

Baker, Joseph

York University

Wattie, Nick; Fraser-Thomas, Jessica; Bassett-Gunter, Rebecca

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The Canadian Paralympian Project: Factors affecting long-term development in Para sport

While the origins of sport for persons with a disability can be traced to the Deaflympics in 1924, social and political attention to parasport is a relatively recent phenomenon. Unfortunately, the pace of research on factors affecting the development of exceptional athletes in parasport has been slow, particularly compared to that of non-disabled sport. This lack of research attention can be problematic for coaches, athletes and administrators in parasport where evidence-based models of development are necessary to make decisions on elements of athlete training, talent selection and coach education. The objective of this project was to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the psychosocial factors affecting the development of Canadian parasport athletes.

Methods and Results

Phase 1: Research synthesis and theory building - This phase involved a systematic review of prior research in this area (Dehghansai et al., 2017) highlighting the sparse domain specific evidence available to guide the creation of sport-specific models for use in parasport. A second component of this phase applied Newell's Constraints-based approach as a theoretical foundation for further work in this area (Dehghansai et al. 2020). These two outputs formed the foundation for the next two phases of the project.

Phase 2: Quantitative survey – Two hundred thirteen elite Paralympic athletes from Canada and Australia completing a modified version of the Developmental History of Athletes Questionnaire. Athletes with a congenital impairment had similar sporting trajectories to those who acquired their impairment before adolescence, and athletes in the late-onset groups (early adulthood and adulthood) had similar trajectories to one another and typically reached developmental milestones at significantly older ages. Groups also differed in their training profiles. For instance, investment in different training types and conditions across development varied between groups. However, there were no significant differences between groups regarding their experiences in other sports (i.e., number and type of sports, sports settings and conditions, and years played). The results from this phase of the project suggest athletes negotiate their sporting careers differently, thus their needs for resources and support will vary.

Phase 3: Qualitative Interviews – elite coaches, athletes and high performance directors took part in open-ended interviews exploring system-support issues, key elements affecting their development, and their perspectives leading into the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. The thematic analysis highlighted challenges specific to participants' sport (e.g., budgetary

constraints, decentralized experiences), personal life (e.g., moving cities to access coaching), and associated uncertainties (e.g., COVID-19, qualifications, accreditations).

Conclusions and Implications

This work adds to a developing literature base on the developmental constraints experienced by athletes with a disability. Generally, these results reinforce the conclusion that Paralympic athlete development is highly nuanced and although there is some relevant research from able-bodied settings, strong differences between sports and disability groups emphasize the need for a) better understanding of the unique requirements of athletes and b) context-specific models for this population.