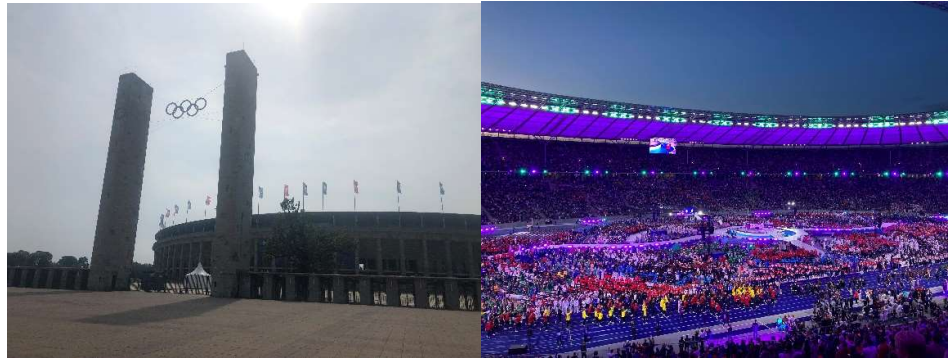


As the curtain comes down on the 2023 Special Olympics World Games in Berlin, I wanted to share some of my experiences and reflections of being part of this incredible global event.

It was a remarkable event that showcased the power of sport in promoting social inclusion and breaking down stereotypes. The opening ceremony at the iconic Olympiastadion highlighted the magnitude and significance of the games, while the sports themselves were gripping, competitive, and presented in a way that is fitting for a high-performance event. Over the eight days 7,000 athletes from around 190 countries competed in 25 sports - so truly global!



*Opening Ceremony*

The Special Olympics movement centres around optimism and hope and provides a refreshing perspective in a world often filled with negative statistics. By highlighting the positives and showcasing the athletes' abilities the movement instils hope that inclusion and accessibility for disabled people can be improved.



*Kiwis on tour – NZ Football Team*

From the outset it was clear that the athlete experience was the priority throughout the event, supported through the brilliant Healthy Athlete programme. Families and volunteers provided a critical support system for the athletes, creating a positive, inclusive and welcoming environment for all. The divisioning process (a type of classification) ensured that athletes competed against others with similar abilities, ensuring meaningful and integrity in competition. This approach also ensures that all athletes have a realistic opportunity to achieve success in their particular sports.



The Unified Sports approach, which allows disabled and non-disabled athletes to compete together, showcased the skills and talents of all participants, promoting inclusion and challenging perceptions. From what I observed this approach absolutely was not tokenistic and all athletes were fully engaged in the matches.



*Unified basketball - USA v Korea*

Inclusion in its wider sense was demonstrated at a 3x3 basketball match between USA and Korea (photo below). The USA team were all female while the Korea team were made up entirely of males. The teams had been through divisioning so were extremely well matched, resulting in a very competitive contest. There was no other criteria apart from ability, therefore no segregation based on disability or gender.



Pupils and teachers from YST Lead Inclusion School Clare Mount Specialist Sports College were among the 22,000 volunteers supporting the games. They volunteered at the 3x3 Basketball at Neptunbrunnen and also partnered with a local school - Schule Am Pappelhof - supporting their

Sports Day as part of the Berlin School Games. They shared and utilised Inclusive Sport Programme resources developed through Inclusion 2024.

Special Olympics have a simple vision and ambition that what they offer is for all disabled people. Further embedding and integrating of the Motor Activity Training Programme (MATP is a School Games format) is key to this aspiration and providing opportunities for individuals with more significant impairments and complex needs.



*Good to catch up with friends and colleagues*

Viewing the games with different lenses - from an athlete's perspective they have a platform to showcase their abilities, while families experience pride in seeing their loved ones celebrated for their achievements. From a sports development point of view the integrity and competitiveness of the competitions was important as was the way the sports were staged. The unified approach illustrated how inclusion can be achieved without sacrificing integrity of the competition.

Overall, an incredible experience both on a personal and professional level. As a sport lover, being a spectator of a wider range of sports was extremely enjoyable. But I realised that this event transcends sport. Special Olympics message of social inclusion and social justice is simple yet powerful. By challenging perceptions, celebrating achievements, and focusing on ability rather than disability, the movement advocates for a more inclusive and accessible society.