

The Kladruby Games, the Paralympics, and the pre-history of disability sport

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ABSTRACT

The place of Dr Ludwig Guttmann in the founding history of the Paralympic Games is universally acknowledged. Briefly stated, Guttmann is credited with the aspiration to improve the dismal prospects of post-war spinal injury patients, and the inspiration of using sports as rehabilitative practices. Given his initiation of the Stoke Mandeville Games in 1948 with a small-scale archery contest between two local teams, he was able to draw a ready parallel between his beginnings and the model of the London Olympic Games, and in a few short years the multi-disability Paralympic Games had been established.

However, there was both an historical context and a co-history to these brief details – there are lessons from both time and place. We must not forget (or fail to acknowledge) some of the pre-history and parallel histories, which we should attempt to recover.

This article presents an account of the development of the Kladruby Games in Czechoslovakia from 1948, which in 2017 celebrate their 100th edition, in order to bring to light some of the hidden history of disability sport. We might be led to speculate on how the Kladruby Games might have developed from these very promising beginnings, had Srdečný received earlier support from the authorities, and the impetus to consider Olympic connections. Such speculations we consider to be fruitless, given the very different conceptions of disability sport at work here. Srdečný's continuing commitment was to seeing the Kladruby Games as an impetus to the rehabilitative and recreational benefits of sport, rather than the contradictions experienced by the Paralympics in balancing elite performance values with its other aims.

KEYWORDS

Kladruby Games; Paralympics; disability sport; Vojmír Srdečný

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INTRODUCTION

The place of Dr Ludwig Guttman in the founding history of the Paralympic Games is universally acknowledged, and has been described in detail elsewhere (Brittain, 2016). Briefly stated, Guttman is credited with the aspiration to improve the dismal prospects of post-war spinal injury patients, and the inspiration of using sports as rehabilitative practices. Given his initiation of the Stoke Mandeville Games in 1948 with a small-scale archery contest between two local teams, he was able to draw a ready parallel between his beginnings and the model of the London Olympic Games, which were opening at the same time. In a few short years, the International Stoke Mandeville Games were held at Olympic venues in Rome, where, in a private audience, Pope John XXIII called Guttman “the de Coubertin of the paralysed” (Scruton, 1979, p. 55). The 1988 Seoul Paralympic Games was the first to be so called, and after its founding in 1989, the IPC back-dated (and re-named) its first edition to Rome 1960.

Guttman wrote, as early as 1949: “I foresaw the time when this sports event would be truly international and the Stoke Mandeville Games would achieve world fame as the disabled person’s equivalent of the Olympic Games” (Guttman, 1949). However, Guttman called the games of 1949 a “Grand Festival of Paraplegic Sport” (Brittain, 2012, p. 8) which confirms his main interest as focussed on Stoke Mandeville and on patients with spinal cord injury.

“Initially Guttman was adamant the Games would only be open to those with spinal cord injuries and for 16 years (1960–1976) this remained the case” (BPA, 2016). Several of the early editions of the ‘Paralympic Games’ were actually held as editions of the International Stoke Mandeville Games (in 1960, 1968, 1972 and 1984).

In wider discussions of the history of disability sport, an oft-cited example of early provision is that of sport for the deaf (e.g. Depauw & Gavron, 2005, p. 37). The Sports Club for the Deaf was founded in Berlin in 1888, and the First International Silent Games were held in Paris in August 1924, days after the closing ceremonies of the successful VIIth Olympic Games. They were intended as an equivalent of the Olympics designed specifically for deaf athletes, and are claimed as the first officially recognised international games for athletes with a disability (Séguillon, 2002). Now known as the Deaflympics, and sanctioned by the IOC, the games are seen by some as a first step for organised disability sports, and have been held every 4 years since the first games. However, we should note firstly the tendentiousness of treating deafness as a ‘disability’, since many deaf people reject this label (see Ammons & Eickman, 2011); and secondly that organisations of sport for the deaf have maintained independence from the Paralympics.

Nevertheless, since 1976, other disability categories were gradually admitted to the ‘paralympic’ fold, some with long and independent histories, beginning with blind and amputee athletes in Toronto 1976 and athletes with cerebral palsy in Arnhem 1980.

