

The more the merrier

One of the criticisms of the disability sport world is that the proliferation of organisations within it can make the politics seem more important than the sport. The Leisure Review took a look at one of the newer kids on the block.

Since the first event in 1960 Britain has always been one of the top-performing Paralympic nations and a lot of that success is directly attributable to the work of the British Paralympics Association. However, as well as continuing to nurture and develop elite athletes with a disability to ensure the UK remains at the top, the organisation now known as ParalympicsGB is also committed to developing sporting opportunities at all levels for people with a disability.

It was this latter objective which led in May 2007 to the creation of Parasport, "an online virtual disability sport institute aimed at increasing participation levels in disability sport by signposting people to suitable opportunities, clubs and facilities in their region". The project, which runs to 2012, is heavily sponsored by the professional services firm Deloitte, who have committed £1.7 million to the project.

So, a website; but perhaps the motivation behind the website is enough to convince the cynical that Deloitte have done something more than buy an association with a brand that harnesses both the appeal of helping the disadvantaged with the Olympic rings. The Parasport website, which is the first of its kind in the UK, aims to inspire anyone with a disability to lead an active lifestyle and enjoy all the benefits that are associated with participating in sport, such as health, inclusion and social development, as well as the value of sport in rehabilitation. It has a 'self-assessment wizard' which allows the user to input their disability and find sports suitable for them to participate in and a page dedicated to each of the sports so users can find out additional information. And there are also regular news updates, videos and photographs to help bring the sports to life.

Pre-empting the launch of Sport Unlimited by about a year, the site also encourages involvement beyond the Paralympic canon. Links can be made to zone hockey, transplant sports, waterskiing, angling, wheelchair dance, hand cycling, motor sports, inclusive gyms, flying and many others. As the project matures so more clubs and event organisers get themselves on the database. Parasport is working towards supporting and developing as many of these sporting opportunities as possible.

To try to understand where the online institute fits within the disability sports landscape and to gain some insight into how Paralympics GB's success has affected the sector we spoke to Parasport national manager Nick Heyworth for a post-Beijing snapshot.

"Beijing was amazing for disability sport and the awareness of Paralympic sport," Nick said. "The athletes once again proved that Paralympic sport in this country is leading the way with an amazing second place medal table finish, and ParalympicsGB again showed how to send the best prepared team to a games."

And how has that affected his project? "We have seen a real increase in awareness and understanding of what disability sport can offer in this country and the excellent work that is happening and opportunities available in the form of enquires and contact made via both the ParalympicsGB and Parasport websites." And going forwards? "This will enable us help inspire, engage, educate and most importantly signpost disabled people to high-quality sporting opportunities throughout the country. It will also hopefully allow us to find and support not only potential future Paralympic athletes but also those wishing to start lifelong participation in sport."



On a roll: goal ball is go

"An online virtual disability sport institute aimed at increasing participation levels in disability sport by signposting people to suitable opportunities, clubs and facilities in their region"



A clean sweep

According to the Parasport site, in the UK in 2006 the Department for Educational Needs and Skills released Special Education Needs in England, January 2006 which gave accurate statistics on disabilities in school children. In England alone of more than 8 million pupils in schools 1.3%, or roughly one in eighty pupils, were in some way disabled. Which rather makes the debate about whether Parasport is required redundant.

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Peter Norfolk in Beijing