

A Comprehensive Analysis of Factors Affecting the Development of Expertise in Para Sport Athletes

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Introduction & Objective

- There are a wide range of benefits for persons with a disability to participate in sport (WHO, 2011)
- However, there is limited literature pertaining to Para sport athletes' sporting experience (Dehghansai et al., 2019), particularly in how athletes are introduced, involved, and developed in the Para sport system

Project Objective: To develop a better understanding of factors impacting Para sport athletes' development

Phase I: Recruitment - Paralympian Search

- 225 participants filled out the survey across 10 events
- Most successful outreach was via online platforms: social media (n=31) and email (n=15)
- Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa events attracted mostly local participants, while Calgary and Halifax also reached participants from near-by cities
- Athletes who acquired their injury later in life displayed different sporting experiences when compared to athletes with congenital or early acquired impairments
- Most early sport experiences were in an open setting

Phase II: Pathway Athletes

- 213 Canadian & Australian athletes participated
- Athletes who acquired their impairment later in life reached the majority of the sporting milestones later age athletes with congenital or early acquired impairments but the latter group reached *some* milestones at a faster pace.
- There were differences in training profiles but none that suggests an advantage for any specific group. There was no difference between groups regarding the hours devoted to various types of training
- Most athletes sampled other able-bodied and/or Para sports in sports that were similar to their current sport

Phase III: Coach Perspectives on Athlete Identification and Development

Semi-structured interviews with high-performance staff highlighted individuality of the optimal process. Impairment-related factors and family demographics were primary factors contributing to the selection and development process.

Implications

- Recent research suggests the timing of athletes' impairment influences their sporting experience. There is a need to consider multiple pathways and timing of resource allocation/support that is unique to athletes' situation/readiness
- Moving forward, there is a need to further examine how impairment-related factors shape athletes' sport developmental trajectories.