

Joel Global Alliance Speech

Honoured guests, fellow attendees, dear friends.

I cannot emphasise enough how important this initiative is. As you have heard, we face a global crisis of inactivity.

Obesity, overweight children, teenagers and adults, rampant diabetes. These have all become normalised. They are no longer exceptional cases.

As we all know, the best medicine is prevention rather than cure. And physical activity is one of those rare things which is both prevention and cure.

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So, we've been told earlier about the scale of the problem. And we've been told about how governments, businesses and organisations can help solve the problem of physical inactivity.

I'd like to concentrate on what individuals can do. And, in particular, how Olympians and elite athletes can help promote physical activity in their communities.

Olympians and elite athletes are role models. Role models and influencers. Positive influencers. They are looked up to, especially by the young who both enjoy seeing them perform but also want to be like them.

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Do you remember the “be like mike” commercials from the early 1990s when kids were encouraged to be like basketball superstar Michael Jordan? Yes, they were trying to sell a product (Gatorade) but they were also encouraging children to take up basketball and to dream.

That’s what we need to do. Get our kids to want to take up physical activity, make it fun and, I’m dating myself here, cool. Physical activity is a habit. And if you want to make a habit part of someone’s life it’s best if you start young. But then again, it’s never too late to start.

Part of the problem is that there are so many competing interests. Computer Games, relationships, films, books, fast food, social media, the smart phone.

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We are bombarded with things to do and things to see and by people who want us to listen to them.

So how do you break through the clutter? How do you get the message across that physical activity is fun, feels good, will make your life better.

Of course, there are a number of ways you can do that. But there is one tried and true method that we know from experience really works.

People listen to their idols, to people who have achieved, who have walked the talk. And in this area, in physical activity and sport, those people are Olympians and elite athletes.

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A number of years ago I saw the problems in some of the worst areas of Paris. Teenagers getting involved with the wrong people. Standing around on street corners with nothing to do. No motivation. No hope. No self-respect. Unfit.

I couldn't just do nothing, so I formed a project called champions in the street. I got together some of my Olympian friends and we took physical activity and sport to those young aimless kids and changed their lives.

For the first time they began to feel good about themselves. The physical activity gave them new-found energy and mental strength. They started doing sport and learned how to work together to achieve a goal. We helped them grow.

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Physical activity and sport gave them something worthwhile to do, gave them targets to achieve, gave them the ability to succeed in other parts of their lives. It was great for them. And so fulfilling for me and the other Olympians and elite athletes who were involved.

And we have seen similar results at the World Olympians Association. We give grants each year for Olympians to run projects that either benefit Olympians or that benefit their local communities.

We have helped Olympians go into rural communities and schools in Africa and Australia where they tell kids about their adventures in sport, their ups and downs, their achievements and disasters but most of all they tell them

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about the values of sport and the great feeling you get from physical activity. But they don't just tell them, they then get them up and moving. And the kids love it.

Especially when they realise that the Olympians are people just like them. With hopes and fears. Who make mistakes and then learn from them. Who win or don't win but no matter what enjoy the feeling of movement, the thrill of being active and achieving at something that makes you feel good both physically and mentally. The kids get to taste it and feel it and they want to keep it up.

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We've worked with a US organisation set up by Olympians called World Fit. World Fit goes into secondary schools and runs a six-week programme to get kids walking. Walking, that's it at the start. Just walking. Olympians and Paralympians act as mentors and adopt schools where they teach students the importance of lifelong fitness and the Olympic values of perseverance, respect, and fair play.

They tell the kids it's not about being an elite athlete, it's about them and their lives and anyone can get up and move. They tell them that it's the mind-set that helps you achieve. They set up competition between local schools to see who can walk the most in the six weeks and then they up the game, moving from walking to exercise and then to sport.

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Some kids just stick with the walking, but that's good too. And far better than the no physical activity they were doing before.

The kids themselves, their parents and teachers see the difference. And that six weeks sets a habit that then sticks.

Physical activity also helps save lives. The WOA is also helping fund a programme in Japan that teaches kids how to swim in their clothes in case they get caught in a flood or the aftermath of a tsunami and need to swim to safety. And in a related project again funded by the WOA, Olympians in Mexico are teaching children how to swim both for fun and to save lives.

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There are so many types of physical activity, so many sports for kids to try. Olympic Day, today, is a good example of bringing sport and physical activity to communities around the world.

National Olympic Committees, National Olympians Associations and individual Olympians are running programmes and taster events where kids and young adults can try all sorts of physical activities, exercises and sports.

It's a great day. But these initiatives can't just be limited to one day a year. It has to be on going, 24/7, all the time.

And that's why we are here. That's the purpose of the Global Alliance.

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So, my message today is let's take what we know about the benefits of physical activity, exercise and sport, let's take all these fine words and let's put them into action.

Work with us and with the Olympians and elite athletes and coaches and teachers and parents in your communities to get everyone moving. No matter what their age, current physical condition or social standing. Let's get out there and inspire the world to move on up to a better place.

And to get the ball rolling and as a small token of our support for the Global Alliance, the World Olympians Association will reserve **all** of our Service to Society grant monies next year for projects that get people physically active.

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We are ready to invest hard cash and the time of Olympians all over the world in promoting physical activity, in promoting the aims of the Global Alliance.

I ask you to dig deep, contribute what you can, and join us in this vital pursuit. Together, we can change the world.

Thank you.