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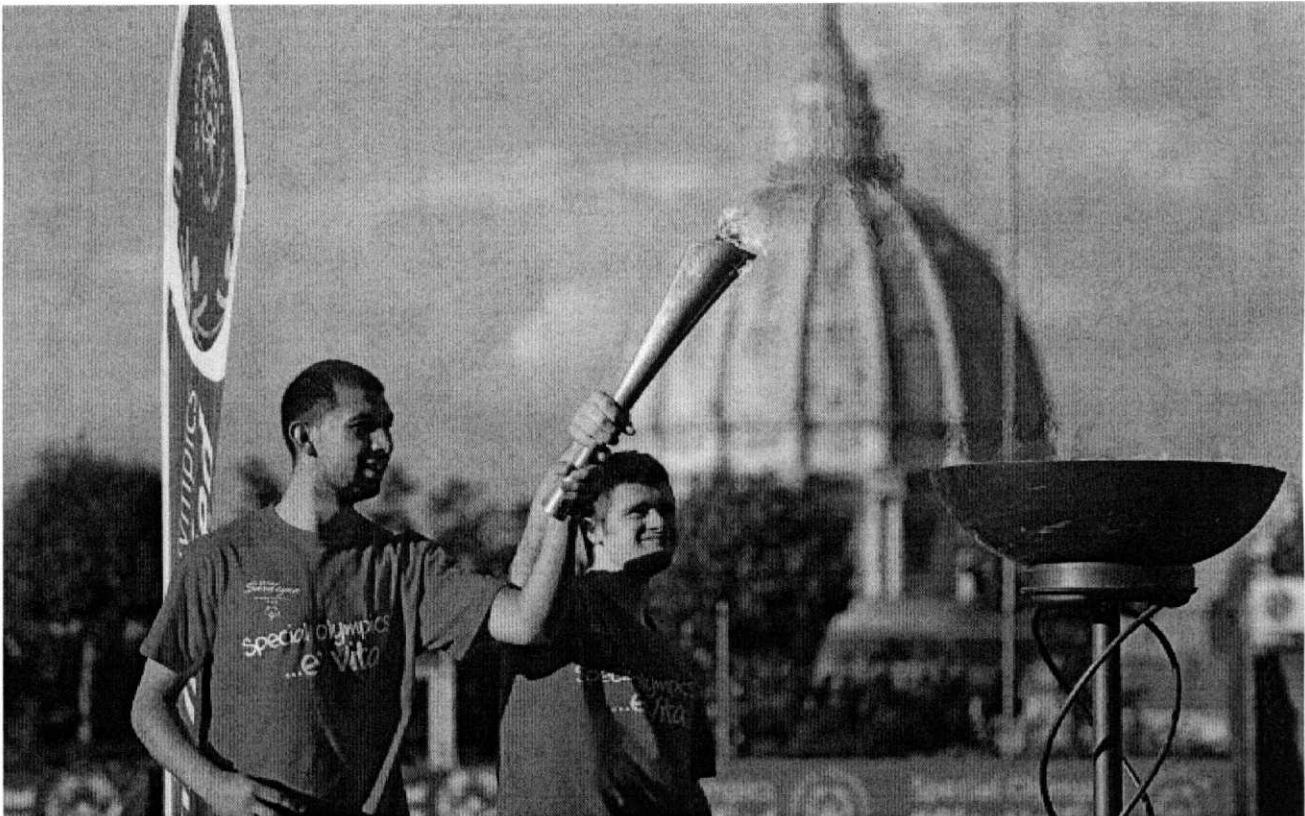
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SPORTS

Special Olympics in Rome show that sports can change the world

Ines San Martin

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Davide Paulis and Salvatore Ruiu hold a torch during the opening ceremonies for the Special Olympics soccer tournament sponsored by the Knights of Columbus in Rome May 20. The dome of St. Peter's Basilica is seen in the background. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

By Ines San Martin

Vatican correspondent | May 21, 2016

ROME—After using the Rugby World Cup in 1992 to unify his segregated nation, South African President Nelson Mandela said, "Sports have the power to change the world." Year after year, Special Olympics do just that – not for politically scarred countries, but for thousands of men and women with disabilities all over the world.

Friday marked the start of the "Special Olympics European Football Week," which runs from May 21-29, involving thousands of players, with and without intellectual disabilities, playing in tournaments across the continent.

In Rome on Friday, the event kicked off at the Pio XI Sport Center with the support of the Knights of Columbus: Over the weekend, almost a hundred soccer players with intellectual disabilities gathered in

Rome, with the magnificent cupula of St. Peter's Basilica looming above them.

