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Kindness Diplomacy: The Special Olympics "Healthy Athletes" Program ^[1]

The Special Olympics World Games in Los Angeles this week is extraordinary in its multifaceted reach. The Opening Ceremonies in front of 65,000 people in the Coliseum and on ESPN on Saturday was number one on Facebook. The competitions have been drawing full houses and an international television audience for the first time. Moreover, the lives of the athletes have been changed in ways no other sports competition achieves. The field of play shows people with intellectual disabilities participating in performances in which they enjoy sincere admiration and applause from the entire crowd. The viewers know the athletes are giving their all, with passion, grit, and determination in volumes equal or greater to that of any other athletes. Here, at this place and time, each of them is finally the cynosure. And, uniquely in competition, each of them, from whatever of the 160 participating nations, is the focus of genuine emotional support and good will. This event is no place for a cynic.



The author with the Denmark team.

The change in the athletes' lives does not stop on the field of play, or with the thrill of an expense-paid trip to Hollywood. Today I saw the transformations wrought by the Special Olympics "Healthy Athletes" program. Dottie, one of the innumerable charming volunteers greeting everyone at the Games (and a person with disabilities) gave me and my wife Nancy a tour of the extensive facilities set up at the USC campus by Special Olympics to offer free medical services to the participants. Such programs exist at many major Special Olympics events in various countries, but this version of "Healthy Athletes" sets a new standard. It will end up treating about two-thirds of the 6,500 participating athletes, and will do so more completely than has ever happened before. In a series of large temporary structures, the program offers to each athlete screening, evaluation, and treatment for general health, vision, hearing, dentistry, podiatry, fitness, and diet. Often, because of intellectual disability, poverty, or the inadequacy of medical services in the home country, athletes suffer from undiagnosed and untreated physical disorders that interfere with their ability to function. Such issues are erroneously attributed to their intellectual disability. Some athletes have vision problems or hearing problems which have been ignored because the athlete could not articulate the difficulty he or she was experiencing, or because there was no treatment available. Some athletes wear shoes that are painful and affect their ability to walk because they have never fit correctly. Some athletes got off the plane in Los Angeles with no shoes. These are dealt with at Healthy Athletes on the spot. Hearing tests can result in hearing aids fitted there and then. Similarly, eye glasses are diagnosed by professionals and ground and fitted immediately. Most exciting for any athlete is the process of foot examination and gifts of properly sized New Balance/Disney shoes for every athlete. These are souvenirs to be envied at home by everyone. They are a sign that this athlete was in the Games, and a sign that does not end at Closing Ceremonies.

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That token that the athlete was at the Games in the USA, and that the athlete has the shoes, the glow, and the new-found confidence to prove it is another element of the public diplomacy effect of the Special Olympics. This event is a kindness of a genuine nature that reaches into villages and towns all over the world in a noticeable way. If we want to be known for something, let us be known for this.



Each Healthy Athlete participant gets a pair of sneakers.

Photos courtesy of Barry Sanders.
