

# THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



/Joel Marklund, via OIS/IOC/AAP Image

## Paris is adding another page to Paralympic history but what will its legacy be?

Published: September 4, 2024 2.11pm AEST

### Simon Darcy

Professor of Social Inclusion - UTS Business School - Co-Lead UTS Disability Research Network - Australian Centre for Olympic and Sport Studies - Centre for Sport, Business and Society, University of Technology Sydney

### Barbara Almond

Research Associate, University of Technology Sydney

### David Legg

Professor, Dept of Health and Physical Education, Mount Royal University

### Tracey J Dickson

Associate Professor, Faculty of Business, Government and Law, University of Canberra

A record 4,400 athletes from more than 160 countries are competing in the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games, with 549 medal events across 22 sports.

To give an idea of how much the event has grown, at the [1964 Tokyo games](#) there were 375 athletes from 21 countries competing in just nine events.

During this time, the Paralympics have evolved from an event for second world war military with spinal cord injuries to now welcoming [ten different impairment types](#), managed using an athlete classification system.

**Read more: [Explainer: how the Paralympics classification system keeps things fair](#)**

This chart demonstrates the growth of the Paralympic Games in terms of the number of athletes.

## Growth of the Paralympic Games by number of athletes

The number of Paralympians has increased 10 times that of the first Paralympic games in 1960

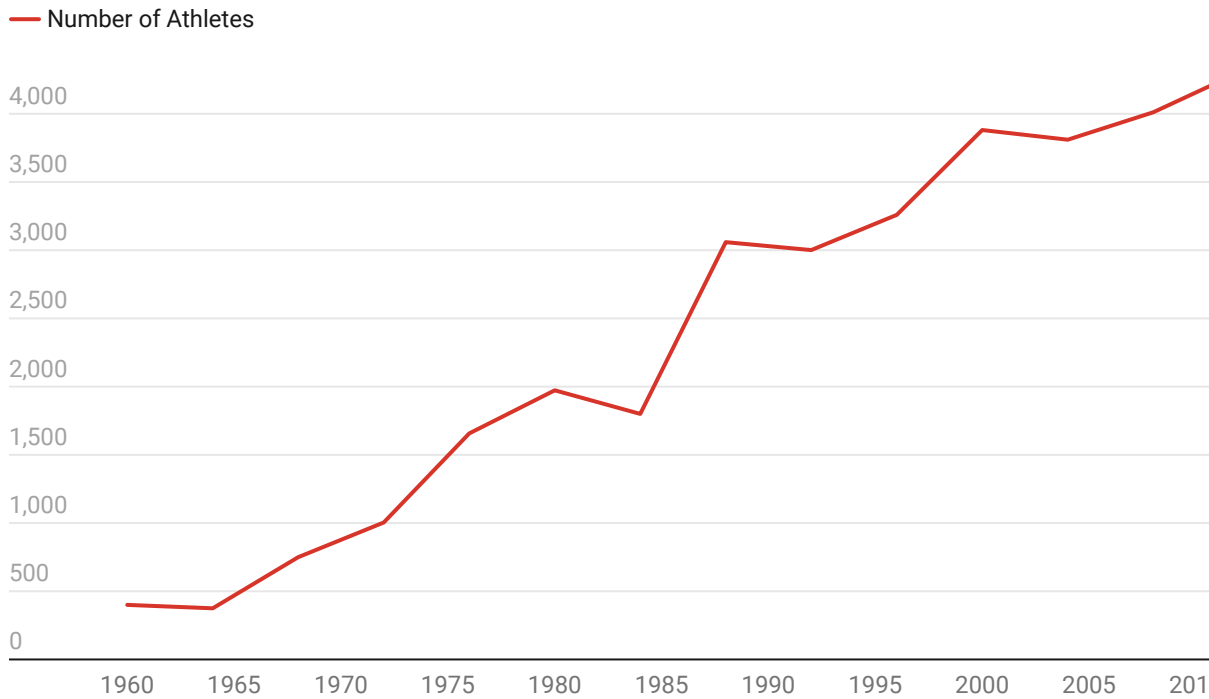


Chart: The Conversation • Source: [International Paralympic Committee](#) • [Get the data](#) • [Embed](#) • [Download image](#) • Created

As we look at these statistics, it is important to note that this [multi-sport mega event](#) evolved from an idea of several advocates across the globe, the most celebrated of whom was Sir Ludwig Guttmann, a refugee to the United Kingdom from Nazi Germany, to use sport to aid [medical rehabilitation](#).

