

HEART AND SOUL

Let the games begin

Dr. Michael Riding has spent the last 23 years guiding elite athletes across Canada and around the world, both literally and figuratively. The Halifax radiologist, who has helped blind runners by leading them in their races, is chief medical officer at the 2002 Paralympic Winter Games, which begin in Salt Lake City Mar. 7.

That role is the culmination of years of volunteer work in sports and medicine. “These are not disabled athletes,” Riding maintains. “They are athletes with a disability.” The Paralympics, he adds, “has world-class athletes, but there is an unselfishness that is probably gone from a lot of elite, able-bodied sport.”

Riding’s involvement began in 1979 when he was asked to be “guide runner” for young, blind athletes in Halifax. He agreed to lend his eyes and feet to the cause, and then he ran in a marathon with a blind friend. “I led him for the first 20 miles,” he laughs, “and he led me for the last 6.”

Riding, chief of diagnostic imaging at the IWK Health Centre, soon found himself taking part in the Canadian championships for athletes with a disability — as team physician. It was, he explains, the only way he could volunteer as a guide runner and have his way paid.

In 1982 Halifax was slated to host the Pan American Games for the Disabled — the games at which wheelchair athlete Rick Hansen won 8 gold medals. In preparation, Riding started attending other competitions to see how they were organized. That look into elite sports led to his involvement in the World Wheelchair Sports Medicine Committee. He then became the first medical officer and chair of the medical committee for the International Paralympics, a nonprofit association of national Paralympic associations.

Athletes with a disability do not differ significantly from other athletes in their drive, skills or accomplishments, says Riding, and “we’ve slowly gotten away from the concept that these athletes have special needs.”

This recognition has led to the establishment of mainstream medical clinics for the Paralympic Games, which are held every 2 years in conjunction with the Summer and Winter Olympics. Some Paralympic athletes are more prone to specific types of injury — wheelchair athletes, for example, have more upper body strains, while blind athletes tend to experience leg injuries — but the nature of the injuries is com-



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mon to most athletes. In some sports, such as swimming, the injuries are virtually the same for the 2 groups. “It’s just sports medicine with sports injuries. These athletes are mostly coached by those who coach able-bodied athletes.”

Unfortunately, physical prowess isn’t all these 2 groups of athletes have in common. At the Sydney Olympics in 2000, positive tests for banned drugs were more prevalent at the Paralympics than the Olympics. The reason athletes use the substances is the same whether they have a disability or not, notes Riding — they simply want to win.

Riding’s time as chair of the medical committee for the Paralympics will end this May after 3 terms, but he will likely remain involved in some capacity because “they always need volunteers.” If there is a bit more free time on the horizon, it will likely be spent with his daughter, Hannah, and with the 50 breeding ewes he has on his farm in Lunenburg County, NS, and with Ping.

Ping is a guard llama, and a rather famous one at that. Believed to be the only guard llama in Canada, Ping has been featured on the Discovery Channel herding Riding’s sheep and bringing them home to rest. — *Donalee Moulton, Halifax*

Tuition fees continue to rise

First-year students attending Canadian medical schools are paying an average tuition fee of \$7541 during the 2001/02 academic year, data from the Association of Canadian Medical Colleges indicate. This represents a 9.6% increase from the previous year. The number does not include additional fees students must pay, which typically account for several hundred dollars annually.

Quebec residents received the biggest bargain, with average fees of \$2885 at their 4 schools. (Out-of-province students pay considerably more.) At the other end of the scale is Ontario, with average first-year tuition fees of \$12 840.

The University of Toronto continues to have the country’s highest fees, \$14 700, while the Université de Montréal has the lowest, \$2452. Five years ago, the fee at the U of T was \$4037.

The Canadian Federation of Medical Students warns that rising tuition fees are “robbing Canadians of a diverse physician workforce and slamming the door on a very talented group of people.” — *Patrick Sullivan, CMAJ*