario** won the women's marathon (T54 category) at the Tokyo Paralympic Games in 2021.

She believes what Australia announced will serve as a catalyst for the Paralympic movement in other countries and dedicated centers of excellence will accelerate participation in Paralympic sports globally, including Canada.

For an ordinary day in July, when nothing much is happening, that's a positive story everyone can celebrate.

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