Eight teams from five nations – Italy, Poland, France, Lithuania, and Hungary – gathered to participate in this event, designed to break down barriers and to offer a model for how communities can include people with intellectual disabilities such as Down Syndrome, autism, fragile X syndrome, and others.

Throughout the week, each country organizes a variety of football activities including large tournaments, exhibition matches and small local competitions hosted by communities and schools. An average of 50,000 people participates, divided into male-female teams which include five people with intellectual disabilities and four players without.

Special Olympics European Football Week began in 2000, with the support of the UEFA [Union of European Football Associations] and is only one of the thousands initiatives the Special Olympic committee organizes, including last year's World Summer Games in Los Angeles.

As with any event considered part of the official Olympic games, Friday's ceremony included the lighting of the Olympic fire, with a torch carried into the soccer field by two of the players, and the sports men and women made the corresponding vow: "That I might win, but if not, that I try to do so with all my strength."

Presenter Rafaelle Italiano said in his opening remarks, with its "history and culture" the Olympics have long been a tradition capable of stopping wars, because whenever they're played, "it's the moment of peace among peoples, of unity, cordiality, sports."

For some of the parents who were cheering from the sidelines, these games represent "an end to discrimination," in a world where people with intellectual disabilities still struggle to find recognition in society.

The Rome tournament was co-sponsored by the Knights of Columbus and the Italian Football Association.

"These games are very important to the athletes," said Logan Ludwing, deputy supreme knight for the Knights of Columbus.

"They don't ask for special treatment, they ask for an opportunity," he told Crux on the side of Friday's opening. "Special Olympics present them with an opportunity to demonstrate their skills. They're as skilled as anybody else."

The Knights have been sponsoring the Special Olympics since their first edition, back in 1968, and are committed to continuing to do so because they represent the values of the organization: "Fraternity, unity, and support to the athletes as a recognition to the human dignity of all."

As John Paul II said, "we should respect people whatever their walks of life might be," Ludwing said.

According to the head of the Hungarian delegation, who said his name wasn't important because he "spoke in the name of the entire team," the Special Olympics transform the self-image of athletes with intellectual disabilities, and also the perceptions of everyone watching.

"When these kids play, they're all equals, and as 'special' as everyone else, because everyone is unique," he said.

Asked by Crux to define the games with only one word, the Hungarian players spoke of "competition," "integration," "equal opportunity," "friendship," "companionship," "champions," "no judgement."

"No one judges me when I'm in the field," one of the players said. "At least, they only judge me for my

game, for what I do, which is as it should be."

Up until the 1960s, it was generally assumed that people with intellectual disabilities couldn't play sports nor benefit from fitness programs, until Canadian Dr. Frank Hayden and his team, through scientific research, discovered that the impediment wasn't lack of ability but lack of opportunity.

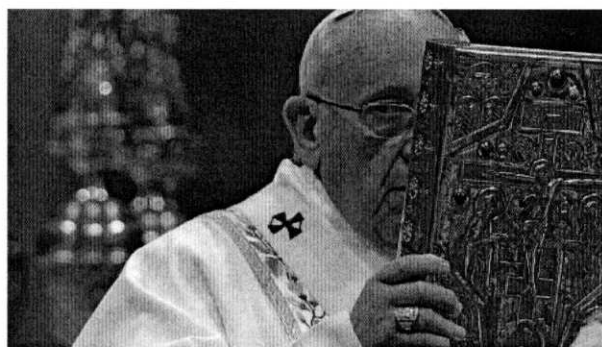Since the Special Olympic Games began, 4.5 million athletes have proven this to be the case.

"Sports can create hope, where there was once only despair," Mandela said back in 1992. "It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination. Sports is the game of lovers."

Watching the tournament held in Rome on the Pius XI Field seemed a ringing endorsement of Mandela's insight.

Inés San Martín is the Vatican correspondent for Crux, stationed in Rome.

ANALYSIS
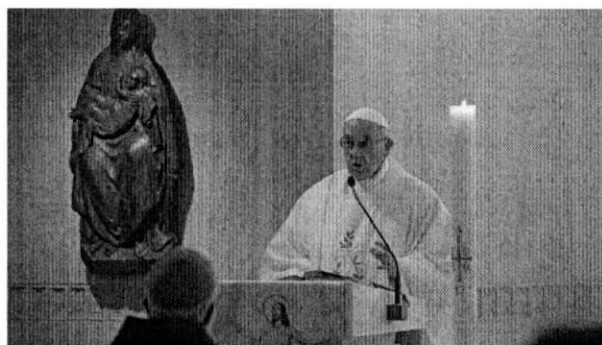# Let's face it: Americans just aren't this pope's favorites

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