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Editorial

Legendary veteran of the Special Olympics

Long jumper Bob Beamon at the Special Olympics World Games in Berlin

The former world record holder and Olympic long jump champion has been associated with the Special Olympics movement since 1968. Of course, he did not want to miss out on the World Games in Berlin.

Bob Beamon has an impressive athletic history. In 1968, the US American became Olympic champion in the long jump with the sensational distance of 8.90 meters. To date, only one other person, Mike Powell, has jumped further in competition and in regular wind conditions than Beamon did back then. What is rarely mentioned in biographies is that Beamon was also present at the very first Special World Games in Chicago in 1968.

“This is not my first Special Olympics,” he told World Games editors with a laugh. “One of my relatives competed in the Special Olympics in 1968 and won a gold medal. I then also won one at the Olympics. It was quite an achievement for my family,” said Beamon as he looked back on that time. It was then that he met the founder of the Special Olympics, Eunice Kennedy-Shriver, who herself came from the famous Kennedy family. She was a sister of U.S. President John F. Kennedy, who was killed in the Dallas assassination.

Beamon has been involved with the Special Olympics movement ever since. “We have accomplished quite a lot. But we also still have a lot of work ahead of us,” he said. To promote the Special Olympics, he participated in the Unified Experience relay race in Berlin. Seven teams competed in the 4x100-meter race. “It’s my first 100-meter dash in over 50 years. After all, I was a long jumper,” he said before the start.

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The inclusive race of the Unified Experience was attended by icons of world sports such as Beamon and top athletes from the Special Olympics and Paralympics as well as volunteers from grassroots sports. Mathias Mester, silver medalist in the shot put at the 2008 Paralympics, joined Beamon in position three in the relay just two lanes away. Maïke Schwarz, who won silver in the 50-meter freestyle in Rio in 2016, started second. “I usually compete in the water. But here, I am proud to compete on land,” she told the World Games editors. Many eyes were on Schwarz – because she was running with her dog Jumbo. “I can’t see very well. That’s why Jumbo makes sure I find the right way,” she said. Jumbo ran ahead on a leash in order to guide Schwarz along the track.

The Special Olympics World Games are a special experience for the native of Potsdam. “I haven’t experienced much of it yet. But what I have noticed is that there is a lot of fun and enjoyment going on. At the Paralympics, everyone is mainly concerned with preparing for their own competition. But everything is a bit more open and joyful here. It’s simply a different experience,” she said. Schwarz will be at the World Games the entire time. But after that, she will resume her own training regime with about 30 hours per week. Her main goal is to compete in the 2024 Paralympics in Paris.

For Bob Beamon, Olympic competitions have long been a distant memory. However, as an ambassador, he continues to participate in the Olympic Games, the World Championships in Athletics, Diamond League meets, and Special Olympics games. He moves between both worlds – which is untypical for most US sports.

In Berlin, he will be accompanied by Benita Fitzgerald Mosley. In 1984, she became Olympic champion in the 100-meter hurdles in Los Angeles. She currently serves on the Board of Directors of Special Olympics International. In the founding country of the USA, she believes that the Special Olympics movement is well anchored. “Everyone there knows what the Special Olympics is. There are many volunteers, both young and old. It is organized at the state level. That leads to a lot of local events. There are thus numerous opportunities to get involved with it,” said Fitzgerald Mosley. Nevertheless, beyond the differentiated infrastructure in sports, she still sees some

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deficits. “Things are fine up to the high school level. We have a lot of inclusive schools. But things tend to thin out at the college level,” she said. She continues to see inclusive sports as a driver for social change. “The movement has grown quite a lot. The athletes really appreciate the experience. And the acceptance of differently-abled people has increased considerably,” said Fitzgerald Mosley.

The 1984 Olympic champion continues to attach great importance to the independence of Special Olympics in the context of world sports. “Special Olympics competitions need their own space and their own time. Otherwise, people would pay little attention to it,” she said. In the Special Olympics, the idea of togetherness is more important than top athletic performance. “I think the most important thing is to reach your own peak performance. You may only come in last place in track and field. But if you’ve run faster than you ever have before, that’s definitely a win,” she said.

With that in mind, then, 76-year-old Bob Beamon did indeed pull off a victory in the Unified Experience. His relay team may have finished last. But he beat his own record and proudly displayed his participant ribbon among all the other athletes.

Text: Tom Mustroph

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