

Winter Paralympics Games began 38 years ago

by [Access Press Staff](#) // March 10th, 2014

The 2014 Winter Paralympics wrap up March 17 in Sochi. This month's People and Places news notes that one Minnesotan, Aaron Pike of Park Rapids, is on the United States team. Teams began competition March 6, after opening ceremonies March 5.

While sports for people with disabilities date back to the 1800s, the notion of organized games with international competition is a newer idea. All Paralympic competition has its roots in London in 1948. The Stoke-Mandeville Games for the Paralyzed, held outside of a hospital that treated injured military veterans, featured 16 athletes competing in archery. The competition was held at the same time as the 1948 Summer Olympics in London. The games were promoted by Dr. Ludwig Guttmann, head of the Stoke-Mandeville Hospital's Spinal Injuries Unit. He believed sports competition would help hospital patients physical and in spirit.

Guttmann's games were considered revolutionary and an aid in helping veterans recover physically and in spirit. Two years after the first Stoke-Mandeville competition, about 60 athletes joined in. Dutch athletes joined their British counterparts for the second round of competition. The games soon were widely replicated by veterans' facilities around the world.

The popularity of the games grew and in Rome in 1960, 400 athletes from 23 countries competed in the first Paralympic Games.

Sports offered were archery, basketball, swimming, fencing, javelin, shot put, club throwing, snooker, swimming, table tennis and the pentathlon. The winter games are the newer of the two Paralympic competitions, starting in Sweden in 1976.

These were the first Paralympics to include athletes with visual impairments as well athletes in wheelchairs. Almost 200 athletes from 16 countries competed in alpine and Nordic skiing for amputees and visually impaired athletes. Ice sledge racing was a demonstration sport.

In Sochi sports are wheelchair curling, ice sledge hockey, alpine skiing, biathlon and cross country skiing or Nordic skiing. Each of the skiing and biathlon events has different subcategories divided by type and level of disability, including physical and cognitive disabilities.

"Paralympic" is a word using the Greek preposition "para." That means beside or alongside. Adding the word "Olympic" is meant to show how the Olympic and Paralympic movements function side-by-side.

Over time athletes with a wider array of disabilities are able to become involved in the Paralympics. Since the 1988 Summer Games of Seoul, Korea and the 1992 Winter Games in Albertville, France, the Paralympic Games have been held in the same places as the Olympics Games. That is thanks to an agreement between the International Olympics Committee and the International Paralympic Committee.

The Sochi Games featured a flame uniting ceremony, which included a nod to the past. Flames from 46 different Russian cities, plus a new Heritage Flame lit in Stoke Mandeville came together to form the Paralympic flame for the final days of the relay. The event was part of a new tradition recognizing Stoke Mandeville as the birthplace of the Paralympic movement in 1948.

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