



Fireworks brighten the night sky at Rice-Eccles Stadium during opening ceremonies of the eighth Paralympic Winter Games. A crowd of 40,000 attended the festivities.

2002 Paralympics

Return of the fire

By Lisa Riley Roche
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A flame is burning again in the caldron above Rice-Eccles Stadium, this time for the athletes competing in the 2002 Paralympics.

Two members of the U.S. team, Muffy Davis and Chris Waddell reignited the caldron Thursday night during the Paralympic opening ceremonies.

Eric Weihenmayer, the only blind person ever to scale Mount Everest, carried the flame from the stadium floor up to the base of the caldron.

Weihenmayer, who navigated the crowded stands and a long corridor assisted only by his guide dog, was a powerful symbol of the theme of the 2½-hour-long ceremonies — overcoming obstacles to reach goals.

He later compared carrying the torch to his historic climb. "There are a lot of similarities in terms of pushing past what you think your limitations are and pushing through doubt, pushing through fear and celebrating every step."

The final torchbearers who carried the flame into the stadium were competitors from previous Winter Paralympics in Sweden, Austria, France, Norway and Japan.

These, the eighth Paralympic Winter Games, continue through March 16 and have brought nearly 450 athletes from 36 countries to compete in alpine and cross country skiing, biathlon and ice sled hockey.

The scale is smaller than the 2002 Olympic Winter Games that attracted some 2,500 athletes from more than twice as many coun-



Wheelchair athletes enter Rice-Eccles Stadium during opening ceremonies. Nearly 450 athletes from 36 countries are competing in the Games, which run through March 16.

SALT LAKE PARALYMPICS

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tries. But the start of the Paralympics was still celebrated in a big way by the athletes and spectators who filled the University of Utah stadium Thursday.

Even a downpour during performances by Wynonna and Stevie Wonder at the end of the 2½-hour show didn't dampen their enthusiasm.

Wearing a plastic poncho, Lizzie Jones, an Olympus High junior, danced in the stands with several friends while Wonder sang. "It was awesome," Jones said at the end of the sold-out show.

She and other spectators said they admired the athletes who paraded into the stadium behind their countries' flags, some in wheelchairs or on crutches, others guided by dogs.

"They're not letting their physical disabilities limit what they're doing," Ryan Crowton of Ogden said.

Oscar-winning actor Louis Gossett Jr. narrated the story told in the theatrical segments of the show with skaters, dancers and singers. Against a backdrop of metal "mountains" at the south end of the stadium, the segments showcased the three elements of the Paralympics — mind, body and spirit.

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Gossett said.

Three disabled athletes told of their struggles, including Rudy Garcia-Tolson, 13, who had both his legs amputated after being born with rare multiple congenital birth defects.

Standing on his artificial limbs, Garcia-Tolson told the crowd he loves to prove people wrong. "My spirit will never fade because it doesn't hear the word 'no,' or the word 'can't' or the word 'never.'"

A triathlete who hopes to compete in the 2004 Paralympic Summer Games in Athens, Greece, he said his "spirit thinks I'm a regular boy and an athlete. Because when I run, I can feel my spirit soar."

President Bush declared open the Paralympic Games, just as he did for the Olympics on Feb. 8. Only this time, he made the announcement via videotape instead of coming to Salt Lake.

In his pre-taped remarks, Bush congratulated the participants, calling them "some of the world's finest athletes."

Each of them, he said, "will demonstrate that we are limited only by the size of our own dreams, and that desire and courage can overcome any obstacle life may bring you."

Mitt Romney welcomed the Paralympians to what he called "the friendliest place on the entire planet." The Salt Lake Organizing Committee president said they should feel at home here in Utah.

"Here, the human spirit has dreamed and built, it has strived and achieved. You Paralympians embody that same spirit," Romney said. "You reawaken in us the spirit of this place. Welcome home."

International Paralympic Committee President Phil Craven, a five-time Paralympian in wheelchair basketball, thanked SLOC for "fantastic

Olympic Games.

"I was here. You gave the world a much-needed transfusion of joy, hope and success. Let's do it again," told the cheering crowd. "Let's do it again for the eighth Paralympic Winter Games."

Unlike the opening and closing ceremonies for the Olympics, spectators Thursday did

not have to pass through security checks to get into the stadium.

"The threat level wasn't there," said Doug Arnot, SLOC's managing director of operations. "If the circumstances don't warrant it, why put people through it?"

Spectators were also able to ride TRAX trains to and from

the stadium. Security concerns closed the University Line during both the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympics.

There were enough riders Thursday night to cause a nearly hourlong wait to board a train after the opening ceremonies.

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