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Athlete development in parasport: The Canadian Paralympian Project

Project Summary

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.

Research Methods

There were several phases to this project.

Phase 1: Research synthesis and theory building - This phase involved a systematic review of prior research in this area (Dehghansai et al., 2017).

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.

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.

Research Results

Phase 1: The systematic review highlighted 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: 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: 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).

Policy and Program Implications

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

Next Steps

This research raised a number of future research areas. Most specifically, this project largely focused on 'age of onset' of the athlete's disability, not the type or nature of the impairment, or any issues related to classification. It is likely that these factors are equally, if not more, important for understanding the psychosocial factors related to athlete success.

The preliminary analyses also indicated that there were important differences between genders, sports, and countries. Ultimately, these results reinforce the conclusion that athlete development in Paralympic sport is not only different, it may be more complicated than development in able-bodied sport due to differences between individual athletes, social and cultural supports for different sports and evolving/unpredictable changes in rules and regulations governing high-performance participation (e.g., IPC classification).

Knowledge Translation

The research team is working with the Canadian Paralympic Committee to disseminate the results broadly across the Canadian sport section. The team also works with several individual

sports (e.g., Wheelchair Rugby Canada, Wheelchair Basketball Canada), and this information will be discussed with them as it relates to their long-term athlete development models/plans. Sport Canada may also wish to disseminate this report more broadly in parasport settings (i.e., outside the high-performance system) and make it available to other high-performance sports.
