



Choices for people with learning disabilities

News Release

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National charity applauds lifting of Paralympic Intellectual Disability ban

A leading national charity has welcomed the news that athletes with learning disabilities can once again take part in the Paralympics after the International Paralympic Committee voted to have a ban on them lifted.

Self Unlimited – the charity for people with learning disabilities, which supported this year’s Leicester-based Special Olympics - is delighted that people with learning disabilities are again able to compete in the Paralympics.

But it says they need more funding if they are going to be able to compete on the world stage.

Earlier this year, members of the successful East Midlands Cycling Team, who all use services provided by Self Unlimited, took to the track in the Special Olympics, a national competition specifically for people with learning disabilities.

The end of the Paralympics ban opens the door for athletes like them to attempt to qualify for the bigger stage of the Paralympics, which has a growing worldwide audience.

Patrick Wallace, chief executive, said: “This is fantastic news for people with learning disabilities, and allows those who have exceptional talent in the sporting world to show off their ability in a high profile, international event where athletes are increasingly recognised for their abilities, not their disabilities. We would be delighted to see participants in the Special Olympics go on to compete in the Paralympics, and to shine on the world stage.

“Self Unlimited is committed to giving people the opportunity and support they need to live fulfilling lives, and sport can play a big part in that.”

“At long last there's some kind of parity for learning-disabled athletes who can meet the Paralympics standard and it is another important step forward to creating a fully inclusive sports system. A number of athletes who starred at this summer's Special Olympics in Leicester might now fulfill a dream of playing at the highest level of sport. The re-inclusion of people with learning disabilities in the London 2012 Paralympics will build on the work of the Special Olympics and accelerate awareness and understanding of people with learning disabilities. We hope athletes with learning disabilities can now benefit from the same level of support afforded to other Paralympic athletes, which has been denied for the past nine years.

“Ever since Sydney 2000, they have been excluded from the Paralympic Games, which has prevented talented sportsmen and women having access to much needed resources and the opportunity to fulfill their sporting ambitions. The success of the nationals in Leicester, including the very high standard of competition, has provided a timely reminder to us all that athletes with learning disabilities have more than earned the right to compete on the world's biggest sporting stage.”

The charity is calling for more funding, warning that unless it is made available, athletes will not be ready to compete at the London 2012 Games and will remain excluded despite the ban being lifted.

The ban on athletes with intellectual disabilities had been in place since it was found that most of Spain's intellectual disability basketball team at the 2000 Sydney Paralympics were not disabled.

As a result, “sports intelligence” tests will form part of the new, more rigorous classification process.

Tessa Jowell, Minister for the Olympic and Paralympic Games, was reported by the BBC as commenting: “I've been involved in this campaign for the last four years so I know it wasn't a simple decision. But nobody who's been at the Special Olympics would doubt that its competitors are every bit as committed as the Paralympians.”

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