Sir Ludwig Guttmann, Stoke Mandeville and the Paralympic Games

The Olympic Games was an Ancient Greek invention, and the first Modern Olympic Games was hosted by the International Olympics Committee (IOC) in Athens in 1896. The Olympic Games have always celebrated the fittest athletes. But what about athletes with disabilities? There was no place for them in the modern Olympics. In fact, the idea of a disabled person taking part in sports hardly existed. All that changed in Buckinghamshire in the 1940s, where a remarkable doctor introduced his patients to a new way of thinking about their life.

Dr Ludwig Guttmann

That remarkable doctor was Ludwig Guttmann. Born in 1899, Guttmann trained as doctor in Germany in the 1920s. He specialised in brain surgery and was particularly interested in the impact of spine injuries. Guttmann was a respected surgeon and teacher. That changed when Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933. This was because Guttmann was Jewish and Jewish people were banned from practising medicine by the Nazis. They were only allowed to work in Jewish hospitals and were not allowed to call themselves “doctor”.

Guttmann worked hard to help protect his patients from the Nazis. On the night of 9 November 1938, the Nazi government organised nation-wide attacks on Jewish homes and businesses called Kristallnacht (“the night of broken glass” - named this because of the broken shop windows) killing hundreds of Jews. Guttmann helped protect 60 of his Jewish patients from being deported to concentration camps by the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police.
History Topic of the Month: Sir Ludwig Guttmann, Stoke Mandeville and the Paralympic Games

Escape to Britain and arrival at Stoke Mandeville

In early 1939 Guttmann and his family were able to escape the Nazis. They arrived in Britain, where Guttmann was able to begin practising and teaching medicine again. He worked in a hospital in Oxford. His work on spinal injuries became very well known among other doctors.

In September 1943, the British government asked Guttmann to set up a National Spinal Injuries Centre at Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Buckinghamshire. The centre was the idea of the Royal Air Force. Many of its pilots had suffered terrible spine injuries when their planes had crashed or from bailing out of planes after they were shot down during World War II.

The centre opened on 1st February 1944, with Guttmann as its very first director. Within six months he had more than 50 patients.
The treatment of spinal injuries

At the time the life expectancy for paraplegics was only two years. Patients were often kept in beds all the time and rarely moved. Many of them died from bed sore infections or from urinary infections. Many patients were convinced their injuries meant their lives were over.

Depression was common: a nurse at Stoke Mandeville said the patients, “had basically been told... they would never walk again and that they were going to die. As a result most of them were badly depressed and not interested in doing anything.”

Guttmann’s treatment of spinal injuries

Guttmann followed the advice of Dr Donald Munro in Boston, USA, who made sure his patients with spinal injuries were turned in their beds every two hours to stop them developing bed sores. But Guttmann believed this was only the start. He carefully controlled everything in the hospital, from cleaning to the food on the menus. No detail was too small for Guttmann. At that time, many senior doctors were distant from the patients and the day-to-day running of the hospital. But Guttmann knew all his patients and took a firm interest in their treatment.

Guttmann also understood the importance of helping people understand that being paraplegic did not mean the end of their lives. It was just as important to make them understand that their lives still had purpose as it was to keep them physically healthy. Guttmann felt physical activity was vital. Where other doctors kept their patients in bed for weeks at a time, Guttmann introduced a series of activities. He set-up workshops for his patients, covering everything from woodwork to watch repairing. One of the biggest activities was sport.

Sport as medicine

Many of Guttmann’s patients were former RAF pilots, who were used to leading fit and active lives. Showing them that things like sport could still be a part of their lives was hugely important.

One of the first sports Guttmann organised was wheelchair polo. The players were all in wheelchairs and used walking sticks to hit the ball. Later he replaced this with wheelchair basketball. The games were competitive and huge fun. Taking part in sport started to change the lives of the patients. Their original doctors had told them they would never leave a bed again: now Guttmann not only had them out of bed, but spending the day playing sport!
One of the most popular sports was archery. This was because it only needed upper-body strength and meant the patients in wheelchairs could compete against non-disabled archers. The patients hugely enjoyed beating them!

Bob Paterson, who knew Guttmann when he was a child, and later became a senior member of the International Wheelchair and Amputee Sports federation (IWAS) said, “After injury Guttmann focussed an individual’s mind on what they can do rather than regretting what they can no longer do. Through sport Guttmann gave that person back the will to live a full life with pride and self-respect.”
On 28 July 1948 the Olympic Games opened in London. On the same day, Guttmann hosted the first Stoke Mandeville Games. With 16 participants (14 men and 2 women), all of whom had spinal injuries and competed in wheelchairs – the highlight was an archery competition. Guttmann called it a Paraplegic Games.

