

Pioneering doctor remembered for Paralympic idea

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Fireworks mark the arrival of the Paralympic flame outside the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff, Wales Monday Aug. 27, 2012. The 2012 Summer Paralympic Games will be the fourteenth Paralympics and will take place between Aug. 29 to Sept. 9. (AP Photo/Tim Ireland/PA Wire) UNITED KINGDOM OUT

(AP)—The Olympics have Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern games. The Paralympics have Sir Ludwig Guttmann.

Guttmann, a Jewish neurosurgeon who fled Nazi Germany, pioneered

athletic competition as therapy for patients with spinal injuries and organized an archery competition for 16 patients at Britain's Stoke Mandeville hospital in 1948. From this humble start have come the Paralympic Games, which this week will bring more than 4,000 athletes from around the world to London.

"The Guttman story is massive," said Olympic historian Martin Polley. "He was the one who linked rehab to competitive sport."

This month has been Guttman's moment, what with a BBC film about his life, "The Best of Men," an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in London and his daughter, Eve Loeffler, being named mayor of the athletes village—a sort of ambassador in chief who welcomes the participants for games that start Wednesday and end Sept. 9.

It follows a resurgence of interest in Guttman, who escaped in the late 1930s and settled in Britain, where his research on treating spinal patients drew the attention of the government. Guttman began working with injured soldiers at Stoke Mandeville hospital, just north of London, during World War II—a time when suffering a spinal injury was considered a death sentence. Patients were discouraged from moving, leading to secondary infections from bed sores or from pneumonia.



A Paralympics sign and logo hang from a crowd control barrier in front of the

main stadium before the 2012 Paralympics, Monday, Aug. 27, 2012, in London. The opening ceremony for the Paralympics takes place on Wednesday. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

Known for an authoritarian streak and his stubborn insistence on changing the status quo, Guttmann swept into the hospital and took patients off sedation, which had been administered to make them comfortable. But Guttmann was having none of that. No one was going to be comfortable.

"One patient told me 'I'm waiting for God almighty to take me up,' the Times of London reported Guttmann as saying at a conference in 1962. "I told him 'While you are waiting, you can do some work'."

He made the patients sit up and work muscles. Seeking to keep them motivated, he hit upon competition as a way to make them work harder. He tried wheelchair field hockey, but when that became too violent, he got the patients involved in wheelchair basketball, Loeffler said.

It was tough and demanding, but grateful patients nicknamed him "Poppa." They were still paralyzed. But many lived—and carried out Guttmann's wish that they become taxpayers.

Loeffler said her father was marked by his past. Many of his relatives perished in Auschwitz. He was driven, intent to give back to the country that had given his family refuge.



South Africa's Oscar Pistorius during a training session at Mayesbrook Park Arena, Barking, England, Monday Aug. 27, 2012. The 2012 Summer Paralympic Games will be the fourteenth Paralympics and will take place between Aug. 29 to Sept. 9. (AP Photo/ Chris Radburn/PA) UNITED KINGDOM OUT

"I think that's another thing that made him work so hard," she said. "He was Hitler's gift to this country in a way, and he was determined to be a good British citizen."

On the same day that London opened its 1948 Olympics, Guttman organized a competition for wheelchair athletes, which he called the Stoke Mandeville Games. They involved 16 patients taking part in archery. From those humble origins, the Paralympics have grown into a festival of sports involving 4,200 athletes from 166 teams. Though smaller than the Olympics—which had more than twice the number of athletes—London's event represents the largest field ever for the games.

The London event—the first to have come as a result of a joint bid from the host city—have also benefited from greater integration with the Olympics, particularly in terms of marketing and organization. London essentially connected the rings to the Agitos, the Paralympic symbol of three circling arcs—a move that helped also spread the fairy dust of attention that the Olympics receive to the Paralympics as well. Queen Elizabeth II agreed to open the event, a reflection of their importance to the country.

Some 2.3 million tickets have been sold, the most ever, many to Britons new to Paralympic sport but who wanted to get an opportunity to see the glittering new stadiums and experience the excitement of first class sporting competition.

Britain's team is also strong. They were second in the Paralympic table at Beijing with 102 total medals, including 42 gold. The hometown crowd wants to see their athletes—and of course wants to see them win.



Torchbearer Robyn Johnson hands over the Paralympic flame to torchbearer Nazim Erdem outside the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff, Wales Monday Aug. 27, 2012. The 2012 Summer Paralympic Games will be the fourteenth Paralympics and will take place between Aug. 29 to Sept. 9. (AP Photo/Tim Ireland/PA Wire) UNITED KINGDOM OUT

Loeffler believes her father's vision has come to pass. And when she wanders the village, people recognize her—like Canadian athlete Jessica

Vliegenthart, who saw Loeffler having her photograph taken in a smart navy jacket with its massive circular gold badge.

"Aren't you the daughter of ..." Vliegenthart asked, as two wheelchair basketball athletes drew their wheels in.

Loeffler nodded, and her pride was clear. Her father dreamed of an "Olympic Games for disabled men and women," and now a whole new generation is learning about him.

"Who but he could have imagined that it would have happened," she said. "I don't think anybody else could."

Britain embraced Guttmann, giving him a knighthood in 1966 and making him a fellow of the Royal Society—honors of which he was extremely proud. Though he died in 1980, he lived long enough to see the Paralympics grow. The first full scale games took place in Rome in 1960, and souvenirs from the 1964 Tokyo Paralympics are part of the collection on display at the Jewish Museum.

"I just couldn't be more proud of him," Loeffler said. "I just hope he's up there watching it all."

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