

Small Steps, Great Strides

Sports Illustrated honored Eunice Kennedy Shriver with the first Sportsman of the Year Legacy Award. Read about how she changed the world for people with intellectual disabilities—through sports.



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On a steamy July 20th afternoon in 1968, Eunice Kennedy Shriver strode to the microphone at Soldier Field in Chicago and convened the first Special Olympics Games. It was only seven weeks after her younger brother, Robert, had been gunned down in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, and about five weeks before the Windy City exploded in violent confrontations between police and protestors at the Democratic National Convention.

The assassination and the violence had lasting political effects on the American landscape...and, in a much different way, so did the Games at Soldier Field.

With a crowd of fewer than 100 people dotting the 85,000-seat stadium, about 1,000 athletes from 26 states and Canada, all of them routinely classified in those days as mentally retarded, marched

in the opening ceremonies and followed Shriver as she recited what is still the Special Olympics oath:

Let me win,
but if I cannot win
let me be brave
in the attempt.

Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, who would become a polarizing figure at the convention that August, attended the four-day event and told Shriver, "You know, Eunice, the world will never be the same after this."

While skeptics shook their heads and most of the press ignored the unprecedented competition, Shriver boldly predicted that one million of the worlds intellectually challenged would someday compete athletically.

She was wrong. Today, more than three million Special Olympic athletes are training year-round in all 50 states and 181 countries. They run races, toss softballs, lift weights, ski moguls, volley tennis balls and pirouette on skates. There are World Winter Games, the most recent in Boise, Idaho, in February, and World Summer Games, which will be staged next in Athens in 2011. Documentaries, Wide-World-of-Sports presentations, after-school TV specials, feature films, cross-aisle Congressional teamwork and relentlessly positive global word of mouth have educated the planet about Special Olympics and the capabilities of the sort of individuals who were once locked away in institutions. Schooling, medical treatment and athletic training have all changed for people with intellectual disabilities as a result of Shriver's vision; more important, so have minds, attitudes and laws.

Ireland rewrote its antidiscrimination statutes after the Special Olympics World Games were held in Dublin in 2003. China once routinely warehoused its intellectually challenged, but at the '07 World Games in Shanghai a crowd of 80,000 cheered as a video on the stadium scoreboard showed the country's president, Hu Jintao, cavorting with a group of Special Olympic athletes. Three decades ago Russia claimed that it had no citizens with intellectual disabilities--it sent a team of 190 to Shanghai.

In Egypt, Special Olympians practice snowshoeing (a Winter Games event) on sand in front of the Pyramids, and in embattled Iraq and Afghanistan, people who were once locked in dark rooms now kick soccer balls in the light of day. The Special Olympics movement is built upon hundreds of big moments and thousands of small ones. In St. Kitts, a young boy with intellectual challenges picks up a grapefruit, tosses it toward a stone, and now he's a bocce player. In Turkey a father watches his daughter run a race and, through tears, tells a Special Olympics official: "I never even thought of my daughter as my daughter before."

It was a daughter who started all this. Born into wealth and power, the middle child of nine in this country's version of a royal family, Eunice Kennedy Shriver chose to lobby for the powerless. Yes, she used her connections from time to time. When Iowa's Tom Harkin was a freshman Senator in 1984, he got a political favor from Massachusetts senator Ted Kennedy and, sure enough, was visited shortly thereafter by Eunice, who asked for his support for Special Olympics funding. But she never twisted arms or peddled her influence to build her own power base. She used it to help those who were invisible or perceived to be an embarrassment by the population at large.

The results of her efforts speak for themselves, but her son Tim, now the organization's chairman, puts it all in some perspective. "If you look at her brothers and sisters and all that they accomplished," he says, "no one will stand any higher than my mother."

The grand dame of Special Olympics is 88 now, too frail and weak from a stroke to sit for interviews or photos. Her husband, Sargent Shriver, himself once a tireless advocate for Special Olympics--"My father had the zeal of a convert once he got over the fact that his wife was a little

wacky," says Tim--suffers from Alzheimer's Disease. But Eunice's spirit remains an essential part of the organization. It will forever be a Kennedy-Shriver movement, even when a Kennedy or a Shriver is not in a leadership position.

Tim doesn't specifically remember that weekend in Chicago when the Games began, but what he vividly recalls are summer mornings at Timberlawn, the family's home in Rockville, Md. when he'd look out of his bedroom window and see ponies and balloons and clowns and kids running and laughing on the huge expanse of lawn. That was Camp Shriver, which Eunice started in 1962 to give intellectually challenged boys and girls a place to have fun. "My parents were more example people than adage people," says Tim. "We were told to do a lot of things--get off our rear end, don't watch television, don't be arrogant, don't waste your time--but the whole issue of being engaged in some kind of socially meaningful work came from seeing it and having fun with it. They were great at making important things fun."

