

WHEELCHAIR FENCING

Articles



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Wheelchair fencers and their results
from Atlanta 1996 to Warsaw 2006

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WHEELCHAIR FENCING

From rehabilitation to professional sport

Wheelchair fencing is one of the first and the oldest sport disciplines practiced by the disabled. After the Second World War, in the year 1948, fencing was introduced in the rehabilitation centre founded by dr Ludwik Gutman in Stock Mandeville near London and it was considered a perfect rehabilitation means and method. Fencing was a sport discipline especially close to the hearts of the patients – war invalids, ex-soldiers, and the duels as well as fencing tournaments organised in hospitals gave vent to their emotions, eased their stress of being disabled, built their self-esteem, nobilitated them and increased their self-confidence. Last but not least, fencing was a means to get physically fit.

With the passage of time, however (as the number and scope of competitions grew), strictly sport values of wheelchair fencing were recognised and highly valued. The first international tournament in wheelchair fencing was held in the United Kingdom in 1955, with fencers from Western Europe first of all, where the discipline was developing most dynamically. France, the United Kingdom and Italy were the leaders, soon joined by Germany, Spain and Benelux countries.

Since the Paralympic Games in Seoul in 1988 and the World Championship in Hong Kong in 1994, Asian wheelchair fencers have joined the best. Competitors from China and from Hong Kong have several times classified first in medal rankings at important international events.

In the 90s, the disabled from the countries of Eastern and Central Europe started to practice fencing, which greatly influenced the dynamic growth of the discipline. (Those countries had a long fencing tradition as well as considerable coaching potential, and making use of both in sport for the disabled soon brought about visible results). In Atlanta Pal Szekers, a Hungarian fencer (able-bodied fencer until his accident) won a gold medal in foil category B, and a Pole Jadwiga Polasik won a silver medal in saber category A. In 2000, in Sydney Poland was the greatest surprise of the Games. Classifying first in medal ranking (7 gold medals and 6 silver medals), it broke the domination of France and Hong Kong.

Today wheelchair fencing is practiced on nearly all continents (Europe, Asia – including Asia Minor, Australia, North America and South America) and the level of its sport quality has improved considerably, slowly getting close to that of regular fencing. Wheelchair fencing is, above all, a magnificent sport event to watch. It is characterised by great speed, it is dynamic, rich in movements with action changing fast. During the World Championship in Turin this year wheelchair fencers will, no doubt, present to us beautiful fencing, as well as provide excitement and sports experience.

Jakub Nowicki
IWFC Press Officer

FENCING TODAY

Domination of the Asian Dragon

The Olympics in Athens (2004) witnessed the return of Hong Kong as the leader (Poland was dethroned) and a visible progress – success - of the Asian countries. One could say that the “Asian Dragon” has won the fencing podium.

Wheelchair fencing of today, especially as presented by the competitors from China and from Hong Kong, is rich in technique. The movements are automatic to a great extent. They are, moreover, perfect as a result of long everyday practice. The training of disabled fencers takes as much time as that of able-bodied ones. Wheelchair fencing is still characterised by great speed and dynamic action.

The new quality and trends in coaching, initiated by the fencers from Far East, made the fencers from other continents change their strategy and tactics. Fierce rivalry between continents, especially between Asia and Europe, has fostered improvement of quality of wheelchair fencing and it is a guarantee that the spectacle we will witness during this year World Championships in Turin will be outstanding.

Among the favourites are fencers from the winning countries of the last Paralympic Games, ie.: Hong Kong, Poland and France, as well as China, Hungary, Ukraine, Italy, Kuwait and the United States. Recently, however, competitors from Spain, Germany, Thailand and Russia have also won medals. They can be expected to enter medal rivalry this year as well.

Jakub Nowicki
IWFC Press Officer

FENCERS SET AN EXAMPLE

The first ever joint World Championships

We, the fencers, have a reason to be proud. It is the fencers who show the others the new direction that sport should take. Special thanks must be given here to the authorities of FIE, represented by Roch Rene, as well as to the authorities of IWFC headed by Alberto Martinez Vassallo, for their decision to introduce the joint competition concept at the World Championships level. This step was both necessary and significant. Successful attempts of France, Poland or Germany, who for many years have organised regional or international informal sports meetings, where both able-bodied and disabled fencers compete SIDE BY SIDE, as well as very positive opinions of the fencers from both groups, prove that the decision was wise, and even vital.

Jakub Nowicki
IWFC Press Officer

FENCING AND WHEELCHAIR FENCING

one sport

The sport philosophy behind fencing is the same for both wheelchair and regular fencing. Attacks, parades, ripostes, quick actions, attempts to deceive the opponent, duels - both physical and psychological – are the same.

In wheelchair fencing FIE regulations apply, with only those adjustments that are necessary to adapt fencing to the needs of the disabled.

The competitors seat on wheelchairs, which are fastened to special platforms allowing the fencers to make very dynamic and quick movements with no risk of falling. In theory the distance between the competitors remains the same. However, where regular fencers use their legs, the disabled use their trunk, which give them a wide range of possibilities. Aggressive inclinations to the front are replaced by lunges and flashes, while escapes “to the back wheel” with strong back inclination are no more than defending the distance and escaping on feet in regular fencing.

Since wheelchair fencing and regular fencing are basically the same sport, in many countries (such as Poland and France) integrating competitions are getting more popular. Fencers on wheelchairs and able-bodied fencers take part in the same tournament. If two able-bodied fencers meet, obviously they compete in a regular way. However, if an able-bodied fencer competes against a disabled one, the able-bodied seats on a wheelchair to make the chances equal. In such tournaments in Poland older fencers, the so called old-boys, also participate. If in their groups or during direct eliminations they come across a younger fencer, they have a choice – either to fight on a wheelchair, or in a regular way, walking on the fencing floor. It has been shown that if the chances are made equal, the result is not at all obvious. Integrating tournaments have sometimes been won by able-bodied, and sometimes by disabled competitors. During “Szabla Kilińskiego” Wheelchair Fencing World Cup in Warsaw an integrating duel was organised between the best wheelchair epee YU Chu Yee from Hong Kong and the World Epee Champion Danuta DMOWSKA. The victory of Yu Chu Yee over Dmowska (15:10) surprised both the public and the journalists. The revenge took place the following day. After a very fierce and exciting duel Dmowska won, within time limits, with the Hong Kong competitor.

To sum up, if I were asked about the future of fencing, I would say that the competition of integrating character, as described above, is one of successive stages that we have reached. It is also the direction that world fencing will take.

Jakub Nowicki
IWFC Press Officer

INTEGRATION IN FENCING

Mutual benefits

In many countries, first of all in France and in Poland, the concept of integrating training was developed quite a long time ago. Such training involves participation of both disabled and able-bodied fencers, who also seat on wheelchairs. Coaches of European disabled fencers consider such training a must if their fencers are to compete with very strong teams form China and Hong Kong. Training camps, in which able-bodied as well as disabled fencers have taken part prove, however, that considerable profits form the “integrating formula” can also be gained by the able-bodied. I do not mean here just profits psychological and social in nature, I mean sports profits. Fighting on wheelchair, as both able-bodied fencers and their coaches agree, considerably strengthens the arm, it helps to increase the speed of reaction as well as develops ability to fight at close distance or at the so called “last meter”. “Fighting on wheelchairs is faster and more intense, because of the so called “critical distance” and the lack of possibility to escape on feet. Moreover, it introduces a new element: work of the trunk, which can successfully be used in regular fencing, for example in fighting at close distance” – say able-bodied fencers, who have tried fencing on wheelchair.

Jakub Nowicki
IWFC Press Officer