

Squiz Kids Shortcut to... The Paralympics

It started as a small competition between servicepeople returned from World War II, kicked off officially in Rome, in 1960, and now in 2024, four billion people all across the globe are expected to tune in to watch! This is your Squiz Kids Shortcut to The Paralympics - the podcast where we dive into the who, what, when, where, why and how of the big news stories. I'm Christie Kijurina.

And I'm Bryce Corbett.

Bryce, the Paralympic Games aren't just about speed, strength, and skill—they're a celebration of extraordinary athletes who overcome challenges most of us can't even imagine.

That's right, Christie. In many ways they're actually more impressive than the standard ol' Olympics. They're a showcase of resilience, power, and the unstoppable spirit of athletes who don't let anything hold them back.

Totally! And this year, from the opening ceremony at the crack of dawn on Thursday, August 29, Australian Eastern Time, we'll witness jaw-dropping feats of athleticism from some of the world's most inspiring competitors.

Today, we'll take you through HOW the Paralympics got started, WHAT kind of disabilities are included in the Games, and WHO to look out for when you watch.

Listen carefully - there's a Squiz at the end!

Christie, we learned in an earlier Squiz Kids Shortcut that the Modern Olympics trace their roots all the way back to Ancient Greece. But what about the Paralympics? How did those Games get started?

Great question, Bryce! Sports for athletes with impairments have been around for more than 100 years. The first sports clubs for the deaf, started in Berlin way back in 1888. But the real Paralympic movement didn't kick off until after World War II. There were a lot of injured veterans—people who fought in the war—returning home, and a doctor in England, named Ludwig Guttmann had a revolutionary idea.

Revolutionary? What was so groundbreaking about it?

Back then, people with severe spinal injuries were often given just two years to live. Most doctors thought the best thing to do was to keep them comfortable. But Dr. Guttmann, who was a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, believed in the power of sport to help them heal. In 1944, he set up a rehabilitation centre at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, where patients didn't just rest—they played sports and did craft activities.

And it wasn't just about physical recovery, right? There were mental and emotional benefits too. Sport helped improve their physical health, but even more importantly, it boosted their confidence and self-esteem. What started as a way to help people recover turned into competitive sports, and eventually, these small competitions grew into international events.

That's right! The first Olympic Games after World War II were held in London in 1948, and at the same time they were taking place, Dr. Guttmann organised an archery competition for 16 servicemen and women who were in wheelchairs. These Stoke Mandeville Games are considered the first Paralympic event. The games grew each year, and in 1952, Dutch ex-servicemen joined in, creating the International Stoke Mandeville Games.

And in 1960, the first official Paralympics were held in Rome, with 400 athletes from 23 countries competing. It took a while, but from 1988 onwards, the Paralympics have been held in the same city as the Summer Olympics.

It's incredible how far the Paralympics have come.

It really is. But I'm guessing they've changed a lot since those early days. Which makes me wonder... WHAT kind of disabilities are included in the Paralympic Games, and how do athletes qualify?

Bryce, the first thing to know about the Paralympics is that the qualification guide for this year's games is 158 pages long. So we definitely won't be able to cover all the intricate details here!

Wow, 158 pages? Why is it so complicated?

Well, as you know, there are lots of different kinds of disabilities. And it wouldn't be fair to have, say, a blind runner competing against a runner who can see but is an amputee with those amazing running blades.

Makes sense, just like how school sports are organised into age or gender groups to keep things fair. So, how do they decide who competes against whom?

There are two main steps. The first is figuring out whether an athlete has an impairment, which is another word for a disability, that makes them eligible to compete in a sport. There are ten impairment categories in total, like visual impairment, intellectual disability, or physical disability.

Okay, and what's the second step?

The second step involves classifying athletes to ensure they're competing against others with similar abilities. This means there are multiple classes for the same event. For example, in freestyle swimming, there are 13 different versions of the 100m race to accommodate various levels of disability. Even though there are only 22 sports in the Paralympics, there are 549 medal events—way more than in the Olympics!