The event was a big success, and word soon spread about Guttmann’s treatments. It became an annual event. By 1950 there were 60 competitors from across England, with the events being archery, javelin and netball. The archery competition was won by a team of Polish ex-servicemen from Penley, near Wrexham, while teams from Stoke Mandeville won the javelin and lost in the final of the netball to a team from Lyme Green, Cheshire.
Stoke Mandeville goes international

In 1952 the Stoke Mandeville Games had its first international participants, with a team from the Doorn Military Rehabilitation Centre in the Netherlands. Guttmann’s dream was to make the Games an international event.

There were now so many athletes, that Guttmann split some of the events into classes to allow fairer competition. Javelin and table tennis were divided based on the level of spinal injury. Astonishingly Syd Taylor and Syd Pratt entered the table tennis competition in every class and won them all – despite both players having paralysed hands and playing with the table tennis bats tied to their hands with bandages.

By 1953 Canada, Finland, France and Israel also sent teams and a new event was added – swimming. Contestants competed in the backstroke, crawl and breaststroke in a pool specially designed by Guttmann. Eight more nations joined in 1954.

The birth of the Paralympics

In 1956 Sir Arthur Porritt, a member of the IOC committee attended the games. In a speech he said, “the spirit of these Games goes beyond the Olympic Games spirit. You compete not only with skill and endurance but with courage and bravery too”.

In 1956 the IOC presented Guttmann with the Fearnley Cup, a special award for outstanding merit in the spirit of the Olympics. Guttmann said, “I hope this is only the beginning of a closer connection between the Stoke Mandeville Games and the Olympic Games.” He was right.

In 1960 the Olympic Stadium in Rome hosted the first Paralympic Games, for athletes with spinal cord injuries. Over 400 athletes from 23 countries took part, with a huge range of events including archery, athletics, swimming, table tennis, basketball and fencing. Italy topped the medal table with 29 golds, closely followed by Britain with 20. Guttmann’s dream had come true – and his passion had made it happen.
From wheelchair sport to full Paralympics

In 1964 the International Sport Organisation for the Disabled (ISOD) was founded to create opportunities for athletes with disabilities. Dr Guttmann later became its chair. In 1976 the Paralympics included non-wheelchair events for the first time.

1976 also saw the first Winter Paralympics in Sweden, with 198 athletes from 16 countries taking part in alpine and Nordic skiing along with other events. The 1988 Paralympics were the first to take place in the same city as the Olympic Games, in Seoul, South Korea. For the first time they were formally called the Paralympic Games. Over 3000 athletes took part in 732 events – 950 world records were set.

Guttmann’s legacy

Today the Paralympics are a huge international event, competed in by countries from all around the world. In 2021, in Tokyo, 162 countries took part, with almost 4,500 athletes. It was watched by over 4.1 billion viewers around the world.

Dr Gutmann’s treatments changed the lives of literally hundreds of thousands of people. When he started work at Stoke Mandeville, people with spinal injuries believed it was a death sentence. When Guttmann retired in 1966, they were taking part in international sports competitions. When asked about Dr Gutmann, Caz Walton, a winner of ten gold medals at the Paralympics said, “Sir Ludwig just changed the world for us; it was a complete step change… He came in, he had a vision… As far as disability and disabled sport was concerned he did change the world.”

Discussion points

- Why do you think it was and is so important for people with disabilities to stay active in mind and body?
- What do you think the significance was for the first Stoke Mandeville Games to open on the same day as the London Olympics in 1948?
- What more can you find out about Dr Ludwig Guttmann?
- Can you find out what the different categories of disability are in the Paralympic Games?
- Outside of the Paralympic Games what other sporting competitions are available for people with a disability to enter?
- Do you think that attitudes towards disability in sport have helped to change attitudes towards disability in society more widely?

About the author

Alistair Nunn, Pearson’s Senior Product Manager for Humanities Teaching and Learning resources created this worksheet using various sources listed below.
History Topic of the Month: Sir Ludwig Guttmann, Stoke Mandeville and the Paralympic Games

**Articles**

Paralympic Heritage – Professor Sir Ludwig Guttmann

Mandeville Legacy

Paralympic History – History

psb.org – About the Paralympics

Stoke Mandeville Stadium

National Geographic – How the Paralympic movement evolved into a major sporting event