



Para Sport Against Stigma (PSAS)

Pillar 3: Athlete Development

Athlete Toolkit

Delivered by



Part of the AT2030 programme, funded by UK Aid and led by GDI Hub



Para Sport Against Stigma (PSAS) is four-year project (2020-2024) that is delivered by Loughborough University London, in partnership with the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) and University of Malawi. Para Sport Against Stigma is part of AT2030, a programme funded by UK Aid and led by the Global Disability Innovation Hub. AT2030 will test 'what works' to improve access to assistive technology and will invest £20m to support solutions to scale.

PSAS Athlete Development Toolkit

The Para-Athletes Guide

This toolkit is aimed at athletes with a disability who aspire to become world class and compete for their country at an international level. This includes athletes that have joined national training programmes supported by the National Paralympic Committee (NPC) and are competing under their international federation (IF) rules for a particular sport (such as Para Athletics or Para Powerlifting).

The toolkit is designed to provide useful information and step by step guides on important aspects of Para sport such as classification, competition, coaching and communication. The information provided has been put together in response to research carried out to identify the challenges, gaps and opportunities that are faced by para-athletes in Ghana, Malawi and Zambia, but it is not country or continent specific and can be used by any para-athlete wanting to progress in International Paralympic Committee (IPC) sanctioned sport.

It is estimated that 15% of the world's population has some type of disability and taking part in sport can be an excellent way of becoming healthier, fitter and more confident. You could become a role model so that you can inspire other people with disabilities to get involved in sport, give you a 'voice' so that you can influence change, travel the world and even become a national icon.

Whatever your reason for wanting to succeed in sport, this guide will help you to navigate your way through some of the important parts of the system so that you can be more confident when you turn up at a major event in being fully prepared. You will enjoy some real-life examples from top international competitors, be able to use a 'check list' to support your planning, identify who needs to help you make decisions, and give you some links to additional information if you want to look more thoroughly into a topic.

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit has been developed for any para-athlete who wants to compete at an international level.

How was this toolkit developed?

This toolkit was developed following discussions, interviews and workshops with over 130 para-athletes and coaches from Ghana, Malawi and Zambia. Its content reflects areas where there were gaps in knowledge or information available to athletes resulting in them being underprepared for competition compared to other nations.

How do you use the toolkit?

This toolkit is divided into five main sections covering the 5 C's: communication, classification, competition, context, coaching.

The Five C's

What is the 5 C's framework?

Researcher Dr Holly Collison-Randall came up with the 5 'c' concept to describe the most critical areas that need to be considered when developing para-athletes in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

**1**

Context

This refers to the environment in which you are in and how it may affect your ability to develop and grow in para-sport. It also includes the people and groups that need to form part of your journey to become an elite para-athlete.

2

Communication

How you communicate with other people and how they communicate back to you is an important consideration when becoming an elite athlete. There are many ways to communicate and many different groups to communicate with that you will need to consider.

3

Classification

In order to compete in a Para-sport you will require a classification. This will inform you of what sports and what classes you are eligible to compete in given your type of disability (impairment).

4

Competition

Learning to compete and finding the best opportunities to do this takes a lot of planning and preparation. Once you have learnt to compete, you can compete to win at 'pinnacle' (critical) events.

5

Coaching

Finding the right coach that you trust, who understands your disability and your sport, and is able to support your training and development is critical to being the best that you can be.

