Learning Disability, Sport and Legacy Report Launch

Legacy Research Group on the Special Olympics GB National Summer Games – Leicester 2009

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RESEARCH TEAM:
International Centre for Sports History and Culture, De Montfort University, Leicester:
Dr Susan Barton
Project Research Fellow
Dr Neil Carter
Senior Research Fellow
Professor Richard Holt
Professor of Sports History
University of Leicester:
Mr John Williams
Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology
People with learning disabilities are a large and vulnerable group in our society whose needs and achievements can easily be overlooked. Sport offers everyone, including those with learning disabilities, the chance to fulfil their potential, improve their health and build self-confidence. With this in mind it gives me special pleasure to welcome the publication of this unique research project into the impact of the Special Olympics National Summer Games held in Leicester in the summer of 2009 – the largest multi-sports event in Britain in that year.

What are the challenges of such a massive undertaking for Special Olympics Great Britain (SOGB) and for a host city? How do athletes and their families benefit? How can we pass on ‘best practice’ to ensure a positive legacy for people with learning disabilities? These are some of the key questions posed – and answered – by this successful collaboration between De Montfort University (DMU) and the University of Leicester.

This involved in-depth interviewing of athletes, families and officials by Dr Susan Barton, the project research fellow, who also published the first history of SOGB as part of the project. Dr Neil Carter and Professor Richard Holt from DMU and Mr John Williams from Leicester University managed a detailed survey of wider public attitudes, measured media coverage and evaluated the financial and administrative challenges of the event for the city and for SOGB. This is the first time such an event has been the subject of rigorous academic analysis. This is a major report which shows how Leicester rose to the challenge in the most difficult circumstances and what we all can do to help ensure the future of sport for those with learning disabilities.

Liz Kendall
MP for Leicester West

This report is the first rigorous and detailed examination of the problems and possibilities of hosting the SOGB National Summer Games. SOGB was set up in 1978 and it is the largest organisation providing sport for people with learning disabilities in the UK. It currently has c.8,500 members with much of its work heavily dependent on local volunteers. The first Games were staged in 1982 and have been held at four-year intervals hosted by different cities throughout the UK. Special Olympics Leicester 2009 (SOL 2009) involved c.2,500 athletes, 1,200 coaches plus 6,000 family members and carers, making it the largest multi-sports event held in Britain in that year.

Here we provide a summary of the two-year collaborative research project into the impact and legacy of the Games for the athletes, the city and the public run by the International Centre for Sports History and Culture, De Montfort University and the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester. Supported by Leicester City Council and SOGB, this project has produced original and important quantitative and qualitative findings on the role of Special Olympics (SO) in terms of:

i. The value of sport for people with learning disabilities and their families and carers

ii. The financial and organisational issues for host cities in staging a mega-event

iii. Public and media awareness of learning disabilities generated by the Games

iv. The critical role of volunteers and the volunteer programme

v. The major challenges of sustaining a viable Games legacy

vi. The future role of SOGB

Liz Kendall
MP for Leicester West
THE HOSTS – THE CITY’S MOTIVATIONS

i. The Games offered place marketing and regenerative branding opportunities.

ii. Special Olympics fitted well with the philosophies and policies of a local authority which placed emphasis on its work on sport and health and working with people with learning disabilities.

THE HOSTS – SOGB’S MOTIVATIONS

i. The city was seen positively for its work with people with learning disabilities.

ii. Leicester was regarded as a dynamic, ‘young’ venue which offered the sort of harmonious ethnic diversity that the Special Olympics movement in Britain lacked.

PLANNING THE GAMES

Leicester was awarded hosting rights for the Games in July 2007. This meant that there was only two years for Leicester Games 2009 Limited to obtain sponsorship funding for the Games in a difficult economic climate and establish the administrative hub needed to manage a highly complex event.

FUNDING THE GAMES

This proved to be the most problematic issue for the hosts:

i. Leicester councillors and officials perceived that the Special Olympics offered possible branding connections with London 2012 and they believed this ‘Olympics’ association would ensure their success with potential sponsors for SOL 2009. This confidence proved misplaced. The intervening global financial crisis greatly exacerbated the problem of finding alternative commercial funding. Eventually, attempts to secure private sponsorship failed almost completely.

ii. The Games offer some limited commercial rewards, but it is not financially self-sufficient or profitable, as other mega-events often are.

iii. Leicester City Council had no alternative, therefore, but to underwrite the cost of hosting the 2009 Games, with Sport England eventually contributing £200,000. It was Leicester City Council’s willingness to finance the Games with an additional £1 million that saved the event.

LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES

i. The financial problems meant that much of the detailed planning for the Leicester Games effectively had to be squeezed into a period of around six months.

ii. Leicester lacked some of the sporting facilities necessary to host a number of sports in a single venue; 21 sports were staged at 21 venues.

iii. Great organisational pressures were placed on SOL 2009 board members and the small number of senior staff seconded from Leicester City Council to run the Games. Only the willingness of this group to work extreme, unsocial hours, under great stress for no additional pay, ensured that the Games took place and were a success.
PART II: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE 2009 GAMES

EVENT MANAGEMENT
A highly successful Games was staged despite the condensed period of preparation.

i. The event was kept in the local public eye via the appointment of ‘Ambassadors’, the production of newsletters, and through new marketing signage to promote the event as part of the city’s ‘One Leicester’ regeneration campaign.

ii. Despite its success, it was noted that few of the people involved in hosting SOL 2009 had any previous experience of working with people with learning disabilities. It was the key event to engage members of the Leicester public and the Opening Ceremony has important symbolic status for SOGB, the athletes and their families and carers. But it soon fell behind schedule. It was too long and finished so late that a substantial proportion of the crowd, especially those with children, left before or during the latter part of the spectacle. The high quality of the event was cited later by many athletes, families and other spectators, but a shorter, better regulated ceremony is required in future, or one that begins earlier.

OPENING CEREMONY
This was a very well attended event held at Leicester City’s football stadium. There was an impressive range of professional entertainment plus performances by local people with learning disabilities. It was the key event to engage members of the Leicester public and the Opening Ceremony has important symbolic status for SOGB, the athletes and their families and carers. But it soon fell behind schedule. It was too long and finished so late that a substantial proportion of the crowd, especially those with children, left before or during the latter part of the spectacle. The high quality of the event was cited later by many athletes, families and other spectators, but a shorter, better regulated ceremony is required in future, or one that begins earlier.

RUNNING THE SPORTING EVENTS
Running the Special Olympics Games is more complex than organising many other sporting events.

i. The athletes have particular needs in terms of their management, accommodation and transport.

ii. Athletes are required to be assessed and placed in the appropriate skill categories before the competition itself can commence. Most events ran smoothly in this respect, though certain sports and venues did have their problems.

iii. There is a clear tension between promoting the Games as a local spectator event on the one hand, and the use of community sports facilities which are large enough only to house participants and their families on the other. If local people had turned up in greater numbers to some of the events it simply would not have been possible to accommodate them.
ORGANISING GAMES WEEK

i. Functional Heads, recruited locally and on a voluntary basis, were responsible for the events during Games week. Their duties included: the opening ceremony, visitor information, medical services, transport, volunteers and event control. Most Functional Heads felt the Games had been an intensely rewarding experience, one which had enhanced their skills, despite difficulties due to budgetary delays.

ii. Heads of Delegation from the SOGB regions had extensive experience of previous SOGB events and their meetings with local organising staff during Games week, proved invaluable.

iii. Heads of Delegation were broadly appreciative of the efforts being made in Leicester, but a lack of a designated transport link running through the day to connect different venues, the Games village and sites of accommodation was cited as an issue for some competitors and carers. Another issue was a relative lack of evening entertainment for athletes and carers.

THE ATHLETES AND THEIR FAMILIES

There were very significant research findings relating to athletes and their families:

i. Special Olympics is hugely beneficial in the lives of the athletes and families involved. The Games carry social, competitive and health rewards as well as a sense of a positive, collective shared experience during the week. For athletes, training for and then competing at the Games aids both their fitness and well-being, and gives them a sense of purpose and confidence.

ii. Families and carers often feel isolated on a daily basis and Games week offers them a welcome shared experience and psychological ‘time-out’; letting them know they were not alone in caring for a disabled family member.

iii. There was, however, an uneven representation of athletes by region. Greater London, for example, had only 46 competing athletes whilst Scotland had a remarkable 775. This structural imbalance, a function of volunteer activity and/or the impact of statutory local support, also contributed to the heavily ‘mono-cultural’ nature of the Games. There were relatively few Black or Minority Ethnicity (BME) athletes or carers present.

iv. Heads of Delegation and family members generally gave high ratings for the facilities and services. The city also made a very positive impact on those who visited for the Games. Especially important here was the welcome provided in the city and the reported ‘friendliness’ of local people and officials of various kinds, and the overall ‘quality’ of the experience of those who came to the city for the Games.

