

# “The same, the same, the same!”

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## An interview with top Paralympic coach Peter Eriksson

**P**eter Eriksson is a sixty-three year old former speed skater who, having served in senior sport's positions on both sides of the Atlantic has become one of the world's most respected coaches in both athletics and Paralympic athletics. Embodying the often called for but seldom delivered integration of the two sides of the sport, he is currently the Chief Technical Officer and Head Coach for both Canada's Olympic and Paralympic athletic programmes for Athletics Canada.

Eriksson transitioned to coaching juniors in his sport at the end of a 17-year competitive career that saw him take part twice in the World Sprint Speed Skating Championships for his native Sweden. Soon he also became interested in athletics, working as an apprentice coach at the 1980 Olympic Games for the Swedish athletics federation (*Svenska Friidrottsförbundet* – SFIF), and in Paralympic track and field, where he coached a number of international level competitors and acted as the Head Coach of the Swedish Paralympic team. During this period he also began research on the physiology of spinal cord injuries at the Stockholm University College of Physical Education and Sports, now known as the Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences or GIH.

In 1987 Eriksson moved to North America where he continued his research, publishing a number of scientific articles, and worked in coaching and performance positions at Speed Skating Canada, the Canadian Wheelchair Sports Association and the US Paralympic Committee. In 2005 he became the first Para-



*Peter Eriksson*

lympic coach to be named Canadian Coach of the Year and he was appointed High Performance Advisor for Canada's "Own the Podium" elite sport funding programme.

Hired by UK Athletics as the Head Coach/Performance Director for the Paralympic programme in 2009, Eriksson was given the mission to change the standing of the national team, 18<sup>th</sup> overall at the 2008 Paralympic Games, as it prepared for the 2012 Games in London. Under his leadership GBR was third on the medal table at both the 2011 IPC World Athletics Championships (12 Golds) and the 2012 Paralympic Games (11 Golds). After the Games Eriksson was named High Performance Coach of the Year by UK Coach and inducted into the UK Coaching Hall of Fame.

A key factor in his team's success was Eriksson's efforts to ensure that athletes on the Paralympic programme received the same opportunities, facilities, support services, training/coaching environment and expectations as their able-bodied counterparts in Britain's Olympic programme. Eriksson's famous slogan at the time was "The same, the same, the same."

In 2013 Eriksson returned to Canada to take up his current position.

NSA contributor Jimson Lee caught up with Eriksson and asked him to share his views on Paralympic athletics and its current issues.

**NSA** *I think we can agree that the media coverage and general awareness of disabled sport and the Paralympic Movement have increased with the requirement that Olympic host cities also stage the Paralympic Games, which is a good thing. But what is the impact on the LOCs (Local Organising Committees) of jointly staging both of these mega events or something like the world championships and IPC championships or even national able-bodied and para athletics events?*

**Eriksson:** To begin with, compared to the summer Olympic Games, where there are over 12,000 athletes are competing, the Paralympic Summer Games is about a third the size with a maximum of 4,000 athletes. The biggest headache for LOCs is transportation. At the Olympic Games, transportation is costly and disrupts the normal everyday flow in the host city and its citizens. At the Paralympic Games and other events for disabled athletes, the issue is not so much about what happens to the city but around accessible buses, which are different from normal buses and more expensive. And then there is the awareness of how you manage the process of moving disabled athletes. For instance, at the 2015 World ParaAthletics championships in Doha, the transport staff were keen on securing the wheel chairs to the buses, with no such concern expressed with regard to the athletes. Don't forget, if the

bus needs to brake suddenly, the athletes will go flying inside the bus! My point is that the key things to remember with regard to the Paralympic athletes are awareness, accessibility and transportation, with transportation usually being the biggest issue.

**NSA** *From the point of view of competition management, how much more difficult is it to host a Paralympic event?*

**Eriksson:** Although changes have been made to accommodate the Paralympic athlete in their particular events based on their class (i.e., according to their impairments and abilities) such as "sit-throwing", the rules for IPC athletics are similar to and based on the IAAF rules. The difficulty is that you may require more volunteers, as well as guides for the track and field events. However, most of the officials presiding over the events are the same.