The etymology of the word ‘paralympic’ exhibits a classic semantic shift, following the fault lines identified above, from its early associations with ‘paraplegic’ to its current status as ‘games alongside the Olympics’ (IPC, n.d.). Whilst it is true that, in the early days, when Guttman’s focus was on paraplegic and quadriplegic patients, the games were envisaged as only for spinal cord injury patients. However, this is not

the position of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), which was set up only in 1989, by which time other categories of disability were already represented at the games. No edition of the games had been named ‘Paralympics’ or ‘Paralympic Games’ until the 1988 Seoul Games (that is, until those from 1960 to 1988 were retrospectively designated and numbered as such). The games were no longer paraplegic games (as had previously been insisted upon by Guttman), but rather “for the physically handicapped” (Tokyo, 1964), or “for the physically disabled” (Toronto, 1976).

The IPC, then, must have had a more inclusive definition of ‘para-’ in mind than its relation to paraplegia, as evidenced in its aim expressed by IPC CEO Xavier Gonzalez in his presentation of strategic plans for the various sports at the IPC General Assembly in 2013 in the following terms:

Provide a platform for para-athletes to regularly practice and to showcase their ability to their full potential and to reach their sporting pinnacle and dreams (IPC, 2013b).

The use of the word ‘para-athletes’ here (and also, later, the word ‘para-sport’) is clearly intended to indicate that the scope of IPC activity is not limited to paraplegic athletes, and so the meaning envisaged by the IPC, and the one in current employment, clearly relates to the second association of ‘para’, meaning ‘alongside’ or ‘next to’. The Paralympic Games are best seen as ‘parallel with’ the Olympic Games.

As the IPC itself says, on its current website:

The word ‘Paralympic’ derives from the Greek preposition ‘para’ (beside or alongside) and the word ‘Olympic’. Its meaning is that Paralympics are the parallel Games to the Olympics and illustrates how the two movements exist side-by-side (IPC 2016).

Alongside the retrospective naming and numbering of seven editions of the games as Paralympic Games, a simplified ‘Official Story’ has been created whose claims do not always stand examination. The history of the Paralympic Games is a sub-category of the history of disability sport, and whilst it is understandable that Paralympic authorities should concentrate on the former, it should be more careful when making claims about the latter. For example, the archery contest at Stoke Mandeville in 1948 was certainly not “the first recorded competition between disabled athletes” (BPA, 2016). Many examples of pre-existing competitions are given below.

Secondly, wheelchair basketball was not invented at Stoke Mandeville as a development of the ‘netball’ game that was played there, which itself replaced the rather too robust ‘hockey’ or ‘polo’ (see Brittain, 2016, p. 9). Wheelchair basketball was played in the USA from 1944, and by 1948 there was a competitive league of 6 teams. If we are to believe the International Wheelchair Basketball Federation, it was introduced to Stoke Mandeville by the arrival of American players in 1955, and superseded netball:

The Pan Am Jets of USA brought wheelchair basketball to Europe when they were invited to play at the International Stoke Mandeville Games in 1955, initially having to settle for wheelchair netball. After dominating the competition, their performance initiated the switch from wheelchair netball to wheelchair basketball for future Games (<http://iwbf.org/the-game/#game-history>).

Further, there is a rich and almost forgotten pre-Second World War history of disability sport. The Mandeville Legacy website shows photographs of “billiards at the Royal Star and Garter Home, early 1940’s”, which presumably pre-dates Guttman, and of the “First ever wheelchair sports day, 1923”, at which “a group of disabled ex-servicemen competed in a Zig Zag obstacle race in their rather primitive wheelchair tricycles” (Mandeville Legacy, 2014).

Cohen (2001) lists an even earlier event: a “Programme of Sports and Concert to be held August 6th 1917 at 2.30 pm” (Star and Garter Collection, British Red Cross Archive). One can only speculate as to the nature of the sports programme announced, but it is surely evidence of sporting activity in response to the exigencies of the First World War.

Further such evidence is to be found in popular Sports Days in hospitals like Roehampton, which held its first in 1916 (Anderson, 2001, p. 77). Anderson claims that “doctors were quick to make use of games for both their physical and mental recovery” and she gives a number of examples (2001, pp. 78–9): At the Prince of Wales Hospital in Cardiff, a golf course was constructed for amputees, with bunkers, bridges, stiles and gates. Stoolball was revived in 1917 as a game for wounded soldiers, and a tournament was organised which was held at Lords annually until 1927. The British Legion held an Imperial Sports Rally at the newly opened Wembley Stadium on 14 July 1923, and events for disabled ex-servicemen were included, such as a mile walk, a 100-yard race for the blind, and a 250-yard race for single leg amputees.

As Anderson (2008) notes, commenting on Bailey’s (2008) book on the history of the Paralympic movement:

There is a substantial amount of documentary evidence that exists detailing disabled people playing sport prior to the 1940s which is not mentioned. Crowds would turn out in London to watch the blind men of St Dunstan’s, which was a hostel for blind ex-servicemen from the First World War, compete in their Saturday Sports. [...] The One-Armed Golfers Association had their first tournament in 1933 at the Burgess Golfing Society of Edinburgh.

