

# The changing face of Vancouver's Games

BY DOUGLAS TODD, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 9, 2010



Former Vancouver mayor Sam Sullivan demonstrated his skills with the flag attachment on his wheelchair in Turin, Italy in 2006 during the Paralympic Games.

**Photograph by:** Ian Lindsay, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Sun

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When he was mayor, the international spotlight shone on Sam Sullivan, identifying him as the face of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games. But politics intervened, removing him from office and stripping him of any official involvement in the Games. A fervent Olympics booster, Sullivan is sorry he's not more involved, but says he's past the hurt and has moved on to new endeavours. Gregor Robertson, Vancouver's new mayor, is centre-stage now. Once ambivalent about the Games, Robertson is the one welcoming the world to Vancouver.

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It is arguably the most famous and evocative symbol so far associated with the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

And, in some ways, it's gone.

It was the photogenic moment that shot around the world four years ago when former Vancouver mayor Sam Sullivan, a quadriplegic, twirled a giant Olympic flag above his head from his wheelchair in Turin, Italy.

Many people were moved to tears in 2006 by that inspiring image of social acceptance, technical innovation and individual fortitude.

Much of the global public, used to disabled people being stigmatized in their cultures, was awestruck that a man in a wheelchair was the elected leader of a city that would host competitions between some of the world's most gifted able-bodied and disabled men and women.

But less than two years later, a shadow was cast over that memorable moment.

In 2008, disgruntled members of Sullivan's own political organization, the centre-right Non-Partisan Association, replaced the one-term mayor with a new candidate, who would himself be defeated in the mayoral race by Gregor Robertson of the centre-left Vision Party.

As a result, the symbolic purity of Sullivan's flag waving has been clouded, especially for those who have followed the life of the former councillor and mayor -who told me after he was defeated by Peter Ladner that he overcame his grief through a combination of Christianity and Greek Stoic philosophy.

The legacy of Sullivan's Olympic act is not gone entirely, however, as has been made abundantly clear this week by the New York Times and The Huffington Post, as well as by an increasingly active Sullivan, who is the subject of a documentary to be aired today. .

The New York Times headlined its glowing Jan. 31 profile of Sullivan with "Vancouver's former mayor remains face of the Games."

The article said, "Hundreds of hours of building and testing went into that moment" in Turin when Sullivan circled rapidly in his wheelchair, which he'd had designed to wave the giant, attached Olympic flag.

"Sullivan practiced in his chambers, in parking lots, in the yard outside his parents' home. As he twirled, he felt as if he were in a movie, silent, bright and in slow motion," wrote Greg Bishop in the Times.

"This said something about Sullivan, about disabilities, about Vancouver. Although he cherished waving to the world, he refuses to let that moment define his Olympic legacy, the subject of which is complicated."

The New York Times article was followed later in the week by an even more adoring piece about Sullivan and his "inspiring" character on the popular Huffington Post website.

A Huffington Post essay, titled "Exploring Vancouver with a True Olympian," outlined the social initiatives Sullivan is helping to lead, particularly those involving the disabled and the addicted.

Since the Huffington Post column was written by Joel Epstein, a consultant to the Annenberg Foundation, it especially highlighted how Sullivan is the subject of a short documentary created by the foundation's American philanthropist, Charles Annenberg Weingarten.

The dynamic Weingarten, who has helped fund Sullivan's current Global Civil Policy Initiative, travels the world supporting and making short films about people he believes are engaged in selfless acts of

giving.

In a recent conversation, Sullivan told me the 17-minute film, titled Sam Sullivan: Life in a Wheel, captures his return to the mountainside where he broke his neck in a skiing accident at age 19.

The film then follows Sullivan to Vancouver's seedy Downtown Eastside, where he states his firm belief that "drug addiction is a disability, not a medical problem."

The film will be previewed today and Wednesday afternoon to journalists and selected Vancouver audiences. Speakers will include people from the social sector, as well as those who are disabled and addicted.

The high-profile events surrounding Sullivan this month make it clear, almost two years after his startling defeat, that he is not slipping silently away.

Sullivan appears to be developing the persona of former New Democratic Party premier Mike Harcourt, another former politician who maintains a profile because he truly values public policy and contributing to the common good.

In a recent conversation, Sullivan sounded his usual upbeat self -although I sensed he was a bit bugged to be on the relative sidelines as the Winter Olympics kick off and many others will more officially bask in its reflected glory.

Sullivan is no plaster saint. Many voters recall how his political decisions seemed to jump all over the map, and he does not seem to dislike the attention that goes with keeping in the limelight.

However, the one thing you can say about Sullivan is that he still lives up to his Christian and Stoic-inspired dedication to what he calls "the polis," or city-state.

A little like his spiritual heroes, Jesus and Socrates, he at least deserves admiration for not being destroyed or silenced by a river of physical, emotional and social setbacks.

For whatever reason, Sullivan remains genuinely dedicated to numerous initiatives that he believes could make Vancouver a better place.

It's quite possible the iconic image of Sullivan twirling the Olympic flag may be superseded as the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games play out.

But, even if that happens, the man behind the legendary Olympic image will remain a force with which to be reckoned.

[dtodd@vancouversun.com](mailto:dtodd@vancouversun.com)

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