(Which means all the more for me to watch. Bring it on!) But Christie, I've heard that 'Para' in Paralympics doesn't actually refer to the word 'paralysis' as some people think.

It actually comes from the Greek word 'para,' meaning 'next to' or 'side by side,' because the Paralympics are held next to the Olympics.

That's right! And speaking of unique events, did you know there are two sports in the Paralympics that aren't in the Summer Olympics? One is boccia, which is a bit like lawn bowls, and the other is goalball.

Goalball is super cool! It's only for athletes with visual impairments, and they all wear blindfolds to level the playing field, in case some have more vision than others. The players throw a heavy ball, really fast, towards their opponent's goal. The ball has bells inside so the other team can hear it coming. They have to block it and then try to score by throwing it back.

And because of that, the spectators have to stay completely silent during the game.

That's intense!

It is! The Paralympic Committee has made some awesome, one-minute videos explaining every Paralympic sport. If you want to learn more, there's a link in your episode notes. Check them out, and you'll be the family expert when it comes to watching the games!

With all those events happening, Christie, I'm curious—WHO should we be looking out for this year?

Bryce, this year's Paralympics are set to be a massive event, with 4,400 athletes from 179 nations competing in 22 sports. There's going to be plenty to watch!

Absolutely, Christie. And the medals this year are really special. Just like in the Olympics, the gold, silver, and bronze medals will have a piece of iron from the Eiffel Tower embedded in them. But there's something even more unique about these medals—they have special engravings and Braille for vision-impaired athletes.

Braille that's raised dot writing, right? It was invented by a Frenchman named Louis Braille. It's great to see the Paralympics honoring that history.

It is! And hoping for lots of those medals, Australia is sending a very strong team this year—160 athletes, in fact. We've got some big names to look out for, too.

That's right! The Australian flag bearers for the opening ceremony have been announced: Madison de Rozario, a six-time Paralympic medallist and wheelchair racer, and Brenden Hall, a seven-time medallist and swimmer. Both are attending their fifth Paralympics, having first competed in Beijing way back in 2008.

Wow! And they're not the only ones to watch. Definitely keep an eye out for record-breaking swimmer Ahmed Kelly who came two Australia after living in an orphanage with with brother, in Baghdad, which is in Iraq. He was born without arms because of the chemical weapons that were used in that country. This will be his fourth Paralympics and he took the gold medal in the 150m individual medley at last year's World Championships.

We also have Vanessa Low, the world-record-holding long jumper. She's a double amputee who's been competing since she lost her legs in a train accident when she was 16. This is also her fourth Paralympics, and she's already got gold medals from Rio in 2016 and Tokyo in 2020. Her current world record is 5 meters and 33 centimeters!

And let's not forget Chris Bond, who's captaining our Wheelchair Rugby team. The game's so intense it's nicknamed 'murderball.' Chris and the team won gold in London 2012 and Rio 2016, but they lost to Team GB in Tokyo, so he's keen to bring the title back.

With so many incredible athletes and events, it looks like we won't be getting much sleep during the 11 days of Paralympic competition!

Lucky we did the training during the Olympics. Now for the main event! Bring it on!

This is the part of the podcast where you get to test how well you've been listening...

Question 1) Which sport did those first 16 returned servicepeople compete in in the Stoke Mandeville Games in 1948? (Archery)

Question 2) Where were the first official Paralympics held in 1960? (Rome)

Question 3) What is the very intense nickname for the sport of Wheelchair Rugby? (Murderball)

Well, that's all we have time for today. Thanks for joining us as we explored the who, what, how, where, when, and why of the Paralympics. Teachers, there are excellent classroom resources related to this topic on the Squiz Kids website and there's a link to them in the episode notes.

Now get out there, and have a most excellent day!

"Over and out.