... and in 1934 an international one-armed tournament between Scotland and England took place (Anderson, 2001, p. 79).

Of course, there are also many records of disabled athletes competing against the able-bodied. One early and outstanding example is that of American George Eyser, a single leg amputee who competed in the 1904 Olympics, where he won 6 medals in gymnastics. He was the only prosthesis wearer to compete in the Olympics for 108 years, when Oscar Pistorius was allowed to compete with ‘blades’ (Mackay, 2014).

We adduce the above examples to show that reality is more complicated than can be captured by the ‘Official Story’, and that there was both an historical context and a co-history – there are lessons from both time and place. Whereas we understand that the ‘Official Story’ must be very simplified for its purposes, it does tend to overemphasise certain aspects of the story of the emergence and development of disability sport, whilst forgetting (or failing to acknowledge) some of the pre-history and parallel histories, which we should attempt to recover.

In the next section, to illustrate the above points, we will present an account of the development of an initiative in disability sport in the former Czechoslovakia after the Second World War, in order to bring to light some of the hidden history of disability sport, and to alert us to the fact that there are doubtless similar stories to be unearthed elsewhere.

Firstly, as background, we will present the biography of Vojmír Srdečný, the founder of the Kladruby Games in Czechoslovakia in 1948. The Kladruby Games pre-date the Stoke Mandeville Games, and will this year celebrate their 100th edition. We will also then present a brief history of the development of these Games.

Vojmír Srdečný (1919 – present)

Vojmír Srdečný was born in 1919 in Albrechtice in eastern Bohemia. In 1939 he was admitted to the Institute for Physical Education Teachers in Prague. After only five weeks of study he was arrested on 17 November 1939 by the Gestapo along with many other students, and taken in trucks to be transported to the concentration camp in Sachsenhausen-Oranienburg, north of Berlin. (Later in life, he became a member of the International Sachsenhausen Committee.) That day, 1083 Czech university students entered the gates of the camp.

After one year, one month and one day he was released along with another two hundred students. After returning to Czechoslovakia in December 1940 he worked as a trainee in an insurance company and later did forced labour in a factory in Holice. During the years 1945–1947 he finished his war-interrupted studies in physical education, and on 1 September 1947 he joined the Rehabilitation Institute in Kladruby, which had just opened. Here, he immediately began to organise sports activities for people with amputated upper or lower limbs, and this was very popular amongst the staff. With the support of management he purchased all the equipment required for sporting activities, which became part of comprehensive rehabilitative care in the Department of Physical Education.

However, in the beginning, sports games for disabled athletes were not universally popular amongst patients. Mr. Srdečný recalled a situation when he went through the corridors in the Rehabilitation Institute with athletic equipment and overheard a patient say: “Guys, look out! Here he comes again and he will chase us!” Over time, though, when the games became established, their popularity increased (Seidl, 2016).

Very quickly, within six months, the idea had taken hold, and in April 1948 the first Kladruby Games were organized (Srdečný, 1948, 2001), a multi-event programme for paraplegics and also for those with other disabilities. The first Stoke Mandeville Games, a single event programme for paraplegics only, took place three months later. The Kladruby Games were held again in 1949, but were then interrupted, as Srdečný was sacked from the Institute (as explained below).

In 1949, after five months’ military service in a tank unit, Srdečný was sent to the state spa and sulphur baths in Great Losiny, where for ten years he worked in the polio department. He felt that he was lucky, since the spa did not fall under the Ministry of Health, so he was able to continue with sport and physical activities for the physically disabled. In 1959, the situation at the Ministry changed, and Srdečný returned to Kladruby where, after a ten-year hiatus, he once again began to organise the Kladruby Games. (See Memory of Nations Project, 2000; Paradenik, 2014.)

The Kladruby Games in Czechoslovakia, from 1948 to 2017

The first Kladruby Games lasted 10 days, 15–24 April 1948, with the participation of 82 competitors (Srdečný, 1948, 2001). The games were launched with a fanfare at the arrival of competitors and a solemn speech by the institute director.

Contestants/patients were divided into four groups according to the type and degree of disability:

- Group A – upper limb disability,
- Group B – lower limb disability,
- Group C – lower limb amputation,
- Group D – paraplegia of the lower extremities.

The programme of the games was divided into three parts: sporting, cultural and institutional. In the sports section athletes participated in the following disciplines:

For men – shot put, medicine ball throw, darts, shooting at the basket, swimming, diving, underwater endurance, high jump, long jump, 3 km walking, 1 km running, 3 km cross-country running, table tennis, board game.