**NSA** *How about getting a world record ratified? I assume you need three different athletes competing from three different teams?*

**Eriksson:** If the event is officially sanctioned the performance can count as a world record.



**NSA** *Outside of the big events we have already mentioned, what other competition opportunities do Para athletes have?*

**Eriksson:** In Canada, the UK and most of Europe, most meetings are sanctioned for both IPC and IAAF. Most open events for able-bodied athletes in these countries have integrated disabled competition with a few exceptions, like the sit-throws. Take a look at the Boston Marathon, they have integrated both divisions since the 1970's. In Ottawa's Twilight Meetings, the races are seeded by time (personal bests). On top of this integration, the IPC has created a World Cup although it not as lucrative or popular as the IAAF Diamond League.

**NSA** *Can we talk about funding, and specifically who pays for the equipment of a Paralympic athlete? At what level would you expect get your equipment paid for by someone else?*

**Eriksson:** Most disabled athletes have to pay for their own equipment, unless they have a sponsor. In Canada and in some parts of Europe, there is a carding system administered by several national committees (i.e., Canadian Paralympic Committee) that provides assistance to the athletes, however, for the most part, the athlete is responsible for their own equipment. An exception in lieu of funds exists with visually impaired athletes. If the athlete is part of the card system their guide is treated the same and carded as well. This has always been the way I think disabled sport should be managed.

**NSA** *Do fans find the different levels of classification, i.e. T41 vs T44, confusing? Do you think we need some change here?*

**Eriksson:** I do agree that for someone who is not familiar with Paralympic sport and the different classes, this can be very complex and very confusing. For instance 18 athletes can be crowned the 100m champion at the Paralympic Games versus one at the Olympic Games. Personally, I believe we need to have fewer classes. The issue is in the governance of Paralympic sport. The IOC itself is not respon-



sible for the governance of the various sports in the Olympic Games (i.e., athletics, cycling, swimming etc.). That is up to the various sporting federations (i.e., IAAF). But currently the IPC governs 12 different sports that are in the Paralympic Games. I think that creating different disabled sport bodies outside of the IPC that are specifically concerned with the various sports may allow the opportunity to reduce the number of classes and create a better chance for spectators and viewers to understand.

**NSA** *What are your thoughts on the future of the Para athletics?*

**Eriksson:** I think we have come a long way in increasing both the awareness and the development of Paralympic sports in general. However, I believe that further development of disabled athletics is hindered by the IPC itself. It currently governs and manages the IPC Athletics Federation as well as the other sporting federations involved at the Paralympic Games. If the athletics became independent it could possibly be part of the IAAF as a sub-organisation, part of the bigger picture of athletics with a closer link to able-bodied athletics. Otherwise we're going to kill a lot of competitiveness in disabled athletics. There are a lot of classes right now that are not competitive, even up to the level of expected elite athletes. But this would be a costly venture and the IAAF would need a lot more funding.

**NSA** *Disabled sport has brought on a lot of controversy, particularly around technology. What are your thoughts on mixed competitions for able-bodied athletes and disabled athletes with some kind of prosthesis?*

**Eriksson:** Oscar Pistorius was a perfect example where it "worked": With his blades he had some weaknesses, for example in the start or running the curve, but he could make it up with his top-end speed. But he would never be able to compete for a gold medal in the able-bodied race because of these weaknesses. However, when we look at Markus Rehm, his performance in the long jump is attributed to the spring blade and that is a different thing. In my opinion, the use of a piece of equipment that gives an advantage over other athletes is unfair and should not be allowed in the able-bodied competition.



**NSA** *With his blade Rehm could win the able bodied long jump in many elite competitions. If there was no advantage to the blade, how come we never see single amputees using their non-blade leg?*

**Eriksson:** That is the point. If you look at Rehm's runway speed, it is much slower than Greg Rutherford, for example. Yet, Rehm can match him in jump distance, which shows that the blade does give an advantage. Therefore, if a single leg amputee wants to do the long jump, he should be using his non-blade leg for the take-off.

**NSA** *Controversy question #2, what are your thoughts on the advantages or disadvantages on choosing a limb length for a prosthetic blade as in the case of Brazilian sprinter Alan Oliveira?*

**Eriksson:** A rule needs to be put into place that limits the maximum length of the blade. The standard allowable length should be scientifically researched. This research should focus on providing information that will create a level playing field for all athletes. Currently I am of the opinion that the science that does exist is somewhat flawed and controversial since we are seeing greater increases in maximum limb lengths. On the other hand, ridiculously long limb lengths may prove to be a hindrance for the athlete, possibly affecting their running gait, since they may not be in proportion to the rest of their body.