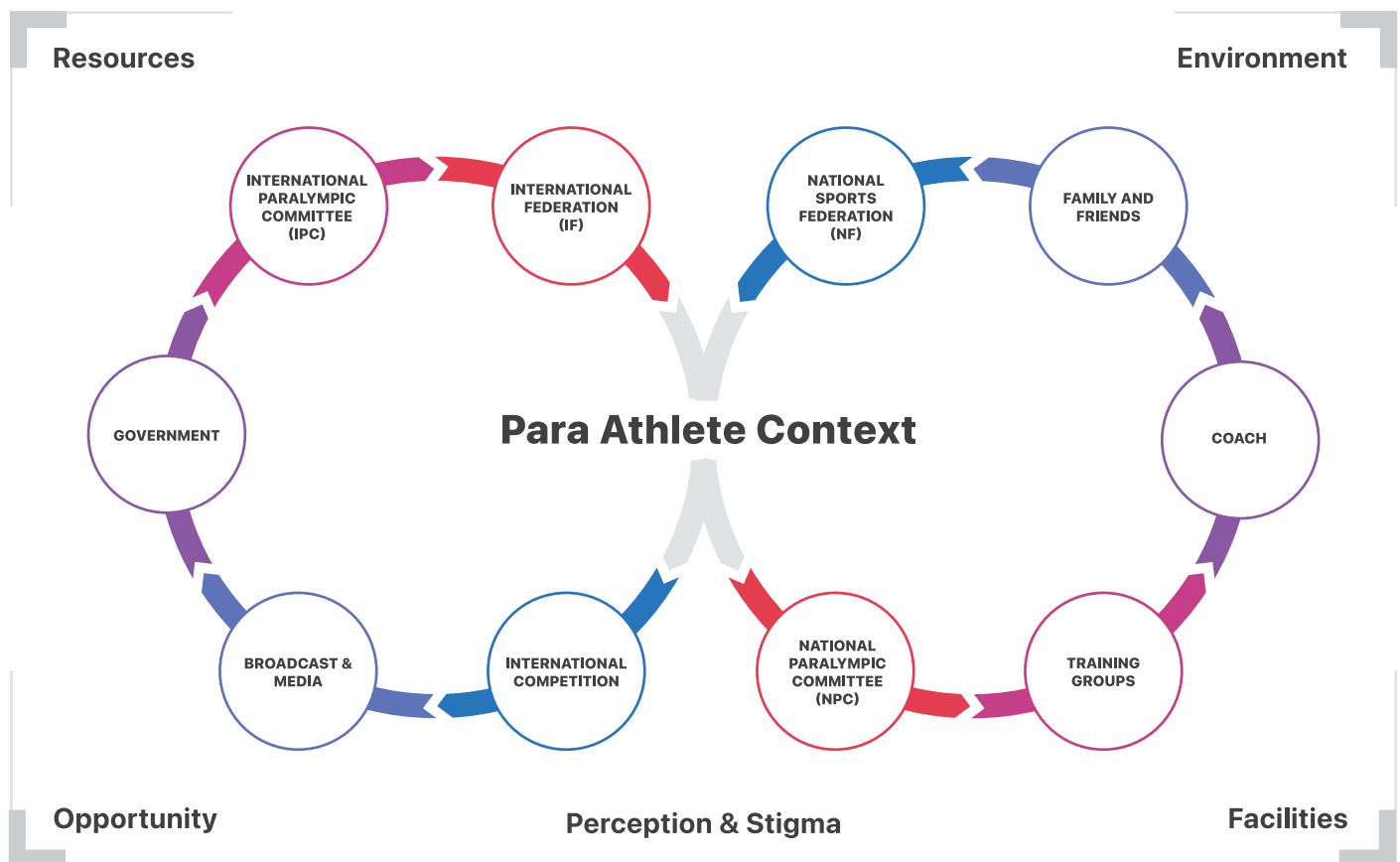
This toolkit takes each one of the 5 'c's in turn and looks at what it is, gives a snapshot from the research that was carried out, outlines what you need to consider in this area and how you go about it. It asks you questions of yourself that are worth you considering and there are also some checklists that you can work through when required.



1.0 Context

The three countries visited in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA) (Malawi, Zambia and Ghana) all had highly passionate and committed para-athletes, coaches, NPC's (National Paralympic Committees), and NF's (National Sports Federations). Most worked as volunteers, giving up many hours of their time to see para-sport grow, flourish and to have a social impact on how disability is perceived by the masses. Having success in high profile para-sport events can really change social stigma on disability and demonstrate how fantastically able and talented para-athlete are.

An athlete's 'context' is rather a complex one though, with many people / groups that influence and impact your journey through your sport career. There are people / groups within your national network such as family, training groups, NPC, national sporting federations who you need to work closely with. There are also people / groups outside of the national network including the IPC, IF (international federations), international competitions, and broadcasters. We call these two large groups 'ecosystems' because all the elements need to interact to deliver maximum success.



There are a few spaces free for you to add other people /groups that are part of your ecosystems.

Questions to ask yourself:



What local and national groups could I engage with?

How is my relationship with them now and how would I like to develop over time?

Do I have an NPC and a NF liaison?

Do my family support my desire to become an elite athlete?

Do I know where to train, how to get there and who to work with?

Are there any local sponsors, media people or government ministers that I could get to know so they could support my journey?

What is my plan to develop and compete over the next 5 years and who needs to be part of this?

How am I going to spread the word about para-sport and reduce the stigma against those with a disability?

Research Findings

The research showed that the facilities and equipment available to para-athletes was invariably of a poor quality and standard. Facilities were often in a bad state of repair, weren't easily accessible, and were in high demand. Equipment was often old, broken and not of the standard you would come to use in competition. Getting to and from training and competition were consistently cited as a big issue, with the costs, accessibility and frequency of transport being a challenge. Another major challenge is the lack of financial support into the para-sport sector. Governments and sponsors are still just learning that parasport exists and it can take time for the culture to change and new areas of investment to be embraced.



How can you best work within your context

Changing 'context' is often a long and slow process due to the high number of factors that interact to make your environment what it is. However, even through the course of this 4-year project we have seen some significant developments in how para-sport is perceived, how para-athletes are given opportunities, and even how facilities and equipment have been improved. There are some great examples of how para-athletes have become national figureheads and are changing the views of tens of thousands of people about disability.

