

## L E T T E R E I N R E D A Z I O N E

## The contribution of Occupational Medicine to the origins of Paralympics

The 14th Paralympics will take place in London between 29 August and 9 September 2012. The evolution of the most important games for athletes with disabilities is rightly credited to the vision and efforts of Sir Ludwig Guttmann (1899-1980), a German-British neurosurgeon who first used sports for the rehabilitation at the Spinal Injuries Unit of the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in the United Kingdom (5).

However, there is little knowledge on the contribution of Occupational Medicine to the international development of sports competition for disabled people. Indeed, the first event promoted by Guttmann in 1948 only included British World War II veterans with spinal cord lesions (16 wheelchair archers). Similarly, the first disabled athletes from a foreign country who attended the Games were a team of Dutch war veterans in 1952 (3). People with disabilities acquired at the workplace seemed to be initially excluded from these competitions. One of the first who extended Guttmann's rehabilitation methods to injured workers was the Italian physician Antonio Maglio (1912-1988), director of the Paraplegics Centre "Villa Marina" in Ostia (near Rome), belonging to the "Italian Workers' Compensation Authority" ("Istituto Nazionale per l'Assicurazione contro gli Infortuni sul Lavoro", INAIL) (2). During the post-war recovery, economic growth in Europe led to an increase in industrial production and consequently in work accidents. So the problems of injured workers and of their reinstatement began to be emphasized in some scientific journals (1, 4). In his centre Maglio used new techniques and methods for rehabilitation through sports and in 1957 organized the first wheelchair fencing competition for people with spinal cord lesions due to work accidents. Meanwhile, the increase in participation and the official recognition of the "International Stoke Mandeville Games" led their promoters to move the event abroad (3). After the great success achieved in fencing for disabled people in Italy, Maglio suggested to Guttmann to organize his Games in Rome in the month following the 1960 Olympics, with the support of INAIL and the "Italian National Olympic Committee" ("Comitato Olimpico Nazionale Italiano", CONI) (2). So, in September 1960 the

first "International Paralympic Games" took place in Rome with over 400 athletes from 23 countries, and quadrennial sports competitions thereafter have been held in the country selected for the Olympic Games, where possible (5). The event, promoted by INAIL and CONI in Rome, aroused a great deal of interest among public opinion and the media, so highlighting the problem of acquired disabilities – particularly those due to work accidents – and the importance of rehabilitation of disabled people and their reintegration into society through sport. For these reasons, the role of Antonio Maglio and INAIL, the main Italian institution responsible for the protection of workers' health and safety, in the international development of sports events for disabled people deserves to be reappraised, particularly in the Olympics year.

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