For women – medicine ball throw, darts, shooting at the basket, high jump, long jump, table tennis, board game.

In the cultural section were included competitions in music, art, poetry, chess, checkers, recitation and singing. The ‘institutional’ section involved competitions in decency and order in the wards, and attendance at exercise (Beran, 1974; Jarošová, Beran, & Ján, 1996; Srdečný, 1948, 2003).

The first Kladruby Games were a first attempt at the optimal selection of sporting disciplines. Already in the 2nd Kladruby Games of 1949, the selection of disciplines had changed, eliminating the medicine ball throw and underwater endurance, which were replaced with loop-ball throwing, and weightlifting of 13 kg and 25 kg at maximum repetition (Beran, 1974).

The 2nd Kladruby Games took place over 15 days, 9–23 July 1949, with the participation of 95 competitors. The first day of competition began with all patients making a solemn proclamation, in which they were reminded of the true purpose of these games. Compared to the previous year, the sports programme expanded into matches between town and country in fourteen social games and sports, with a final team score of 7–7 (see table 1) (Petlach, 1949).

Despite this very promising start, however, political conditions in Czechoslovakia were not conducive to the development of disability sport in a rehabilitative environment. After the Second World War, the communist regime pushed the handicapped to the edges of society. The Ministry of Health did not approve of sports activities at the Rehabilitation Institute. After the 2nd edition of the Kladruby Games, they were banned by the Ministry of Health in 1949, and the Sectional Director uttered the memorable phrase: “Do not mix sports with rehabilitation.” On the basis of these restrictions the founder of the games was forced into redundancy, as a physical education specialist, and to leave the Kladruby Rehabilitation Institute (Seidl, 2016; Srdečný, 2003, 2017).

Table 1 Match results, town against country (Petlach, 1949)

	Town	Country		Town	Country
Basketball	11	7	Whisking	2	1
Volleyball	1	2	Skittles	100	175
Tennis	3	2	Russian skittles	174	176
Ping-Pong	5	0	Sitting Handball	1	6
Cowboy	6	0	Foot tennis	2	0
Water polo	1	4	Drifting	7	5
Water rugby	0	2	Board game	1	2

The final scoreboard 7 : 7

After their 2nd edition, the Kladruby Games were interrupted for a full 10 years, until 1959, when the political situation changed. The initiator of the Games, Mr. Srdečný, returned and immediately organized the 3rd Kladruby Games on 1 September 1959. At these games there were notable differences in the competition programme, which now included the triathlon and tetrathlon, small-bore rifle shooting and 3m rope climbing (Beran, 1974; Srdečný, 2001). From 1960, the Kladruby Games split into spring and autumn editions, so the Games were held twice a year until 2002 (Balzar, 1968). Table 2 shows a detailed overview of the records of the Kladruby Games between 1948–1973.

Table 2 The Kladruby Games overview 1948–1973 (Srdečný, 1974)

	Date	Participants		Date	Participants
I.	15. 4. – 24. 4. 1948	82	XVI.	6. 9. – 8. 9. 1966	138
II.	9. 7. – 23. 7. 1949	95	XVII.	24. 4. – 27. 4. 1967	139
III.	1. 9. – 12. 9. 1959	166	XVIII.	20. 9. – 22. 9. 1967	173
IV.	14. 6. – 25. 6. 1960	170	XIX.	24. 4. – 26. 4. 1968	156
V.	19. 10. – 22. 10. 1960	179	XX.	28. 8. – 30. 8. 1968	142
VI.	25. 5. – 10. 6. 1961	189	XXI.	29. 5. – 30. 5. 1969	135
VII.	9. 10. – 31. 10. 1961	176	XXII.	22. 9. – 26. 9. 1969	122
VIII.	4. 6. – 8. 6. 1962	184	XXIII.	15. 5. – 16. 5. 1970	129
IX.	24. 9. – 28. 9. 1962	181	XXIV.	21. 9. – 25. 9. 1970	139
X.	1. 7. – 6. 7. 1963	185	XXV.	27. 5. – 28. 5. 1971	121
XI.	22. 6. – 26. 6. 1964	178	XXVI.	23. 9. – 24. 9. 1971	130
XII.	23. 9. – 26. 9. 1964	167	XXVII.	18. 5. – 19. 5. 1972	135
XIII.	26. 5. – 29. 5. 1965	127	XXVIII.	28. 9. – 29. 9. 1972	145
XIV.	20. 9. – 22. 9. 1965	157	XXIX.	24. 5. – 25. 5. 1973	136
XV.	25. 5. – 27. 5. 1966	140	XXX.	28. 9. – 29. 9. 1973	147

It should be noted that, since the first years, participation in the Games has been consistently high. Typically the number ranges from 150–200 athletes (Foxová, 2017; Rehabilitační ústav, 2007).

