



A special event

An Olympic first, and hopes for change

Lily Postlethwaite editorial assistant,
The World in 2019

IN MARCH 2019 around 7,000 athletes and 2,500 coaches from more than 170 countries will gather in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for the Special Olympics. It will be the culmination of the competition's 50th-anniversary celebrations. This sporting event, held every two years, enables people with intellectual disabilities (IDs) to triumph over physical and mental handicaps in a show of strength and skill.

IDs, such as Down's syndrome and autism, can make socialising, communicating and even physical contact a challenge, let alone competitive swimming, gymnastics and athletics (to name three of the 24 sports on offer). But what does hosting the Special Olympics mean for wider society? The event's founder, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, believed that it acts as a catalyst for change and acceptance.

The Special Olympics in Abu Dhabi—the first time an Olympic event has been hosted in the Middle East—will put this claim to the test. Unified Sports, an American-funded inclusion initiative in which athletes with and without disabilities come together to form teams in sports such as basketball and badminton, is set to play a role in the Special Olympics. Its game-changing decision in 2017 to refer formally to people with disabilities as “the determined ones” sets an admiring tone.

The event's patron, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, intends its influence to permeate society long after the last starting pistol has been fired. Already, for example, it has inspired an initiative called Walk Unified, which aims to instil values of voluntary work and healthy living through a weekly organised walk, including people with disabilities.

The UAE keeps representatives of international human-rights organisations out of the country and is justifiably criticised for its treatment of migrant labourers. The Special Olympics gives it a chance to show the world a kinder, gentler face. If some lasting change comes of that, so much the better. Any opportunity to celebrate human resilience and collaboration is to be relished.