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**OLYMPICS**

# 'More than a medal:' Special Olympics continues Eunice Kennedy Shriver's fight for societal inclusion

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Loretta Claiborne said she was used to being unseen growing up in the 1960s. She was a Black girl who loved to play sports at a time when racial segregation and gender inequality ran rampant. And she identified as having intellectual disabilities – and was born partially blind – in an era when that often meant being cast out and institutionalized.

But when the late Eunice Kennedy Shriver interacted with her, she felt seen in a way that changed her life trajectory forever. "She saw straight through to my heart," Claiborne said.

"When I first met her, she was fierce. She walked right up to me and said, 'I want to be your friend.' She would write me letters, invite me to see her and meet her family. She saw me in a way I had never been seen by anyone."

Shriver's belief was that emotional connection could empower people with intellectual disabilities to reach their potential, and that sports could help open hearts. While Shriver died in 2009, her legacy lives on through the Special Olympics, and the organization commemorated its founder's 100th birthday last month.

Shriver started the Special Olympics in 1968, and it now serves six million people in 200 countries and aims to combat bullying and isolation. Special Olympics was first recognized by the International Olympic Committee in 1988; however, the organization's World Games are not held in the same year as the Olympics. The most recent World Summer Games were held in Abu Dhabi in 2019. The next World Winter Games are slated for Kazan, Russia, in January 2022, while the World Summer Games are slated for Berlin in 2023.

"She made the road for intellectual disabilities when society didn't want them," Claiborne said of Shriver. "Back in 1968, whites weren't liking Blacks and Blacks weren't liking whites, and people with intellectual disabilities were being hidden away in their homes and in institutions.

"But Eunice wasn't afraid to take a chance. She started something special for a group of people that wasn't even thought of. She was uncovering something society wanted covered.

"She showed the world what you can do through sports by having faith in someone. It's more than a medal. Our athletes have jobs, live on their own and are married because Eunice believed in seeing value in people (with intellectual disabilities). I wouldn't have stepped out of my closed box if it weren't for Eunice."

Claiborne, the Arthur Ashe Courage Award winner at the 1996 ESPYs, is a unique figure in Special Olympics history. Her mother, Rita, a single mom, was told by doctors to institutionalize Loretta, but she refused. Loretta has completed 25 marathons and claimed countless gold medals as a multiple-sport athlete through six Special Olympics World Games competitions.

"I was tired of being bullied. I was so angry inside. Special Olympics gave me a way to (channel) that," Claiborne said. "My mom said, 'If you quit something today, you'll quit your whole life.' So I've just never quit."

## A lasting legacy

In establishing a lifelong connection with Claiborne and other Special Olympics athletes, Shriver was partially seeing her sister, Rosemary Kennedy, who had intellectual disabilities. The two grew up playing sports – swimming, sailing, skiing and football.

“In the world, most of us see through hierarchies,” Special Olympics chairman Timothy Shriver said. “You’re smart, you’re not so smart. You’re rich, you’re not so rich. It’s a big cancer in human life. It invariably leads us to miss what’s going on beneath the surface.

“My mom saw beyond the appearance, beyond the label, beyond the stigma. That came from her sister. She grew up loving someone that the world didn’t. If you grow up that way, you have to learn how to see beyond what the world sees. You have to learn that the judgments of the world are not true, that they're a distortion.”

While he was president, Eunice Shriver's brother John F. Kennedy in 1963 granted nearly \$600 million to serve disabled citizens. But Shriver didn't want Rosemary to be trivialized, so keeping the Special Olympics movement separate was essential in its early phases.

Shriver said his mother's legacy remains with him. The biggest lesson he learned from her was that evoking change doesn't just require a voice; it takes real action.

“A lot of people today, they talk about inequalities and change, they talk about ending discrimination. My mom, she was completely in the game,” he said. “It wasn't like she didn't use her voice. But she was all about action. She was of the belief that things change when people act, when you have personal, engaged experiences. You can't fake showing up, and she never did.”

## **Out of isolation, onto the field**

Chris Nikic, the first person with Down Syndrome to complete a full Ironman triathlon, said in his 2021 ESPYs speech while accepting the Jimmy V Award for perseverance: "Three years ago, I was 18, overweight, out of shape, excluded and isolated. But my dream was to be like you. To be included. To be independent."

Sports and competition helped pull Nikic out of depression. But others aren't so fortunate.

Shriver believes the pathway to inclusion starts early. His goal is for every high school in the country to offer "Unified" sports programs: inclusive sports made up of athletes with intellectual disabilities on the same team as their non-disabled peers.

"The problem in our society now is we have people growing up afraid of other people who are different," Shriver said. "If you cross the boundary of fear, and you can do that by playing on the same varsity lacrosse team, then everything else changes and there's no marginalization. You become friends. That's sports working its magic. It is social change through sports. Because then kids grow up in schools with physical inclusion and all of the sudden, workplaces are increasingly open to people with intellectual disabilities."

Claiborne can speak to that. She said she went from being angry at the world to trusting non-disabled people – all because of sports. "One time Eunice told me, 'You've gotta have faith yourself first, then have faith in others.' Then you can let faith trump your fears."

## **Dikembe Mutombo steps up**

NBA Hall of Famer Dikembe Mutombo remembers going to the market in his native Congo when he was in ninth grade and patrons screaming at him in horror

before scattering from the store. His height -- Mutombo was 7 feet tall -- had frightened them. A 13-year-old Mutombo was left scarred and heartbroken.

"I was bullied every day by teachers, principals, headmasters and other students," Mutombo told USA TODAY Sports. "It took me about three years to go to the market after that incident. I was rejected from my own society in Africa because of my height. Can you imagine if I was born with intellectual disabilities? Now, the same people who rejected me, roll out the red carpet when I come home. The world is funny like that."

Mutombo has been a global face of the Special Olympics, first serving as an ambassador in the 2011 Greece Games and then establishing Special Olympics Congo in 2017. Now a member of the organization's International Board of Directors, Mutombo and his children have regularly competed in Unified events. He's rallied his friend, Yao Ming, an NBA Hall of Famer, to become a global ambassador.

"... We cannot lose hope," Mutombo said. "What Special Olympics have done is given hope to athletes."

That hope has literally been lifesaving, especially in developing countries. In many African countries, people with intellectual disabilities are not even recorded at birth. Mutombo said he's leading a brigade in an uphill climb to change societies. .

"In Africa, where I came from, people with intellectual disabilities have been killed at birth. They are hung in their bedrooms or sent away from the village. I knew a woman whose father killed her mother because the man felt the mother was a curse for giving birth to someone with intellectual disabilities," Mutombo said, choking up. "We have a moral duty to look at everyone as a human being, support and protect them so they are guaranteed human rights."