



## Dr. Steadward promoted to Order of Canada's top rank for lifelong work in disability sports

Gerry Moddejonge

Jan 06, 2021 • January 6, 2021 • 4 minute read •

While the world watched Wednesday as rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol on the heels of a year that was flipped on its head by a global pandemic and the ongoing struggle for racial equality, Dr. Robert Steadward is well aware of some of the disorder underway at the moment.

But as the lone person promoted to the Companion rank of the Order of Canada – the highest level of the cornerstone of the Canadian Honours System – last week, the 74-year-old former University of Alberta athletic director and founder of the International Paralympic Committee can offer bit of a unique perspective on current events.

After all, he has made it his life's work to change how the world views athletes with disabilities and, by extension, people living with disabilities in general.

And it doesn't take someone with a PhD – although as a Professor Emeritus at the U of A, he certainly has one of those too – to recognize a common underlying theme between his field of expertise and some of the biggest issues facing the world today.

“Listening to the news day in and day out, it just gets so discouraging. We're lucky to live in a country like Canada, and yet seem to see the kind of disarray where everything is so negative and people are frustrated. They're tired of COVID and I can understand why people feel like they do. We've got to start looking at more positivity in our life and in our country and the world, otherwise it's going to pull us down.”

It might sound like blowing sunshine, but it's the same philosophy he's lived his life by and the driving force behind a career he's spent half a century pursuing.



**Dr. Robert Steadward, whose name is on The Steadward Centre for Personal and Physical Achievement at the University of Alberta, has been promoted to the Companion of the Order of Canada for his lifelong work in helping athletes with disabilities across the world, pictured on campus Jan. 6, 2021.**

Photo by Ed Kaiser

/Postmedia

“It’s just the continuation of a journey I’ve been on for more than 50 years of my life,” said Steadward, who was also named to the Alberta Order of Excellence in 2010, three years after entering Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame. “I saw a need, I saw people that were struggling for equality and struggling for rights and recognition and because we were such a mere fledgling, not only as an organization, but people living with disability were having so many challenges with accessibility and the barriers and attitudes and discrimination not only throughout our society with people of disability.”

A track athlete himself, Steadward began competing for the Golden Bears in 1964 where he first started working with programs for athletes with disabilities. He would go on to found The Steadward Centre for Personal and Physical Achievement, a multi-disability sport, fitness, lifestyle and research centre that operates on campus and bears his name.

“And certainly, because of more of my involvement in sports at the time, I just really felt that sport could provide the mentorship and leadership and what needs to be front and centre to provide people with disability overcome those barriers of attitude and discrimination and everything else that was present in and throughout the world,” he said. “That’s when I decided to roll up my sleeves and see if I can make a difference.”

It started small, “only 41 or 42 nations,” in Steadward’s own words, as he began to bring the world together under his vision.

“And now, to have over 200 countries and having the second largest sporting movement in the world, that’s incredible changes, incredible growth,” said Steadward, who served as the first IPC president in 1989 after undertaking the monumental task of consolidating international disability sports organizations.

He never thought he’d see the day something on as grand a scale as the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games simply get bumped.

“Never in my wildest dreams would I ever see something that would grab a hold of sports so seriously that it would put them in a situation where we would have to postpone the Olympics and Paralympics,” he said. “Sure, these athletes are young, healthy, fit and strong, but I don’t think this COVID-19 cares about that. We have to ensure the health and safety of our athletes and all of the coaches and support staff with them.”

Just like it did when he rallied the world under one Paralympic flag, Steadward said it’s going to take human ingenuity and co-operation to get back to the point where countries can once again compete against each other.

And when they do, it will be a global coming together on a level that hasn’t been seen before. And Steadward can rest easy knowing his efforts played one not-so-small part somewhere along the way.

Both internationally and right here at home.

“I was very honoured to be the only one with the Companion for this appointed period of year,” he said. “I look at the list of people appointed over the years and it’s remarkable. These are people who have so unselfishly given of themselves to do their very best to help make Canada a country that they’re proud of and that they can leave a legacy as best as possible for people to be able to raise their families to work and get educated and have fun in doing.”

Steadward was first appointed to the Order of Canada as an Officer in 1999, skipping the initial rank of Member entirely.

“But this time, it was unbelievable because I said I could never live a life long enough and do enough to ever be recognized at that level in our country,” said Steadward, who thought the letter that arrived from the Governor General’s office had to do with someone else’s nomination. “Of course, when they contacted me I was flabbergasted. It’s with profound humility that I look at this.”

**E-mail: [gmoddejonge@postmedia.com](mailto:gmoddejonge@postmedia.com)**