

April 24, 2020

Another Four Years to Train?

Sigh. The week started off with the disappointing (though not unexpected) news that the on-site portion of the AHEAD conference has been cancelled. It put me in mind of all the other activities that generally fill our summer months, but that we'll miss this year. That includes the postponement of the 2020 Summer Olympic Games. And THAT made me remember this post (below), from August of 2016, in which I speculated about the possibility of our own set of athletic competitions for 2020. Perhaps, now, we will have another four years to train for the events. We can try again in 2024. GRIN (Note the recent addition of a new event – the Coronavirus Triathlon!)

August 12, 2016

In Praise of DSS “Athletes”

OK, I admit it. I am an Olympics junkie. I didn't say I apologized for it, I just said I admit it. I have spent much of the last week glued to the TV, watching coverage of the games from Rio. I am fascinated by the skill, the determination, and the dedication of these athletes from around the world who have focused for so very long on that single opportunity to perform in their sport and to be recognized among the best-of-the-best. And let's face it... it has been a very satisfying week to be a US citizen and see our athletes compete and succeed on an international stage.

I was afraid that my fascination with the Olympic games would so interfere with my productivity that I wouldn't get anything put together for this Friday offering. But then I realized that there was a natural extension of this week's focus into the DSS world. There has been some talk on the DSSHE-L in recent days about reviving the idea of certification, in order to enhance the visibility and credibility of DSS providers in the world of higher education. I am not a fan of certification (I **HATE** the idea, for reasons that I'll go into another time!), but if what you are after is recognition for what we do and how we do it – for OUR skill, determination, and dedication – then perhaps the answer is right in front of us just now. We need our own Olympiad! For what it is worth, here are some suggestions for events you may wish to start training for now, in preparation for the 2020 DSSlympics.

The Legal Gymnastics venue offers a number of signature events for our DSSlympians. The Balance Beam competition looks to see how adept the DSS provider is at walking the very thin line between access and success. Athletes get higher scores when they show they are able to bend over backwards, jump up and down, and stretch in agonizing directions, all without losing their balance. Then we move to the Uneven Bars, when participants need to show fluid transitions between the high bar (ADA/504) and the low bar (FHA, 508, and more), knowing instinctively when it is time to jump from one to the other, and being able to demonstrate great flexibility in working around these laws, all without losing your grip on the basics. The Vault event is judged almost exclusively on how firmly participants are able to “stick” their landing. No matter how high you jump, or how many twists and turns you work in along the way (in considering

a course of action or an accommodation request), the real question is whether you can come to a solid conclusion and stand your ground without moving. The Floor Exercises present a unique challenge to DSS athletes. It isn't the skills that one must show in turning somersaults, or doing back flips, jumps, and twists in applying 504/ADA, all while interpreting the rhythm of the music and staying inside bounds (of the law). The challenge comes from the inconsistent scoring often shown by the panel of (federal) judges, that includes a representative from OCR, one from DOJ, and one from the Federal bench. Participants in this competition need to recognize that no matter how much skill they demonstrate or how consistent their performance, the judges may disagree among themselves. Such is life.

While it is expected that the Legal Gymnastics events will be dominated by experienced service providers with considerable practice behind them, the Diving events are likely to be won primarily by enthusiastic newcomers who aren't afraid to dive in, head first, to get the job done. As opposed to the Olympics, when divers earn points for making as small a splash as possible, our DSSlympians will be encouraged to dive with style and make a BIG splash, to make their presence known on campus. The other diving event of note is the Synchronized Diving event, remarkable because it is the one competition that requires the participation of a non-DSS partner. The DSS leader of the pair may choose to bring along someone from Residence Life, from IT, from Student Services, or even an administrator. The area of focus of the partner is not important. What IS important is that the two divers are perfectly in sync and able to match both their rhetoric and their actions.

The Equestrian events of the Rio Olympics will be replaced by the Zoological competitions in the DSSlympics. The term *dressage* translates as "training", and in the equestrian events it refers to a highly technical form of riding, done within carefully controlled parameters. In the DSSlympics, the *Dressage* event will test the skill of DSS providers in asking "the two questions" (and any allowable follow up) and determining whether the animal is, or is not, a service animal. Meanwhile, instead of the Steeplechase, DSS providers can enter the Snake Chase – a free-for-all kind of event to see how quickly the DSS provider can find and contain an escaped snake in the Residence Hall. (By the way, in order to make the finals and have a chance to demonstrate your prowess in the Snake Chase, you must first participate in the event's "compulsory skills" exhibition, sorting out bogus ESA documentation from the real thing.)

