

The Paralympian

Newsletter of the International Paralympic Committee



No. 1 / 2002

Mind

Body

Spirit

VVAF Launches "Sports for Life"

The Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAF) has launched an exciting new initiative called Sports for Life. VVAF was founded over twenty years ago by a group of American veterans committed to assisting civilian victims of conflict. Today, VVAF works in seven countries around the world running innovative rehabilitation, education and advocacy programmes. Building on the strengths of its existing activities in Cambodia and Kosovo, VVAF will now go global with its efforts to develop sports and recreation programs for people with disabilities and other isolated or disadvantaged populations in war-affected countries.

Cambodia: Hitting Home with a Message of Hope



In Cambodia, traditional belief maintains that disability is a sign of bad karma—in other words, people “earn” their disabilities by misbehaving in a previous life. Such beliefs are reinforced by pervasive images of people with disabilities facing extreme hardship, like the many who circulate through city streets begging for small change. For the past two years, though, Cambodia’s standing volleyball team has been turning its society’s notions of disability upside down.

In 2000, with sponsorship from VVAF, the team realized its dream of participating in the Paralympic Games. Although Cambodia won only one match in Sydney, the exposure to elite international competition proved extremely powerful, whetting the players’ appetites for more. In 2001, VVAF secured sponsorship from Cathay Pacific, Dragon Air, Czech Air, Otto Bock, the German and Australian governments, and singer-songwriter Nanci Griffith, enabling the Cambodians to travel to the World Cup Games in Slovakia. There, the team showed marked improvement, narrowly losing the battle for the bronze medal. Now the players are back at home training hard for the 2002 FESPIC Games and demonstrating their talents in competitions around Cambodia, recently placing fourth against non-disabled teams in a prestigious national tournament.

The efforts of the volleyballers are having a great impact on Cambodian society, as well as the lives of individual players. Cambodians are taking pride in the achievements of their team, while young people with disabilities are finding new role models to emulate. What is more, the players are showing an unprecedented sense of self-confidence. The team’s coordinator, Chris Minko, has noted that “some of the players have been seen strutting through the streets of Phnom Penh wearing shorts and showing off their prostheses,” a scene that would have been unimaginable in Cambodia just two short years ago.

Kosovo: Unity Through Sports

Since the spring of 1999, when the war in Kosovo ended, the province’s citizens have been working hard to rebuild their homes and their lives. However, much work remains to be done in order to bring unity and peace to Kosovo’s communities. This is reflected by the fact that many people with disabilities continue to be sheltered and treated as mere social welfare cases, while members of some minority groups can only leave their villages under the protection of military escorts. Through its programs, VVAF is encouraging the recognition and integration of all of Kosovo’s citizens.

VVAF recently employed disability program specialist and wheelchair athlete Andrew Houghton to initiate VVAF’s Sports for Life activities in Kosovo. Houghton discovered a great deal of interest in sports throughout the province, but found that most groups do not have the equipment, training, or information that they need to develop meaningful programs. For example, eighty athletes expressed a desire to compete in wheelchair basketball, but only twenty sports chairs could be found in the whole province. Furthermore, rules for the game did not exist in local languages. So, VVAF translated rules and began providing sports equipment to local groups and schools.

VVAF also learned that many people, disabled and non-disabled alike, had never been exposed to disability sports activities and therefore lacked an understanding of what was possible. Houghton observed that “many people didn’t even want to try, but after one went out and started to play, the others followed. It’s typical—people never know what it will be like until they get out there and participate.” With this in mind, VVAF held three wheelchair tennis clinics; facilitated recreational activities for youth; and brought together disability organisations, the Department of Sport, the Kosova Olympic Committee and the tennis and basketball federations to organize a major disability sports and recreation exhibition. After this event, the sponsors signed a joint proclamation declaring their commitment to developing disability sports and recreation programming.

In the coming months, VVAF will expand Sports for Life into countries such as Angola and Vietnam, supporting the development of activities at the therapeutic, recreational, and competitive levels. VVAF will also assist its partners with advocacy and awareness-raising, using sports as a vehicle for promoting rights and reconciliation, as well as rehabilitation, well-being, and fun.

For more information, please email swarren@vi.org or see <http://www.vvaf.org>.

Sarah C. Warren
Program Development Officer, VVAF