

Our history

In the early sixties, research on children with an intellectual disability revealed that they were only half as physically fit as children without an intellectual disability. It was generally assumed that their low fitness levels were directly linked to their disability.



A Toronto researcher and teacher, Dr. Frank Hayden, questioned this assumption. Working with a group of children on an intense fitness programme, he demonstrated that, when given the opportunity, young people with an intellectual disability could become physically fit and develop the skills required to participate in sports.

His research proved that low levels of fitness and motor skills development in people with an intellectual disability were caused by their sedentary lifestyle. In other words, their disability was the result of their exclusion from the exercise programmes and sporting activities available to children without a disability.

Inspired by his discoveries, Dr. Hayden began searching for ways to develop a national sports programme for people with an intellectual disability. He eventually achieved his goal, although not in Canada.

His work came to the attention of Eunice Kennedy Shriver and the Kennedy Foundation in Washington, D.C., and led to the creation of Special Olympics. The first sport competition organized under the Special Olympics banner was held at Soldier's Field in Chicago in 1968. To ensure that Canada was represented at these Games, Dr. Hayden called on an old friend, Mr. Harry "Red" Foster.

The late Harry "Red" Foster was an outstanding sportsman, a well-known broadcaster, a successful businessman and a humanitarian recognized throughout the world for his tireless work on behalf of people with an intellectual disability. Inspired by his mother's devotion to his younger brother, who was both blind and intellectually disabled, Mr. Foster began early in his career to devote much of his time, energy and money to raising public awareness of the problems faced by individuals living with an intellectual disability and their families.

Accompanying a floor hockey team from Toronto to those first Games in Chicago, "Red" was quick to see in Special Olympics an opportunity to improve the lives of Canadians with an intellectual disability.

Upon his return to Canada, he began setting up a foundation for the benefit of the Special Olympics organization. The following summer, in 1969, the first Special Olympics Canada Games were held in Toronto. From these humble beginnings, the organization quickly spread across the country and grew into the sport organization that we know today.