

Where is the paralympic spotlight?

Joshua Turek wins another gold medal for wheelchair basketball

BY JOHN MISA
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“God save all dressed in green, Long live our noble Queen, God save the Queen.” sang the 20,000 fans packed into North Greenwich Arena at the 2012 London Summer Paralympic Games. The United States wheelchair basketball team was facing off against Great Britain in the bronze medal match.

“The whole place was rocking,” said Joshua Turek, a bronze and two time gold medalist for the United States men’s national wheelchair basketball team. “It was just an absolutely raucous environment, and we completely shut them up. It was the first medal of my career, and the first wheelchair basketball medal for the USA in 12 years, and is why it is one of my all-time favorite moments in basketball.” The United States had beaten Great Britain 61-46. And few Americans knew it.

The Paralympic Games, a major international sports competition for athletes with disabilities, is held for 14 days shortly after the Olympic Games are played. Paralympic athletes compete in six different disability groups—amputee, cerebral palsy, visual impairment, spinal cord injuries, intellectual disability, and “les autres” (athletes whose disability does not fit into one of the other categories, including dwarfism). These games tend to bring in millions of viewers just like the Olympics. However, the Paralympic spotlight tends to be short lived, and doesn’t bring in as many viewers as the Olympics due to the small amount of American awareness of these games, and the competition for viewers from other sports.

“I would say that the vast ma-



Photo courtesy of Joshua Turek
Turek poses in his Team USA uniform. He participated in the mens wheelchair basketball team for the United States in Tokyo 2020.

majority of Americans in particular, are not even aware of the Paralympics or are unsure of what it is,” said Turek. “It does happen to be the second largest sporting event on Earth. The only sporting event larger is the Summer Olympics, and you’re looking at more than 200 countries and more than 6000 athletes and coaches with a lot of amazing different sports and talent. But it just doesn’t seem to gain much popularity in the U.S.”

Mingson Burns, an NBC Network Operations Producer for the Olympic Games, agrees that historically U.S. viewers were less aware of the Paralympic Games.

“Prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, NBC had not given much airtime to the Paralympics,” explained Burns. “The majority of the American public did not even know such a thing existed.”

Turek was born with spina bifida, a condition that affects his spine and leaves him paralyzed from the knees down. Growing up in Council Bluffs Iowa was a struggle for Turek, dealing with bullying and school. To help pass time and keep him distracted, Turek found and fell in love with the sport of basketball. Coming from an athletic family with his siblings playing college and professional basketball, Turek found himself figuring out how to play in his wheelchair against his friends and family.

“I found wheelchair basketball at 12 years old,” said Turek. “There was a local sports organization that put on a free summer camp for disabled children, and exposed us to a variety of sports, and one of which was wheelchair basketball. As soon as I played it, I immediately fell in love with it.” From there Turek played for a team called the Nebraska Red Dogs in Omaha and played well enough to start receiving scholarships and offers. Turek decided to play for a smaller school, Southwest Minnesota State University, to see how far he could take his team with his talents. After getting the attention of European scouts at a Final Four match, Turek brought his talents to Milan, Italy where he was able to play professional wheelchair basketball, and then on to Spain, France, and Australia.

As soon as Turek fell in love with basketball, he made it his goal to be able to represent his country and play for the United States Paralympic wheelchair basketball team.

“My goal was never to make money in Europe,” said Turek. “It was to represent the USA and help them win a gold medal. Even when I was a kid I knew that the U.S. had gone from 1988 without

winning a gold medal. So I made it my goal to play at the highest level and help my country win.”

Turek’s compelling story is one of many heroic stories behind the Paralympic athletes. So why don’t as many people know about or seem interested in the Paralympic Games or its athletes? Turek sees it as an American perspective on sports and masculinity.

“You can see the difference in how the games are covered between America and other countries like Australia and European nations,” exclaimed Turek. “America is kind of trailing behind the rest of the world when it comes to the Paralympics. I think that the American paradigm on sports is really masculine centric, and you see the same issue with the WNBA (Women’s National Basketball Association). And I think disabled sports or adaptive sports are rejected to a much higher degree.”

In 2008, NBC, the U.S. network with Olympic broadcasting rights, began coverage of the Paralympics with athlete interviews.

According to Burns, “In the end, the interviews were so compelling and the competition so riveting that NBC condensed it all into a primetime TV special—and the positive reaction from the public was overwhelming. Since then, and with the launch of new media platforms, NBC’s Paralympic coverage has grown significantly.”

With the United States having more of a response to the 2020 Summer Paralympic Games than the previous three Paralympics combined, it can be seen that attention and viewership is starting to increase.

“There were definitely a lot more people watching and a lot

more awareness of these games,” stated Turek. “Just the amount of messages, social media follows, Instagram, and Facebook requests has increased a lot.”

Burns confirms this shift in awareness, “While it still cannot compare in scale to the coverage of the Olympics, the visibility and publicity the Paralympics now receive are at least heading in the right direction.”

Turek feels this growing support from the country.

“I think the U.S is starting to fall in love with it just like the rest of the world,” said Turek. “The truth is, as great as the Olympics is, some of the athletes, their conditions, their stories, and their struggles are even more interesting and beautiful than the Olympics are. It’s a slow process but I can tell we’re definitely trending in the right direction.”



Photo courtesy of Joshua Turek

Turek shoots the basketball during the Tokyo 2020 paralympic games. Team USA came out victorious in this game against Spain 68-34.

Homecoming festivities bring smiles to Minnehaha

A welcome return after events cancelled last year



Photo by Curtis Craig

Junior Mayah Ruiters represents her grade level by catching a dollop of whipped cream. All grades participated in the grade level olympics this year.



Photo by Owen Hoffner

Senior girls celebrate their victory over the junior girls in powderpuff football. This is an event during homecoming where junior and senior girls play football.



Photo by Owen Hoffner

Ann Oakman and Cal Daenzer perform their homecoming dance. Each of the members created a special dance. The other court members include Josh St. Andrew, Tollef Currell, Prince Aligbe, Peter Mollison, Dante Donato, Stella Berlin, Marie Kruppen, Tiffany Simba, Annika Benson, and Penny Sedgwick.