### Origins of the Paralympics

The second world war was devastating, not just in the number of those killed but also in the number of people who sustained injuries resulting in lifelong disability.

But improved medical treatments resulted in much higher survival rates, so there was a greater need for rehabilitation to ensure the injured military could be [active members of society](#).

This led to a number of nations developing specialist spinal injuries centres, including the UK's Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Aylesbury, England.

From 1944, the centre was led by the visionary [Guttmann](#), who gained a reputation for innovative practice, both in medical rehabilitation and in motivating those with spinal cord injury.

## The Mandeville Legacy - Paralympics Documentary



Doctor Ludwig Guttmann helped spark the birth of the Paralympic Games in Stoke Mandeville, England.

Central to Guttmann's approach was the use of sport in rehabilitation, which quickly evolved into a wheelchair sport competition.

The first was an archery event between hospital wards, with 14 male and two female competitors. The servicemen and women thrived on the physical outlet that competition provided.

However, Guttmann had a broader vision for the future of wheelchair sports.

These modest beginnings led to the creation of an annual [Stoke Mandeville Games](#), first held on July 28, 1948.

Deliberately, this date was also the opening day of the 1948 London Olympic Games, with the two events held at the [same time](#).

The first international competition occurred in 1952, when competitors from Holland were invited to compete in archery, table tennis, darts and snooker.

Eight years later (1960), Rome became the first city outside of Stoke Mandeville to host the games.

Yet it was not until [Tokyo 1964](#) that the term "[Paralympics](#)" was officially used.

### **The evolution of the games**

From 1960 to 1984, only two Paralympic Games were held in the same city as the Olympics: Rome 1960 and Tokyo 1964.

In 1988, this changed when the Paralympic and Olympic Games were both held in Seoul, Korea.

Here, for the first time, the host organising committees ensured Paralympic athletes competed in the same venues as the Olympic athletes, although housed in different villages.

The Seoul 1988 Games also helped spur the creation of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) in 1989, bringing together the four separate disability-specific organisations that had previously been represented in the International Co-Coordinating Committee Sports for the Disabled.

This was a significant step, allowing the IPC to evolve and forge closer links with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and future host cities.

The Atlanta 1996 Olympic and Paralympic Games, however, showed the frailty of the relationship, with appalling issues emerging during the village handover, no coordination between the organising committees and problems with the sports delivery program.

Four years later, the Sydney 2000 Olympic and Paralympic games changed that trajectory and created a benchmark for the operational partnership between the organising committees.

Following the 2000 games, the first host city agreement between the IOC and IPC was signed, ensuring all games after Beijing 2008 would require bid cities to host both events.

The relationship between the IOC and the IPC was further consolidated prior to the Rio 2016 games with the signing of a memorandum of understanding extending the partnership up to the Brisbane 2032 Games.

## **Social inclusion and question marks**

The vision of the IPC is to enable para athletes to “achieve sporting excellence and inspire and excite the world”, with hopes of being a catalyst for greater social inclusion.

Yet, critics suggest the rhetoric of these claims can fail people with disability within the host city and country.

Critics question whether the Paralympics lead to a legacy of improvement for people with disability in the host community, or if they only improve the material position of the elite athletes who participate.

Another example critics highlight is that while the IPC handbook and the IPC accessibility guidelines discuss the importance of improving host city accessibility and attitudes towards people with disability beyond the games, the IPC has not resourced studies to test these claims.

In part this may be because focusing on legacy is somewhat new.

London 2012 was the first to have social inclusion in bid documents and featured in the narrative leading up to the games. This broadened the focus beyond the field of play.

The lack of research may also be because most organising committees wrap up within months of the games ending.

An example of a broader social inclusion agenda beyond the games is [#Wethe15](#) - a global collaboration of organisations advocating for people with disability.

