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"A Different Light"

A Different Light - 11 September 2021 – “Courageous Effort of Tokyo Paralympics by NZ Disabled Athletes”

The Paralympics have come and gone with a hiss and roar. They provided a welcome relief from the daily Jacinda and Ashleigh talk show earnestly explaining - the nuances of the various Alert Levels and regional restrictions. All in all New Zealand had a ripper!

New Zealand bagged twelve medals including 6 gold. And this time all to the women!

There were emotional highs aplenty in these results. Pulling at the heartstrings was the humble and deserving gold winning backstroker , Tupou Neiufi , who was embarrassed that went a little awol in her second 50m – “I have no idea where the technique went” – and did both her amazed parents and all Kiwis proud , with her medal winning performance. And the touching narrative of gold medallist, Lisa Adams who stepped up. But the outstanding performance (in terms of comedy and swimming) came from Sophie Pascoe who showcased an extraordinary example of giving it all she had. As Pascoe said “I didn’t just leave it all in the pool, I left some outside of the pool”, as her incredible effort was so intense that she passed out and vomited on the pool side and had to be taken off by medics in a stretcher, only to wake up to the realisation that she had won yet another gold. Pascoe’s sheer resilience in these games demonstrated the spirit of the Paralympics- she demonstrated the hallmarks of these Games - determination and tenacity- as she ‘showed up’ again and again. Swimming and athletics were indeed the ones that brought home the bacon for New Zealand, with all of the medals coming from these two disciplines.

Sadly, wheelchair rugby didn’t manage to make a place on the podium. I wonder if the fact that our Northland veteran Paralympian Cameron Leslie wasn’t on the team this time , contributed to this rather disappointing result? Well, that might be overstating things, as his rookie replacement, Barney Koneferenisi, displayed outstanding speed and acceleration when he played.

The media coverage of the Paralympics was also outstanding and showed improvement even from the last lot of excellent coverage, although there is a still a wee way to go to bring us up in parallel to the mainstream Olympic Games. Of course, that is why they are called the Paralympics: para does not hint at ‘paralysed’ or ‘paralytic’ as some might vaguely believe -

it stands for 'parallel' as in to be equal and parallel to the Olympic games, which I find a refreshing goal to strive for.

So kudos to the ladies of the pool, the track and the field. You have done all kiwis with disabilities proud on the world stage –with plenty of drama, passion and even a bit of comedy. You sure left quite a bit out there .

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.