Records from the years 1974–1981 are so far undiscovered, despite archive and publications searches. From 1982 to 2006, the Games were held continuously, with minimal changes to the sports programme. We should draw attention to a significant change in the organization of the Games in 2006. Until then, patients competed only as individuals in the Games, even when contributing as a ‘town’ or ‘country’ team member in 1949. For the first time in 2006, all participants were divided into four teams, which competed together in all competition categories, some of which were also sub-divided into classification categories. The competition categories were also newly devised:

A – physical disability upper extremities (hand, elbow, shoulder),

B – physical disability lower limbs (ankle, kneeP*, vertebraeP*),

C – less mobile (group hemiparesis, paraparesis, hips, vertebraeS* + Z*, kneeZ*),

D – wheelchair users (group mats),

E – immobile (wheelchair users, who are not included in any group exercise).

* The classification categories were divided on the level of ‘eventual burden’ on the patient due to his abilities, skills and health condition.

Z = beginner, S = intermediate, P = advanced

Another milestone in 2006 was to diminish the number of athletic disciplines. What remained were a relay race and orienteering (Foxová, 2017; Rehabilitační ústav, 1995; Srdečný, 2003).

The Kladruby Games also included in its programme exhibitions of national teams of disabled basketball players against whom patients played a team match as the closing event. A substantial criterion is the effort to involve every patient in the Games, so that the Games help the rehabilitation process to fulfil its social dimension.

On the 50th anniversary of the Rehabilitation Institute in 1997, the Games hosted its 75th edition. It should be noted that the 100th Kladruby Games will be held on 23–26 May 2017, at which the founder of the Games, 97-year-old Mr. Srdečný, has promised his attendance.

CONCLUSION

Guttman will forever be remembered as the organizer, at Stoke Mandeville, of small-scale paraplegic games that very quickly evolved into the much larger International Stoke Mandeville Games, which were in turn the precursor of the multi-disability Paralympic Games. Indeed, some of the editions of the International Stoke Mandeville Games were even retrospectively named as Paralympic Games. Guttman had the advantage of having emigrated to a stable post-war society, receptive to his views. He also benefitted from the model of the Olympic Games in London in 1948, and seized on this historical accident as a motivation for his prescient vision of the future development of disability sport, on the Olympic model.

However, it should be noted that:

1. the Kladruby Games preceded the Stoke Mandeville Games, albeit by a mere 3 months,
2. the Stoke Mandeville Games were on a tiny scale compared with the first Kladruby Games of 1948 (and also the second, of 1949), in terms of numbers of participants (12 : 82), and duration of event (1 : 10 days),
3. the Stoke Mandeville Games of 1948 had one sport and one disability category, whereas the Kladruby Games had seven sports and four categories of disability,
4. the Kladruby Games included not just individual events, but also social games and sports,
5. the Kladruby Games had elements of oath-taking, ritual and ceremonial (which are also found in the Olympic Games),
6. the Kladruby Games had competitions in the arts and culture, as did the Olympic Games until 1948, when competitions for medals in the arts were discontinued,
7. the first Kladruby Games also had an explicitly 'ethical' component – not only in oath-taking, but also in competitions for 'institutional' virtues,
8. recently, the Kladruby Games has been experimenting with 'mixed' groupings (teams competing together in all competition categories).

We might be led to speculate on how the Kladruby Games might have developed from these very promising beginnings, had Srdečný received earlier support from the authorities, and the impetus to consider Olympic connections. Such speculations we consider to be fruitless, given the very different conceptions of disability sport at work here. Srdečný's continuing commitment was to seeing the Kladruby Games as an impetus to the rehabilitative and recreational benefits of sport, rather than the contradictions experienced by the Paralympics in balancing elite performance values with its other aims.

Considering the huge success of the elite Paralympic Games over the past four decades, it is difficult to compare them with the Kladruby Games which, despite troubled beginnings in an unfavourable regime, grew into a magnificent sports event focused on patients with disability, in the form of rehabilitative and recreational contests.

NOTE

The first author, RR, conducted interviews with staff at the Rehabilitation Institute in Kladruby in March 2017, and plans to attend the 100th Kladruby Games to be held on 22–26 May 2017. He was also able to interview 97-year-old Mr. Vojmír Srdečný on 13 March 2017 in Prague.

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