By that time Eunice was already firmly committed to improving the lives of the intellectually challenged, in no small part because her older sister, Rosemary, had "a mild form of mental retardation," in the parlance of the day. She was lobotomized in 1941 and afterward spent most of her life in an institution in Wisconsin. (She died in 2005.)

Eunice was a good athlete (her favorite sports were swimming, sailing, and, of course, touch football, the Kennedy ancestral game) and she was frustrated by the dearth of athletic opportunities afforded women in the 1930s and '40s. At the same time, she saw how much worse it was for the intellectually challenged in a society that rarely educated citizens with such conditions, much less thought about organizing them into athletic competitions. So Eunice did what Kennedys do: She made some noise and moved around the furniture.

"When I've talked to her about it, the word she comes to is 'anger,'" says Tim of the wellspring of his mother's activism. "She is really tough and ambitious and strong-willed, but she also has this vulnerable and empathic side. After watching the struggles of her sister and visiting institutions and seeing this enormous amount of human suffering, and at the same time coming from a place where women didn't have equal opportunity in sports, she just couldn't take it anymore."

Eunice began by using funds from the Kennedy Foundation (started by her father, Joseph, and mother, Rose) to create programs for the intellectually disabled. Then she instituted Camp Shriver and helped finance a dozen or so other such camps around the country. One day in 1967 she listened to a plan from the Chicago parks and recreation department to hold a track meet for the city's kids with intellectual disabilities--Anne Burke, then a teacher in the Parks system, now an Illinois Supreme Court judge, was the moving force behind the idea--and turned on the Kennedy magic, providing \$25,000 in funding and insisting that kids from all over the country be involved. And with the Games in Chicago in 1968, the movement was on.

Since then, its emphasis has changed but always with the goal of improving people's lives. In the beginning the Games were based on the model of the modern Olympiad. Allowed to compete was any person, regardless of age, who had a below-average intellectual functioning (two years or more behind their peers) and significant limitations in the adaptive skill areas needed to live, work and play in the community.

Now the organization has become far more ambitious, using athletes to bring preventive medicine to the intellectually challenged throughout the world. "Up until 40 years ago most people with intellectual and developmental disabilities didn't live long enough to have adult specialized care," says Matt Holder, a Louisville-based dentist whose practice is devoted exclusively to treating such patients. "So many of them died young because we didn't take care of them." Obesity and periodontal disease, both of which can lead to fatal health problems, are rampant among people with intellectual disabilities, for example. They used to go relatively unchecked for any number of reasons: indifference, communication barriers, a lack of training in the medical community.

"Studies show that 81 percent of medical students will graduate without having any training in caring for a person with an intellectual disability," says Holder, who is the executive director of the nonprofit American Academy of Developmental Medicine and Dentistry and the global medical adviser for Special Olympics. "And the 19 percent who did had an average of one hour."

Another medical reality: About 40% to 50% of those born with Down syndrome have a cardiac defect that, if not corrected, could lead to early death. Surgeries and other medical advances have increased the average life span of someone with Down syndrome from 19 to between 55 and 60 years old, Holder estimates.

"What Special Olympics is about now," says Tim Shriver, "is using an event to drive the development of sport, fitness and health programs nationwide. It's a basic change in the movement."

To an extent, it has been a movement that sells itself. "When people meet individuals with intellectual disabilities," says Peter Wheeler, the chief communications officer of Special Olympics, "it invariably makes people change the way they think. We say our program is the best export ever developed in this country. Take it anywhere in the world and it's accepted, no matter what your philosophy, religion or political background." There were watershed moments along the way, particularly the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 and later the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990--with Harkin as chief sponsor-- which together greatly expanded the rights of the disabled. The adoption of Special Olympics as a cause in the '70s by celebrities such as Susan St. James and Rafer Johnson also helped.

But always it was Eunice, shoulder to the wheel, cajoling, lobbying, wheedling, quarterbacking, stirring it up. The 2007 Games in Shanghai were a remarkable success by any standard, but a day or two after their completion Eunice was on the phone with her son. "China was a success," she told him, "but we have a lot of work to do in Bosnia."

And elsewhere, the intellectually disabled population is increasing at a pace proportional to the world's population. More than 190 million people in the world have an intellectual disability, about 7.5 million in the United States. They are at greater risk than the general population for virtually every medical malady, vision, tooth decay and obesity being particularly troublesome. They are bullied, sexually abused, ignored and unemployed at a far greater rate than the nonimpaired population.

But to say that the lot of people with intellectual disabilities has improved because of Special Olympics is so grossly understated as to be meaningless. Shriver's movement did nothing less than release an entire population from a prison of ignorance and misunderstanding. It did something else, too--create a cathartic covenant between competitor and fan that is unlike anything else in sport. You watch and what you see is nothing less than a transformation, the passage of someone who has been labeled unfortunate, handicapped, disabled or challenged to something else: athlete.

Eunice Kennedy Shriver knew this could happen. Fifty years ago she saw it all. For that, we recognize her as one of those revolutionaries who saw opportunity where others saw barriers, someone who started a movement and changed a world.