

Beijing: A Magnificent Paralympic Venue to Showcase Athletes with Disabilities

In the lead-up to the Beijing Olympics and Paralympics, there was much written in the media about the shortcomings of China with respect to human rights, religious and press freedoms, and progress for Chinese citizens with disabilities. These concerns are valid and need to be aired whenever possible to help coax China to amend some of its domestic policies.

However, I also want to give credit to the progress that has been made as a result of the hosting of the Olympics and Paralympics by the government of China. These events set the stage to address some of these concerns. Recent Wall Street Journal reports indicate that some of the restrictions on foreign press reporting that were made more lenient for the Olympics/Paralympics, have been made permanent.

Additionally, significant steps were taken to demonstrate the importance of the Paralympic Games, with much emphasis on abilities and making this ancient city accessible to people with disabilities.

Despite the fact that Beijing has been a capital city for eight centuries and some of its structures date to the 1100s, the government went all out to make the Olympic/Paralympic facilities fully accessible to those with disabilities. More than \$100 million was spent making them, as well as many other attractions and tourist sites in Beijing, accessible.

However, even though the Great Wall of China at Badaling was advertised as accessible, it was not. We had two wheelchair users and neither could negotiate the facilities. The ramp to the gondola was far too steep and long and at the top of the gondola there was about 30 meters of steps (no ramp). There is still work to be done!

During my visit as a member of the Presidential delegation to represent the United States at the opening ceremonies, I attended the following events and venues: U.S. Paralympic Team Flag Raising Ceremony at the Paralympic Village; the Paralympic Opening Ceremony at the National Stadium (Bird's Nest); cycling at the Laoshan Velodrome; men's basketball at the National Indoor Stadium; and men's blind goalball at the BIT Gymnasium. I also was honored to be hosted at a private meeting with Vice President Xi Jinping at the Diayutai State Guesthouse.

The experience in Beijing was not only one of the most memorable of my career but, after attending four Paralympic Games, I believe the event may well have set a new standard.

The opening ceremonies were produced by the same film artist that produced the Olympic opening ceremonies but with artists and performers with disabilities the central actors. One production featured 750 dancers with hearing impairments. As they sang their songs in sign language, they danced in different formations in brightly lit white gowns. The lighting showed the forms of flowers and other shapes as they danced. Another production featured a blind singer and piano player. Both were amazing and moving performances.

One of the most moving acts featured a young female dancer who had lost her leg in the great earthquake that rocked China in the spring of 2008. Although not yet recovered enough to dance again, she was surrounded by dozens of dancers wearing long white gloves. As the music played, they sat and with their gloved hands and arms simulated the movement of legs dancing. Their smooth movements were every bit as beautiful as if they were standing and dancing, demonstrating that there is more than one way to do something when you have a disability!

From the opening ceremonies through the sports competitions, everything was well-planned and professionally executed. The facilities were state of the art, officials and volunteers well trained, and venues and facilities accessible to everyone with a disability. Official announcements were made in both English and Mandarin, with much information given about the competitors, world records, and history of the sport.

I also was very impressed with the attention that the Chinese media gave to the Paralympics. It was much more prominent than coverage in the United States. One day, the front page of the China Daily News carried a photo of the U.S. vs. Israel wheelchair basketball game. The signage also was notable with thousands of Paralympic banners on the sides of the roads from the airport into the city, banners with disabled athletes displayed on the sides of 35-story buildings, and flags everywhere. I have never seen better promotion of the Paralympics than in Beijing.

The tremendous abilities of people with disabilities are best exemplified in the performances of the athletes with disabilities. Events like the Paralympics send a strong message that we as disabled people can be active and productive members of society.



Opening Ceremony in Beijing, China. From left to right: Kirk Bauer, Disabled Sports USA; Marlon Shirley, Track and Field Paralympian; Brian Frasure, Track and Field Paralympian; Hon. Clark T. Randt, Jr., United States Ambassador to the People's Republic of China; and Melissa Stockwell, Wounded Warrior and Paralympic swimmer.