THE SOL 2009 VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME

There was almost unanimous agreement that this had been an outstanding success:

i. Approximately 1500 volunteers were originally recruited, but in the end 1050 took part: 676 coming from the city and 314 from the county.

ii. School and college students and the retired were over-represented. The latter group included some volunteers who had previously worked with people with learning disabilities. Some volunteers were also drawn from local young offender centres. An important feature of SOL 2009 was that 81 volunteers – and some volunteer trainers – themselves had learning disabilities. Around 40% of volunteers were drawn from BME communities; a similar proportion to Leicester’s ethnically diverse population.
iii. One concern among volunteers was that there was not always sufficient work for them to do, especially as visitors became more familiar with Games procedures and venues.

iv. For the first time, volunteer training was provided prior to the Games and this was a great success. As a consequence, SOL 2009 created a trained volunteer group, many of whom might remain engaged, or volunteer again in the future. How many volunteers might continue to work, post-Games, in sport with people with learning disabilities, however, was unclear.

v. One of the most successful features of the Games’ volunteer programme was the social and cultural exchange that occurred between younger BME Games volunteers and athletes with learning disabilities and their carers. The benefits of these exchanges were reciprocal. Meeting people with learning disabilities not only improved the awareness of learning disabilities amongst younger volunteers but also visitors had positive experiences through meeting volunteers from BME backgrounds.

MEDIA COVERAGE

The reporting and representation of the Games were important not only for publicising the Games and drawing attention to people with learning disabilities – a largely invisible social group – but also for reflecting wider attitudes towards them.

i. There was considerable coverage in the local media but the Games made relatively little impact on the national media. BBC Radio Leicester and the Leicester Mercury were very strong supporters of the event throughout.

ii. ITV was an important broadcast partner, providing an estimated £400,000 worth of TV coverage. During Games week, ITV Central Tonight broadcast a daily, dedicated feature on SOL 2009 live from Leicester and devoted over 20% of its news coverage to the event. BBC regional TV news also covered the event on both its early and late evening news.

iii. The coverage conveyed some ‘mixed messages’ concerning sport and learning disabilities. The media reporting of the Games was overwhelming positive but it was sometimes difficult for journalists to respond to, and represent, the competitors as athletes. Instead, the main story was reported as a human-interest one, which focussed on athletes’ learning disabilities and personal and carer issues. Moreover, there was very little reference to the wider political context of learning disabilities.

iv. This media coverage of Special Olympics should become a stable feature of future Games. But we suggest some basic awareness training for broadcasters might be appropriate. It would also be useful if the Games organisers and SOGB had more strategic aims at hand in terms of what they want to achieve from this brief, extended media focus on people with learning disabilities.
The Games Legacy encompassed a number of local, social, economic and cultural issues. However, there was no substantial facilities legacy of the 2009 Games; Leicester did not build new sports arenas specifically to host the Special Olympics although some existing facilities were improved and issues of disabled access highlighted.

**ECONOMIC LEGACY**

Special Olympics provided a boost to the local economy during a very difficult economic period. Visitor-related businesses and the local retail sector both clearly benefited. Our estimates indicate that visitors to Leicester during the Games contributed up to £2.8 million in additional spending (including accommodation) to the city.

**PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO THE GAMES AND PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES**

We conducted three public surveys: six months before, during, and six months after the 2009 Games covering 919 members of the Leicester public. This was an entirely new feature of research on Special Olympics. Attitudes to Leicester hosting SOL 2009 were generally positive:

i. In terms of local awareness, six months before the Games, 30% of local people knew they were being held in Leicester. This figure rose to 60% while the Games were occurring, but fell again to 30% just six months after the Games.

ii. General awareness about SOL 2009 was greatest among older, white respondents, suggesting that the main avenues for disseminating the Games message – local authority sources, the local daily press, local radio – may not be the best way to reach younger people. Our findings also suggest that it is more challenging to engage young people and people from ethnic minorities in terms of support for or awareness of Special Olympics.

iii. At all three phases of the research the Leicester public were overwhelmingly in favour of the city hosting the Games. This suggests that the funding problems did not dent local public support for Special Olympics. A resounding 90% of respondents thought Leicester should be ‘proud’ of hosting Special Olympics. However, before the Games 80% of local people thought the Games would improve Leicester’s public image but six months after the event this figure had fallen to just over half (55%).

**RESULTS CONCERNING ATTITUDES TO PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES WERE MIXED:**

i. More than eight-out-of-ten respondents surveyed during and after the Games agreed that it was good to have the opportunity to mix with people with learning disabilities. Almost two-thirds (65%) also agreed that the Games had ‘brought disabled and non-disabled people in Leicester closer together’.

ii. Six months after the Games, 35% of all respondents agreed that hosting Special Olympics in the city had made them ‘more aware’ of the problems of people with learning disabilities. On the other hand, we found relatively little evidence that hosting the Games added substantially to local public knowledge of learning disabilities.