**WeThe15** 

@WeThe15 · **Follow**

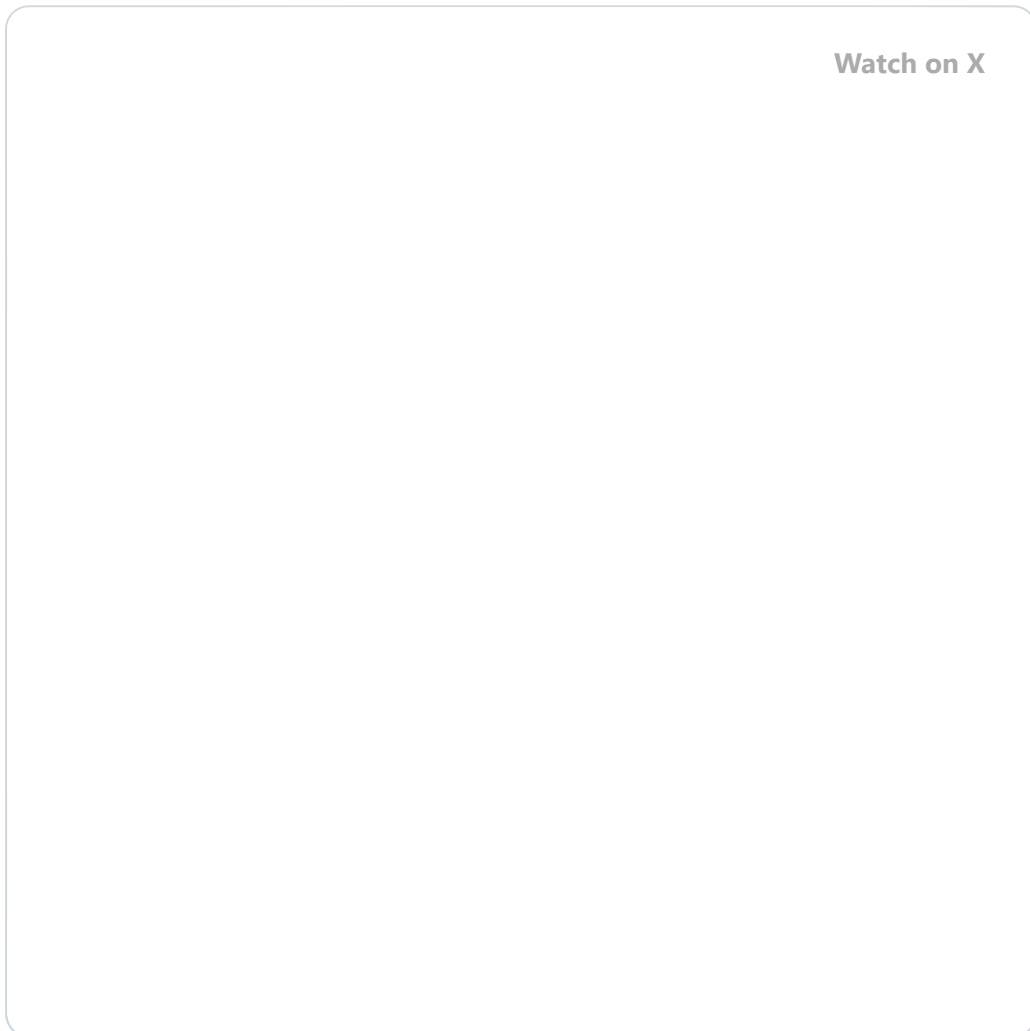


With [@paris2024](#) a few days away, [@WeThe15](#) episode on sport is out.

Listen to [@parsonsandrew](#) from [@paralympics](#) & [@TatyanaMcFadden](#) of [@TeamUSA](#) [@USParaTF](#) in conversation with [@AndyStevenson81](#)

Link: [spoti.fi/3W9brZJ](https://spoti.fi/3W9brZJ)

[#AccessAllAreasPodcast](#) [#Disability](#) [#Representation](#)



6:00 PM · Aug 23, 2024



 **18**  **Reply**  **Share**

[Read more on X](#)

Launched in the lead-up to the Tokyo 2020/21 Paralympic Games to promote social change, the campaign showed everyday life challenges, barriers, and frustrations of “the world’s 1.2 billion persons with disabilities” so they can be visible and active members of an inclusive society.

A second phase of the campaign was a #WeThe15\_podcast\_series launched prior to Paris 2024.

As gold medal winning Paralympian and Australian broadcast co-host Kurt Fearnley said: “WeThe15 is about taking the voice of the people with disabilities to an international stage.

*They don’t want to be seen as superhuman, they want to be seen as human, as equal, as being able to get a job, being able to access education.*

The success of the #WeThe15 campaign will depend on how well the rest of society is able to create more accessible and inclusive societies, communities, workplaces, and sporting opportunities.

## **The Paris legacy and beyond**

The Paris 2024 Paralympic Games has its opportunity to add another page in Paralympic history. As the IPC president Andrew Parsons recently stated

*For the City of Paris, the improvements made over the last seven years have been fantastic. They should be regarded however as the starting point of an accessibility journey, rather than the end.*

Has the Paris Games helped achieve Guttman’s vision that people with disability may live fulfilling and engaged lives?

The final assessment will be made by the community of Parisiens with disability and those that visit the city in the future.