

Paralympians are a fine example of what can be achieved in the face of great adversity, says **Michael Paterson**

In time, we will look back to the summer of 2012 and remember the London Olympics, where athletes from many different countries competed against each other to be the best that they could possibly be.

We have seen world records being broken and athletes achieving their personal bests and we can admire them for what they have achieved.

When I speak of athletes, I include those athletes of the Paralympics, where the only difference between them their able-bodied counterparts is some form of physical impairment.

The Paralympics, in my opinion, has the ability to showcase what people with disabilities are capable of.

It is unlike the International Year of Disabled People, which the United Nations declared in 1981 — ironically, the year I lost both my arms and suffered severe injuries to my lower limbs in an IRA rocket attack when I was a policeman.

That particular year faded into

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obscurity. I remember carrying out a survey in 1982 asking people how many of them knew that 1981 was the International Year of Disabled People; none did.

That year did little for showing how capable disabled people are, whereas the 11 days of the Paralympics, which finish on Sunday, will do more for disabled people than the whole of 1981 did.

In the past, the perception of disabled people was that they were less-able than others.

I recall being treated differently in the period following my injuries. I remember an occasion when my wife and I were visiting her elderly aunt; the aunt asked, “Does Michael take sugar?” Hazel replied, “Ask him, he’s sitting there.”

So often, disabled people have been thought of as not having full mental function, because they had some physical disability. I experienced this when handing over money in the supermarket and the cashier slowed down her speech to help me understand what she was saying.

Perceiving people with disabilities as being incapable may lead to a sense of them having no value in society, but in reality this is far from the case.

Many people with impairments are extremely



Michael Paterson now, and (below) after his injury. Bottom, Northern Ireland's Michael McKillop who has retained his 800m Paralympic title

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capable and have been role models for others in the face of adversity. One thinks immediately of Stephen Hawking, one of our greatest minds, who is confined to a wheelchair and has difficulty communicating as others would.

We should also salute Michael McKillop, the local lad who won two gold medals running 800m and 1500m in the London Paralympics.

Personally, I enjoy the story of Oscar Pistorius, the South African runner dubbed ‘the fastest man on no legs’.

Pistorius is a below-knee, double-leg amputee, who runs on specially designed blades which allow him to compete with able-bodied athletes.

I am amused by the challenge there was to him, as he was seen as having an unfair advantage over able-bodied runners.

This was overturned in



2008 and he was then allowed to run in able-bodied games.

We should consider what an Olympic athlete with, or without, full physical function has to do to get to that level.

It is all about achievement at different stages to reach that highest possible level with the accolades it brings.

When I was discharged from hospital at first, my leg had been in traction and I was unable to bend it for a number of months.

When I was finally able to walk unaided, without the brace or anybody holding me, it felt freeing; it was an achievement, literally the first step.

I started to run and built up my distance, managing to take part in a 10-mile sponsored walk and then another landmark, running a half-marathon. I felt I had achieved.

That's why I was so heartened when, watching the Paralympics one evening, I saw a competitor

throwing a discus and found out that he had lost both legs in an explosion in Afghanistan while serving in the Army. He had overcome his challenges and was able to compete on the world stage, but I am sure he did not find that easy at the start.

All of us are capable of achieving greater things and the Paralympic athletes whom we see on television are fine examples of what can be accomplished in the face of adversity.

Many people have referred to me as an inspiration and a model for others and I accept that gracefully. I also enjoy the opportunity to see others who can inspire me, too.

Inspiring people are all around us — we just need to notice them. But, over the brief period of the Paralympic Games, we can feed on the positive energy these magnificent athletes generate and use that to help propel each of us forward on our own journeys through life.

Dr Michael C Paterson OBE is a consultant clinical psychologist
www.drmichaelpaterson.com

inside...

Airline food

HOLIDAYS abroad can be an expensive business. The cost of hotels, food and sightseeing can all add up to a nasty headache after arriving home.

There was a time when you would have added flights to the above list but the growth of budget airlines means travelling is now cheaper than it once was.

However, look a bit closer and these low-cost airlines are sometimes not quite the bargain they seem — especially when it comes to in-flight snacks.

Last month, I had to catch an early-morning flight with easyJet — so early that I opted to skip breakfast and grab something to eat on the plane.

But it proved an expensive lie-in, with the cost around double the amount you would expect to pay in a shop. Nor is it an uncommon experience.

New research by website TravelSupermarket.com has found some budget airline passengers are paying the same for in-flight snacks as they do for a ticket.

Irish airliner Ryanair is among the worst culprits, charging 1,083% more than a supermarket for a 500ml bottle of still water.

Pringle crisps on an easyJet flight costs almost 350% more than a typical branch of Asda, while flapjacks on a Flybe flight can have a 1,000% mark-up on supermarket prices.

According to TravelSupermarket.com, the average mark-up on confectionery, such as sweets, chocolate and crisps, is 347%.

Bob Atkinson, from the website, warned customers were being exploited by some airlines.

“We appreciate they are businesses, but these are charging several times what supermarkets charge, who manage to make a profit,” he said.

“Holidaymakers flying with airlines that don't offer a complimentary meal can fork out a small fortune on snacks, which are considerably more expensive onboard than what you'd pay in even an airport shop.

“Airlines realise hungry and thirsty passengers are a captive audience, with no option but to buy from the trolley if they fail to plan ahead.”

In response, easyJet said its food was “competitively priced”, adding that its prices should be compared to bars and restaurants, rather than supermarkets.

A Ryanair spokesman — in true Ryanair style — branded the survey “silly”.

“Ryanair is not a supermarket, it is Europe's only ultra-low fares airline, guaranteeing the lowest airfares,” he said.

The lesson is to plan ahead. Otherwise, relying on airline snacks could leave a nasty taste in the mouth.

ADRIAN RUTHERFORD