24th March 2015 - Sports: Volunteering

**Baroness Grey-Thompson (CB):** My Lords, I thank the noble Lord, Lord Allen, for tabling this debate tonight. In doing so, I declare a number of interests listed in the register, the most pertinent being that as of this morning I am now a trustee of Join In. I very much look forward to continuing that work and channelling the positive energy of volunteers. I am also a trustee of the Duke of Edinburgh awards and president of Sports Leaders UK, which are in different ways involved in volunteering.

I am well aware of the impact that volunteers had on my own career. Like the noble Lord, Lord Holmes, without volunteers I would not have been able to be a Paralympian. It is a huge thank you for what they did—from Roy Anthony at Bridgend Athletics Club to Dave Williams at Cardiff Athletics Club to my long-suffering husband, who was my longest-serving coach in my career. My husband coaches a number of athletes and just recently he suggested that we might like to spend a day together next week, which is quite unusual because of the work that I do in London. He offered to take me on a first aid course, which is quite important for his coaching in triathlon.

I have been interested in volunteering for a number of years, not just from a selfish point of view but from some of the very early Sport England research to the Russell Commission on youth volunteering, out of which came vInspired in 2006. I sat on that board for a number of years. I am very interested in how volunteering is developing and growing, because it gives back such a huge amount of financial support. Whether it is the Join In data that show that it is £1.6 billion, or Sport and Recreation Alliance, which shows that the contribution is more than £2 billion, it is a significant amount of money. The *Taking Part* quarterly report from the DCMS showed an increase of up to 21.9% over the past year in the number of volunteers who had some connection with sport—so sport is something that we are very passionate about in this country.

The 2012 Games—both the Olympics and the Paralympics—were incredible, and huge praise is due to the Games makers. One thing that they did very well, apart from making volunteering quite cool, was to be realistic in showing the reality of volunteering. A lot of the adverts said, “You are unlikely to get the men’s 100 metres final”. That is really important, because the Commonwealth Games and the Olympic and Paralympic Games are amazing things to be part of, but the reality is that it is day-in, day-out, week-in and week-out. The Games makers all talked about the cultural exchange and being an indirect part of the national team. I was tweeted by somebody today who said that they had been a volunteer at six Commonwealth Games, among other things. So volunteering is very important to us.

For 2012, I sat on the diversity and inclusion board. It was important for us to make sure that a diverse group of people volunteered. I think that it is fair to say that in British sport the average age of volunteers is probably rising. I know that it is the case with athletics officials, because I knew officials who officiated at my very first event when I was 12 who were still officiating, although they had retired from their ordinary job, when I retired at 36. That is fantastic, but we have to find new ways of bringing younger people in.

LOCOG and the Games makers did a lot to show the diversity in volunteering. Games makers still proudly wear their distinct grey and red trainers. If you ask them what they did during the Games, they will talk for 20 minutes about how much being a Games maker changed their life. It is important to remember that.

We may not have expected to see the emergence of mini knitted Games makers—the “knitteds”. That was a huge fad. I have one sitting on my desk. Another thing that emerged was the Games maker choir. People came together and got involved in a really interesting way; volunteering made a difference.

As I say, the reality is that volunteering can be hard and frustrating. Most of my experience of it involves being cold. But you get a huge amount from it. When I was sitting in the Matlock control room—when I say “control room”, I mean “tent”—of a division two kayak slalom two weeks ago, helping to operate a “tutty” start and finish machine, I did not think that it was terribly glamorous. However, none of the children or participants, including my daughter, could kayak unless parents like me got involved. The oldest paddler that I have seen is 73 and she could not take part in these events unless there were volunteers who were willing to act as judges. Sports such as canoeing are very keen to encourage young people to come through take part in the volunteering and judging process, which I think is fantastic.

My other experience of volunteering is helping to run water stations in the Great North Run. Last year, 390,016 bottles of water were available for runners taking part in the Great North Run. At the water station where I work, which is located on John Reid Road at the eight-mile mark, we have 45,000 bottles of water. As an athlete who pushed past that water station for 17 years, I did not have a clue what went on with being a volunteer. I did not realise that the volunteers have to take the lid off every single bottle of water that you give out so that people cannot choke. It is an amazing experience to be part of that but it is also a privilege to watch the race go past in a very different way.

One of my interests concerns how disabled people volunteer. It is certainly not easy to gather data on disabled people’s experiences of volunteering. Indeed, many might have a hidden impairment which they may not declare. I would like to explore that aspect a little more in my ongoing work. Although it is slightly off-topic, I should say that volunteering is one way of enabling people to work eventually for sports governing bodies and in local authority sports development. I would be interested to know how many disabled people work for national governing bodies or have an opportunity to use their volunteering as a basis for obtaining paid work in sport. Sport England is doing some fantastic work on measuring disabled people’s participation in this regard. I commend what it is doing but it is also time that we looked at the wider implications of this issue. Whether it is Sport England, UK Sport or other organisations, what influence can the Minister exert to encourage them to push volunteering for disabled people? That is something that I hope to do in my work with Join In.

Looking at other areas where I work, for example the Duke of Edinburgh award, sports leadership is the third most popular volunteering activity after helping children and working in a charity shop. The Duke of Edinburgh organising body leverages thousands of volunteer hours from assessors and supervisors who support young people during their physical section. The reason I got involved with Sports Leaders was because I recognised that not everybody wanted to play sport but they wanted to be involved in sport. That body’s learners have completed 100,000 qualifications and awards in sports leadership in the past year and have completed 420,000 mandatory hours of volunteering. The words “mandatory” and “volunteering” do not always fit well together but it is important to get the qualification to enable them to volunteer in other areas. The body runs 20,000 courses a year and 20% are delivered in centres located in the top most deprived areas of the UK and 47% of the learners are female. That is good because there are lots of issues around women getting involved in volunteering and some sport structures. We can also measure the increase in self-esteem, likelihood to further volunteer, health and well-being, and happiness—all the things that we would want from young people, which is important for me.

In closing, I should like to provide noble Lords with two quotes. One is from a fellow trustee of Join In, Lucy de Groot, who this morning came up with a brilliant way of explaining volunteering. She said that volunteering is a, “gift of free time, not a free gift”.

We have to look at how we manage, support and promote our volunteers, because we need to keep those people involved not just in sport but in volunteering in the widest possible context. My final quote is from Nelson Mandela who, at the 2000 Laureus World Sports Awards—I am a trustee of its Sport for Good Foundation—said:

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair”.

This is true, whether it be in sports participation or volunteering in sport.