



### **A Tribute to the Paralympians**

What a great pleasure it has been to watch the London 2012 Paralympics. The opening ceremony with its spectacular showmanship was undeniably impressive; but the glitz was surpassed by an atmosphere of immense pride as the competitors entered the arena to begin their parade of the stadium, and I shared that feeling. For me, it had nothing to do with our own country's athletes; it was not about politics and one-upmanship: this was purely a celebration of life and the joy of living. In my opinion, they had no need to strive for glory in their individual sports because, before the games had even begun, they were all winners. Whether members of the largest or smallest contingent, every single one of them deserves a gold medal for simply being there.

After just a few events, commentators were running out of superlatives to describe what they had witnessed. With much more to come, spectators and viewers were unconcerned about journalistic preferences and were only too happy to repeat those same words over and over. Words like amazing, courageous and inspirational, though inadequate, were all they could think of and were so very true. We were seeing incredible feats of endurance and stamina, skills honed far beyond anything we might hope to achieve, and a pursuit of individual excellence that we can all learn a lesson from.

What impresses me most, however, is the attitude of those who are not only special in respect of sporting talents, but in particular their *joi de vivre*. They seem happy to be who they are, the way they are, and recognise no barriers to further improvement and eventual excellence. Having reached this, the highest pinnacle, it still isn't enough and they strive for more. Time and again, we hear of individuals overcoming great adversity to excel in one sport, then are driven to take on the rigours of other disciplines. Their self-belief and determination seems insatiable.

Their approach to competition is, in many respects, the same as any athlete, wanting to win for their team and their country, but I suspect the greatest challenge lies within themselves. It is hard for those of us who are relatively able-bodied to fully comprehend the mental and physical pain they have had to bear in order to reach this point in their lives. In the face of such courage and accomplishment, we can only stand in awe and applaud because they are simply the best.

To the Paralympians, I would say: your dedication and persistence, your camaraderie and support, not just for those athletes from your own country, but even for your fiercest competitors, is a shining example to us all. One day, hopefully soon, we may be able to put our prejudices aside to be as strong and compassionate. Perhaps then, the world will be a far better place.

Thank you Paralympians.

