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YOU AND YOURS – SHOULD PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES BE BANNED FROM THE PARALYMPICS? 07.02.03

ROBINSON

People with learning disabilities are being banned from taking part in the Paralympics in Athens in 2004. The decision, which has just been made, means athletes in training, pinning their hopes on being selected for the games in Greece, now have absolutely no chance of going. The British Paralympic team will include only people with physical disabilities. This all flows from events at the Paralympics in Sydney in 2000 where the Spanish basketball team took the gold, they were later stripped of this medal because 10 of the 12 players didn't have learning disabilities, as had been claimed, they had cheated their way on to the team. Ever since then the International Paralympic Committee has been trying to agree a definition of learning disability but it's failed. Instead it's decided athletes with learning disabilities will all be barred from taking part.

Bill Stuart's in our Glasgow studio, his son Alan, who's 21, is one of the athletes who'll be affected. How has he reacted?

STUART

He's not very happy with the results. He's been training since he was at Sydney, [indistinct words] when he came home from that, his next target was Athens and he's training nearly six days a week, constantly training hard to get through to this and they've just taken it away from him. There was no previous notification or nothing, it was just a phone call, then a letter and that was it - he's devastated by it.

ROBINSON

How will it affect the funding that he receives to train as an athlete?

STUART

Well obviously there'll be a cut in the funding, the way they said it, but the funding's secondary. That just kind of helps out - he gets a subsistence allowance plus he gets money for his sporting equipment. But he had all that before he actually got pretty good, the funding was then placed before that, it's just a secondary problem, it's mainly the fact that they took away Athens and a couple of other major competitions he could take part in.

ROBINSON

And have you spoken to the parents of other athletes with learning disabilities or to some of the athletes themselves?

STUART

I was coaching last night at Corkbridge [phon.] and some of the other parents there were a bit concerned because they've got young athletes coming up and through the ranks as well. They've got nothing to aim for now. They're coming through - there's no targets now they've taken away Athens and Paralympics and things like that. So they've got like club level or Special Olympics and some of

the athletes are far too fast to go to Special Olympics. So they're kind of stuck between a rock and a hard place - they cannot compete in Special Olympics because they're too fast, they cannot go to the Paralympics because of the Spanish cheating, so there's nowhere for them, no real targets for them to aim for. So quite a lot of them may actually give up the sport which is sad in a way.

ROBINSON

Bill Stuart stay with us if you will. On the line now from Bavaria is the President of the International Paralympic Committee Phil Craven. Mr Craven why have you made this decision?

CRAVEN

We've made the decision following a lot of contact with the International Federation, which is responsible for athletes with an intellectual disability, the International Sports Federation for Athletes with a Disability. This is the responsible body for athletes with intellectual disability and the body responsible for developing a new eligibility system following the scandal of Sydney. And I have to say that this is the body that hasn't come up with a new system, despite lots of contact, despite the final date being October 2002 that this decision should have been taken, we gave an extra three months to them to come up with a system that showed promise and showed that it could be implemented by Athens and they've failed to do so. So we've had to take a very difficult decision, it took a long time on Saturday to come to this decision, thinking of the athletes primarily. But we have to be fair to all athletes at the Paralympic Games and they have to compete under the same conditions.

ROBINSON

But given the fact that there is no evidence whatsoever that the Spanish cheating was anything more than just a very unfortunate one-off how can you possibly, morally, justify a decision to ban everyone with learning disabilities all those who, as we've heard, like Bill Stuart's son, have been training hard?

CRAVEN

The proof is that yes 10 of the 12 Spanish basketball players cheated. If so many from one team can cheat then you have to ask - what is the system and how has the system permitted this? And on investigation the system was shot full of holes. It wasn't a system that would work and we had put the trust in the INAS-FID as the international federation is called to have a competent system.

ROBINSON

Okay, well we've got also on the line Bernard Atha, he is the honorary life president of INAS-FID, the International Sports Federation for Athletes with an Intellectual Disability. It's all your fault.

ATHA

Yes I'm amazed to hear it. I don't honestly accept Craven's - Mr Craven's view of the events. We have come up with the three things that were demanded in October 2000 - last year - that was one for primary evidence of mental handicap, we promised to provide that, a certified psychologist's statement that the person met the World Health Organisation definition, there is no shortage of definitions, we have the World Health Organisation definition and that's the one we follow. The second thing they required was an indication of how the disability affected sports performance and we've had a very distinguished team of people working on this and produced documentation which I think will pass anybody's scrutiny. The third thing required was a dispute procedure, which was agreed with the medical officer of health and the technical officer of IPC in Bonn at a meeting at which I attended.

