

'Inspirational' visit

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World renowned Olympics and Paralympic gold medallists including Qatari weight lifting Paralympian Ali Abdulla and Olympic gold medallist Carl Lewis yesterday spent time at a sporting event with 20 physically challenged student athletes at the Shafallah Centre for Children with Disabilities to inspire them into unlocking their potential.

Also present at the event held as part of the Shafallah Centre's 4th International Annual Forum were International Paralympic Committee president Sir Philip Craven, world champion skier Chris Waddell and Paralympic gold medallist high jumper Hou Bin.

The sports heroes shared experiences and inspirational stories of their personal triumphs over their shortcomings with the student athletes who participated in the Special Olympics this year. To the delight of the children, the Olympian athletes also demonstrated their skills and challenged the children to a friendly competition.

Special Olympics in Morocco chairwoman Princess Lalla Amina and Panama's first lady Vivian Fernandez de Torrijos were among those cheering them on. Shafallah Centre chairman Hassan Ali bin Ali said: "What these children want and need in life is not special treatment ... they want to be on equal field of play where they can achieve based on their abilities and no where is this more possible than in athletics."

Qatari athlete Abdullah, diagnosed with poliomyelitis in his right leg at the age of five, remained determined and achieved success.

He was named best athlete in the world at the 7th European Open in Budapest, having represented Qatar in over 30 weight lifting competitions throughout the world.

He has competed in three Paralympic games, three world championships, 10 European Opens and more than 15 Arab and GCC events, being adjudged best athlete thrice by Al Saqr magazine.

Carl Lewis, a nine-time track and field Olympic gold medallist, has earned international respect for his achievements and a place in history as one of the greatest athletes of all time.

An activist for family, youth, education, wellness and fitness, Lewis urged the student athletes to use sports to build self-confidence.

Chris Waddell spoke to the budding talents about achieving their goals after the heartbreak of a personal tragedy where he broke his back in a ski race and was later named to the US Disabled Ski Team.

He was honoured by the Dalai Lama as an unsung hero of compassion, having won four skiing events in one winter in both the Paralympic games and the world championships twice.

Sir Philip Craven, who was a Shafallah Forum speaker this year and is passionate about sports, has made a name for himself in wheelchair basketball and swimming with winning numerous gold medals in his tally.

Apart from being the president of the International Paralympic Committee and a board member of London's 2012 organising committee for the Olympic and Paralympic games, Sir Craven was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for services to Paralympic sport and was also made a member of the Order of the British Empire for services to wheelchair basketball.

Another Olympian, Hou Bin, who was the Paralympic athlete who lit the Beijing Paralympic torch last year, was also present to serve as inspiration to student athletes in wheelchair. He has won Paralympic high jump gold medals three times and he was the first Paralympian ambassador of International Paralympic Committee.

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