Track and field events will test DSS providers in a variety of ways. Running the Hurdles will see DSS providers jumping over faculty members randomly placed at intervals along the track. While the athlete can choose to skip a jump and simply run around the side of a hurdle placed in their path, doing so will lose them points in the final scoring. The High Hurdles present a similar challenge, except that runners are trying to navigate a path strewn with administrators, institutional policies, and college attorneys. In the high hurdles, obstacles cannot be ignored. They must be faced, and failure to get past any one obstacle will disqualify the athlete in that round.

Meantime, the frequent and important challenge of creating alternate media translates to several DSSlympic events. The Alt Media Sprint pushes athletes to demonstrate their creativity in finding quick solutions for last minute requests/needs. In contrast, the Alt Media Marathon is a test of strategy, policies, and persistence in setting up a viable system for moving a large number of alt media requests through the system expediently.

The Pole Vault event of the Olympics is replaced by the Captioning Hoops in the DSSlympics. Athletes compete to see who can jump through the various hoops (of different sizes), placed all over the playing field (necessitating a great deal of running around), in order to accomplish all the steps in identifying the need, getting permission, creating a transcript, finding a vendor, and getting a captioned video in place for use by deaf students.

[It should be noted that, to date, the organizers have resisted suggestions to include throwing events – Discus, Hammer, Javelin, Shot Put. There seems to be some disagreement as to whether athletes would be aiming for a neutral target or be allowed to identify the picture of someone specific to aim for (which is the way athletes practice this skill, in secret, on their home campus).]

The most noteworthy Cycling competition is the Universal Design Stationary Bike. DSS athletes disseminate information to as many folks as possible, as fast as they can (just keep on pedaling!) during a prescribed time period. A stationary bike is used in this competition because whether or not the DSS provider makes any forward progress through their efforts is too often governed by outside forces and circumstances. It is not a part of the event scoring.

Among the more dangerous events is Canoeing. The Canoeing event starts with the DSS provider up the creek without a paddle, trying to navigate troubled waters without any support from the administration (note that DSS providers don't get to choose to participate in this event – they are entered by those same, unsupportive administrators with or without their consent). This event is particularly dangerous as the DSS provider has to be prepared to abruptly change directions or maneuver past a number of cave-ins that appear unexpectedly as a result of administrative (in)actions.

That brings us to the DSSlympic Aquatics Stadium for a variety of events that all take place in a single pool. It doesn't matter whether you are swimming the Backstroke, the Butterfly, the Breast Stroke, or Free Style (or assigning Extended Time, Notetakers, Assistive Technology, or Adaptive Testing). It doesn't matter whether you are swimming an individual medley, or whether you are lucky enough to approach the accommodation process with a team of DSS professionals behind you. You are still going to be swimming back and forth in the same pool, event after event, throughout the competition – and once you get back home to your campus. In OUR swimming events, it isn't speed that counts, but consistency and the ability to keep your head above water no matter how many times you are asked to jump back into that pool!

(UPDATE: Spring, 2020)

A new sport has been added to the DSSlympic lineup – *the Coronavirus Triathlon*. The triathlon began, almost 50 years ago, as an alternative workout to the rigors of track training. In that same spirit, the DSSlympic version will see DSS athletes participating in typical activities, but in a changed environment or with an added degree of difficulty. The intent is for the athletes to demonstrate strength, stamina, and resilience while also proving their flexibility. The 5K run will be held on the beach, so that the runners must deal with constantly shifting sands beneath their feet. The 200M swim will be held in the Aquatics Stadium pool, but the distance must be swum with one hand tied behind the back. Perhaps most difficult will be the 10k cycling event that uses a stationary bike in the competitor's home, with the activity proctored by Respondus Monitor. Part of the challenge in this grueling event (that seems to go on forever!) is not being able to see your fellow athletes and know how your progress matches theirs.

There are other, less glamorous events under consideration for our games, including Faculty Fencing, Attorney Arm Wrestling, and the very difficult Parental Pentathlon (which includes demonstration of a variety of skills in dealing with parental over involvement). There is even some talk of recognizing Role Juggling as a DSSlympic sport (especially for single practitioners from smaller campuses who wear several hats). And let's not forget the very difficult Documentation Archery contest in which competitors are under no obligation to use standard equipment or start from the same place in order to hit a common target. The point of all this is not that these DSSlympic games will provide an opportunity to honor those among us who excel at these activities, but rather to honor ALL the DSS providers out there who expend their time and energy, EVERY DAY, not for the sake of their sport, but for the support of students with disabilities.

You ALL deserve medals.

Janie

“The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part; the essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well.” (Pierre de Coubertin, Father of the modern Olympic Games)