ROBINSON

Okay, if I could just briefly go back to Phil Craven - who is telling the truth here?

CRAVEN

Well I'd just like to put the IPC's position on this that Bernard Atha has put forward the three elements that have to be satisfied. The IPC believes that the first element, which was with regard to primary documentation, progress has been made there. The second element which relates intellectual disability to the participation of the athlete in a specific sport - the work has only just begun on that second part of the system. That INAS-FID only accepted in October 2002 that this work had to be undertaken. And the third part - it is not the case that a protest procedure has been developed for intellectually disabled athletes. It is an agreement from INAS-FID that they will comply with our conditions, that is not sufficient - they have to have a system that will work, which can be put in place and can work at events, if a protest is made and they have not proven this and more importantly both sections 2 and 3 have not been tested at all.

ROBINSON

Phil Craven, Bernard Atha, we'll have to leave it there.

At the last Paralympics though in Sydney 2000 there were more than 4,000 athletes from around the world and 200 of them had learning disabilities but there has always been a lobby to exclude them from the games. Simon Jackson who's a British gold medaller for judo and competed in the Sydney Paralympics is one of those who believes that athletes with learning disabilities should not compete at the Paralympics, why not?

JACKSON

That's not strictly true actually. I think that the system has to be in place so you can't get cheats. Let's take the basketball team - if 10 of the 12 people were cheating how hard is it to get in?

ROBINSON

Haven't you gone on record as saying that people who have an intellectual disability aren't athletes in the sense that you are because they can't work out their own strategy?

JACKSON

No, I think they're athletes yes - right I am planning for the Athens Games, which is 18 months away and I'm actually now doing the heavyweight programmes and doing a lot of endurance work and I have actually planned that myself. Someone with a learning difficulty obviously they can't plan that but the Paralympics is for people with a physical disability, if you've got a learning difficulty what is stopping you running the same time as Marion Jones?

ROBINSON

Well plenty of able-bodied people, don't they, say that people with physical disabilities - I mean it was said after the Games in Sydney - are not really competing fairly against each other because their disabilities are so different. Do you feel no sense of embarrassment about wanting to dismiss a whole other group?

JACKSON

No I don't because I just understand why they cannot compete on an equal level with an able-bodied person. Let's take the deaf, for instance, there is no reason why they - let's take my sport of judo, I'm visually impaired, now when I start judo it is like giving somebody a second head start in the 100 metres, okay, so I am never going to compete at an Olympic level but if I didn't have a physical disability and I had a learning disability and somebody showed me how to do judo and taught me how to do judo why does that stop me competing on an equal level with able-bodied people?

ROBINSON

So you don't believe that people with learning disabilities should be at the Paralympics at all?

JACKSON

No, no I didn't believe they shouldn't be there because I don't understand why they can't compete on an equal level with able-bodied people.

ROBINSON

Okay, Bill Stuart's still in our Glasgow studio. Briefly Bill what's your answer to that?

STUART

Well he's entitled to his own opinion on that one. As for the politics about athletes with learning disability and able-bodied athletes taking part in the same competitions that doesn't happen, they have their own events. And as I say he's entitled to his own opinion but as for the politics that's not my part, my main interest is how it's affected my son and other athletes with learning disability, I don't want to get into the argument about able-bodied or got a learning disability or physical disabilities - I don't want to get into that argument, it's not what we're here for. I'm here for the fact that my son has been told he can't go to Athens because of this dispute with INAS and the IPC, other than that anything else is secondary and as I say he's entitled to his opinion and if he can convince people with that well that's up to him.

ROBINSON

Mr Stuart, so far as you're aware, is this decision absolutely final?

STUART

At the moment we're aware that there may be an appeal put in. We've had the paperwork through saying that any funding the athletes may have will finish by March, whether they reconsider that - but it's happened before, after Sydney they were suspended for the IPC World Championships and then they were reinstated but they were reinstated at a time when the programme was made up so they couldn't enter that event. We may find again they'll be reinstated before Athens but again it's too late to put them in the programme. So it's broke their hearts, they've trained hard for this event and they're not getting the chance to compete to prove themselves, it's just a shame really.

JACKSON

Well if the [indistinct word] stops that's a tragedy because let's face it in 2008 the systems might be in place where cheats can't get in. And I think - I'm not an expert by any way shape or form on this but I know that the boundaries are so vast within this - it is very difficult to stop the cheats coming in. Like I said before you've only got to come back to the basketball team - if 10 out of 12 can get in, how hard can it be?

ROBINSON

Simon Jackson ...

JACKSON

Sorry - it's not 1 out of 12, it's 10 out of 12 - that's a lot of people cheating.

ROBINSON

Mr Jackson, Bill Stuart thank you both.