

Finding deeper meaning in sport at the 2006 Paralympics where sledge hockey team won gold



SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

Shaunna Taylor

Let me start this column by saying that I love being Canadian, I love hockey, and I love the world of sport.

For three weeks in March I became even more certain of those three loves and also that I made the right career choice. Our involvement in sport pushes us to our physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and ethical limits at times.

From heart-warming to heart-breaking moments, sport can reach the depths and heights of all that is human nature. Nowhere did I see this more clearly than during my journey with the Canadian National Sledge Hockey Team to Torino, Italy in March at the 2006 Paralympic Games.

Sledge hockey is an exciting sport to play and to watch, with the athletes using a sled, instead of skates, with two shortened hockey sticks (with picks on one end) to propel themselves on the ice. Do a switch in grip and the sticks can fire a puck or stickhandle it down the ice.

Centre Ice readers may recall a recent sledge hockey article explaining how almost all strategy, rules and skills mimic regular stand-up hockey. Players may not t-bone each other with their sleds, but most other major and minor penalties and rules are the same as hockey.

Obviously great upper body strength is a must, and to be eligible for the Paralympic sledge program, athletes must have a physical disability in their lower body that prohibits them from playing regular stand-up hockey. Able-bodied and disabled athletes alike are encouraged to try this fun and challenging sport, and many leagues have a mix of athletes taking part!

I brought home many lessons from Torino.

I became involved in the national program about a year ago, after being invited to a training and tryout camp in Ottawa by a colleague. Upon watching the game and meeting some of the players, I knew instantly that I wanted to be involved, and shortly afterwards was hired on to the team in preparation for the Torino Games as their mental trainer and sport psychology consultant.

My involvement in sledge hockey has taught me many things. I hope I can do these lessons justice in the following short version of what the Games – and working with the amazing athletes and staff in the sledge program – have meant to me.

Lesson one: sport heals.

Many sledge hockey players have endured extremely challenging circumstances to come out at the other end as elite athletes with a disability. Sport heals many physical, emotional and mental wounds and what can result is a phenomenal sportsperson, with outstanding perseverance and heart.

Most of these athletes have faced much more daunting challenges and adversity than a sporting competition. I am honoured to have worked with some of these athletes, and my life will be forever changed because of it.



Photo: CPC, Benoit Pelosse

National sledge hockey team's gold medal win in Torino shows how sport can heal and unite.

Next lesson: sport challenges.

Sport invites us to put our nose to the grindstone, to start over, or to try again. Sport challenges us to be more than we thought we could be ... and then some. Sport can also give us second chances, and taunts us with the hope of topping our last effort.

Our Canadian Paralympic Sledge Hockey team had earned a bronze medal in Lillehammer, a silver in Nagano, a 4th place in Salt Lake City, and now... a gold in Torino. This team never gave up, and their belief and perseverance paid off in a big way.

Another lesson: sport unites

There were 39 nations represented at the 2006 Paralympic Games in Italy. Thirty-nine nations – with athletes from all different walks of life, religious faiths, and with different disabilities. In the end, even in the fiercest battles on the ice or snow, the athletes and staff came together in order to celebrate each other's victories and to comfort one another after the defeats.

There was a lack of the commercial corporate culture that has infiltrated professional sport and amateur events such as the able-bodied Olympics and many World Championship events. Athletes competed for the thrill of the journey, and the quest for the podium. It was refreshing and exhilarating to be a part of it.

When I wrote this column, I was proudly wearing a Japanese paralympic jacket I traded for my closing ceremonies gear (as in the Olympics, a huge event is the international gear trading at the close of the Games). Somewhere in Japan, someone named Daisuke is dressed up as a proud Canadian, with a lot of great memories to match.

As Hockey Canada celebrates its gold medal successes of the past couple of months, it will be looking at the fairy tale World Junior team success, the resounding win of the Women's Olympic team, and now... the phenomenal Paralympic Sledge Hockey Team Gold Medal finish.

Hockey Canada is proud of all three teams for their determination, dedication and pride in our nation's most popular sport and I hope all Canadians share in that pride. I also hope this marks a new era of awareness and appreciation for sledge hockey and all disabled sports, and that you take some time to think about the deeper meanings behind hockey, and other sports you love.

Let sport heal, challenge, and unite you.

Shaunna Taylor is a sport psychology consultant and counsellor at the Ottawa High Performance Centre (www.ohpc.ca).