



# PAOLA FANTATO: SPORTS AS A MEANS OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION



he 19th of July 1996 will remain in Paola Fantato's memory as a very special day. For the 36-year-old native of Verona who has suffered from the effects of poliomyelitis since the age of 8 months, and member of the Italian archery team for the Games of the XXVI Olympiad in Atlanta, entering the stadium with the rest of the Italian delegation during the Opening Ceremony was already a victory over her physical disability. For the first time in the history of the Olympic Movement, a wheel-chair bound archer participated fully in the Olympic Games. Paola Fantato kindly shared her impressions with Olympic Review.

**O.R.: At 36, after participating in the 1988 Paralympics in Seoul and the 1992 paralympics in Barcelona where you won the gold medal in archery, is competing in your first Olympic Games in Atlanta a dream that has finally come true?**

Paola Fantato: Yes, it is a dream come true. After my results in Barcelona, I was invited to join the national team for the Atlanta Games. From that time, it has been a real race from the start. Today, it gives me great joy to have succeeded in reaching my goal, even if I was not able to bring away a medal.

**O.R.: what was your impression of the level of competition in the archery contest in Atlanta, and also, how were you able to fit in with the rest of the athletes?**

P.F.: There were some practical problems - the typical barriers which physically

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challenged athletes often have to confront. Nevertheless, I could rely on the goodwill and total support of the organizers to overcome those problems. For example, a car was placed at my disposal to facilitate transportation. I was also housed close to the archery range at Stone Mountain during the competitions in order to facilitate my participation, and then I moved back to join the Italian delegation in the Olympic Village.

**O.R.: For you, what does sport, and archery in particular, represent?**

P.F.: Sport represents a great deal to me. It is a way of integrating in a world where anyone without a perfect physique is at a disadvantage. It is a great satisfaction to be able to show the world that physically challenged people like me can achieve the same things as anyone else. I hope that my participation will serve to increase understanding of our situation.

**O.R.: You have practised archery since you were 12 years old, and your record of achievements includes many victories, notably the European Championship Team Prize for this year. What was the most outstanding moment in your sports career?**

P.F.: My experience at the Atlanta Olympic Games was certainly the most important and the most emotional. I will always have a special memory of the Opening Ceremony with Mohammed Ali, because I think he showed a lot of courage by appearing, with his particular physical challenge, before the eyes of the

entire world after having been a great champion in his discipline.

**O.R.: In the European Archery Championships of 1996, you contributed to the Italian team's victory. What satisfaction do you derive from that shared experience?**

P.F.: It gave me a great sense of satisfaction, because this was a result that we had been striving to attain for many months. It was also a very nice experience for me to have a real emotional connection with my teammates. Giovanna Aldegani and Giuseppa Di Blasi.

**O.R.: What are your plans now that Atlanta is over?**

P.F.: To start with. I am going to defend my title at the Paralympics, which start in a few days, and then I am going to take a break.