**THE SOCIAL WORTH OF SPECIAL OLYMPICS**

Critics argue that Special Olympics both sustains poorly resourced, separate provision for people with learning disabilities and also promotes and perpetuates a patronising, sentimental public attitude towards them. However, we argue that Special Olympics offers important opportunities for self-realisation, competition and sociability for athletes, family members and carers. It also provides a potential forum for developing greater awareness and lasting relationships between disabled and non-disabled people.

**SOCIAL POLICY**

Hosting the 2009 Games gave the issue of learning disabilities greater prominence on Leicester’s social policy agenda. Local professionals though were aware that this impact might be short-lived, unless their work was prioritised and properly resourced over the longer term. SOL 2009 raised the profile and ‘opened doors’ for the council’s Learning Disability Team in Leicester. However, in the face of cuts to local authority budgets, providing more resources for their work seems unlikely.

**SPORTING LEGACY**

i. The Games raised awareness among local authority sports staff about learning disabilities and prompted a review concerning the suitability of local facilities and services for people with learning disabilities.

ii. The Games has produced a sports volunteer database combining new and experienced workers.
iii. The development of the Young Athletes Programme and growing connections between learning disability sports groups and the inclusive annual Youth Games in Leicestershire also offer promise for the future.

iv. A post-Games legacy goal should be a more integrated and more comprehensive sports service locally for people with learning disabilities. However, such ambitious prospects seem to be limited by a relative lack of post-Games strategic thinking, the restricted reach of Special Olympics, and the new funding restraints on local authorities.

LOCAL LEGACY PLANNING

There was relatively little evidence of local planning for the wider Games legacy. The intense pressures of delivery, lack of resources and the relative isolation of SOGB from other disability and sports agencies made any post-Games logistical work very difficult to realise. As a result, there is no existing local forum to build upon and sustain the legacy of the Games.

FINANCIAL LEGACY

The financial problems of funding the 2009 Games and the present economic downturn have serious implications for future games.

i. The SOL 2009 finance sub-committee concluded that: ‘The Games are not sustainable in its present format’. We agree with this view.

ii. Cities of Leicester’s size are likely to look critically in future at the prospect of bidding to host such Games. Other sources of funding and support, perhaps from central government and/or sports governing bodies, may be needed to sustain future Games. This may be especially important given the IOC’s re-inclusion of some elite learning disability athletes into the Paralympic Games.

THE CHANGING SOCIAL CONTEXT

SOL 2009 highlighted some of the limitations of the Special Olympics concept.

i. Special Olympics rely too heavily on local volunteering for providing sporting opportunities for people with learning disabilities.

ii. Because of a relative lack of impact in certain urban centres – especially London – and cultural resistance inside BME communities, Special Olympics is marked by an ethnic exclusivity and does not reflect the diverse face of modern Britain.

MODERNISATION

To meet these new challenges, SOGB needs to modernise. It seems unlikely that the Games can continue in its present format without perpetuating forms of exclusion or without downsizing in response to the new economic realities. It will, therefore, have to assess a number of different potential future scenarios. There is no ‘silver bullet’ solution but we offer a number of possible ways forward:

i. The traditional forms of charity support and celebrity fundraising seem far too limited to face the new challenges which lie ahead for learning disabilities sport

ii. SOGB will have to rethink its current structures and its connections with ethnic minority groups, other learning disability bodies, national governing bodies for sport, and other agencies

iii. Some forms of positive action might be needed, initially, to attract more athletes from BME backgrounds

iv. The format of the Games may need to be reviewed (for example, the provision of more regional events) in order to offer more opportunities for competition for more people with learning disabilities

v. Finally, the future scale of the Games may itself have to be significantly reduced in the light of new economic realities.

SOGB – THE FUTURE

For all its excellent work and past successes, the 2009 Games were, in our view, something of a watershed for SOGB.

FUTURE RESEARCH – SPORT AND LEARNING DISABILITY

It is intended that this report should act as a stimulus for future research into how sport can have important consequences for the lives, health and welfare of one of society’s most excluded and least visible groups. Working constructively and building effective links across the sector is clearly very important. Sport not only provides enormous social and health benefits for people with learning disabilities but it can also act as a pathway to a greater sense of citizenship and inclusivity. Any future research would need to take into account how the provision of sporting activities for people with learning disabilities can be more accessible and more sustainable.