As you progress through the competition pathway it is likely that your profile will grow, and you will start to be interviewed by the media. If you so choose, you have the opportunity to influence your context by using these platforms as a voice that could be seen and heard by many people. However, how you do this and what you may want to influence is up to you. You must stay true to yourself and what you believe in – your narrative (story) is owned by you and no one else.

EXAMPLE


Sheila is 2 years old and lost both of her lower legs in a car accident when she was 2 years old. Her father could not cope with her being disabled and left the family, and her mother could not afford a wheelchair so kept her shut in the house most of the time. However, Sheila loved to climb and got very strong in her arms. One day she was spotted by a Para Powerlifting coach, and he asked her to come to the gym where he trained some athletes. 2 years later she won her first international medal, and the media have started to take a huge interest in her.

Sheila is discussing with her coach how she wants to be viewed by the people who read her story. He offers her three stories to see which she is most comfortable with:

1. I had a terrible accident when I was 2, and it turned my world upside down. We had very little when I was growing up, my father left us, and I didn't go to school. I was very lucky that I was spotted at the age of 16 by a coach and I have trained really hard for two years to get to where I am. I want to be an ambassador for young disabled children to try sport and become active. I want all communities to enable those with a disability to have all the opportunities that those without a disability have – school, sport, fun.
2. I don't want to talk about my disability, but my ability. I have been given a wonderful opportunity in life that I wouldn't have otherwise had. It has meant that I have new friends and an incredible sport family, I have been in an airplane and seen the world. I can now be here as an inspiration to others and to show how able people with a disability can be.
3. I have been blessed to be here, and I want to use this platform to lobby the government to provide better social care and support for people with disabilities. I want to see all children with a disability go to school and learn. I want to see them all have the opportunity to play sport. I want us to become a normal part of society and not to be locked away.

Whatever narrative you feel most comfortable with will become your story. You don't need to let the media pressure you into defining yourself in any other way. Be loud and proud!

In the space below have a go at writing your own narrative:



Once you have established a narrative and have become more active in the media, you may want to consider broadening your reach so that you can influence 'context' on a larger scale.

Here are some ideas of how this could happen, but please add some more into the spaces on the list.

- Attend community events and schools to talk about your achievements.
- Attract sponsors and investors that could give you access to facilities, equipment, clothing, or supplements.
- Do radio and TV interviews, talk about your sport, what it means to you, and how other people with disabilities should find a sport they love and take part.
- Attend disability events and take opportunities to showcase your sport.
- Be active on social media.
- Support your local and national NPC, NF's and other disability organisations with their events, fundraising and lobbying.
-
-
-
-
-
-

Summary

Understanding your context is very important as it paints the whole picture of you as an athlete and all of the things which influence this. The environment in which you flourish is impacted by many things, but being an elite athlete can be a gift that enables you to make a positive difference in your own life, and the lives of many others.

2.0 Communication

Introduction

Communication is the process of sharing or exchanging information between people or groups. It can be verbal (spoken) or nonverbal, written or graphical (pictures), or based on signs, signals, and behaviour. Communication can also refer to the methods of sending information, such as letters, phones, computers, radio and TV.

The word 'communication' can mean a number of different things.

Talking, sign language, letters, radio, tv, emails, Facebook, etc etc etc.



Ways of communicating:

Talking. Radio. TV. Newspaper. Emails. Social Media – Facebook, Twitter etc. Flyers. Posters. Images. Letters



Learning to become a good communicator is an important part of being a successful para-athlete. There are many reasons for this including raising your profile, making friends and connections, getting opportunities to train / compete, gaining support and sponsorship. Also, as you start winning medals for your country, you start to have the platform to become a role model and ambassador for disability inclusion, disability sport and disability opportunity.

Questions to consider:

Think of how you communicate with different people and groups – athlete, parent, NPC?

Who do you think is most important to communicate with and why?

How do you like to communicate? What strategies are you most experienced with?

Do you use any social media platforms?

How do you communicate with your NPC, NF's and disability groups?



Research Findings

The research looked at two different areas: (1) the athlete's own experience of 'communicating' with the media; and (2) how effective the NPC is in communicating to the athletes and coaches, and also to the media and sponsors.

Taking each one separately:

1. The athlete's understanding of communication varied massively between age groups, confidence levels and degree of competitive experience. The older and more experienced athletes were more likely to have their own social media accounts and have been interviewed on radio and TV. A number of the younger athletes just starting out in parasport had not heard of social media and were in awe of being interviewed on the radio or TV.

All athletes that had been interviewed on TV or radio at a competition or when returning home from a major event said that they really enjoyed the experience, and it gave them confidence and enabled them to get the message out about the benefits of taking part in parasport.



Benefits of Good Media Representation

Promote disability inclusion.

Engage with wider group.

'Making noise' to the government.

Grow supporters and support networks.

Reduce disability stigma.

Encourage new participants.

Encourage sponsors and investments.

Advocacy and activism on disability rights.

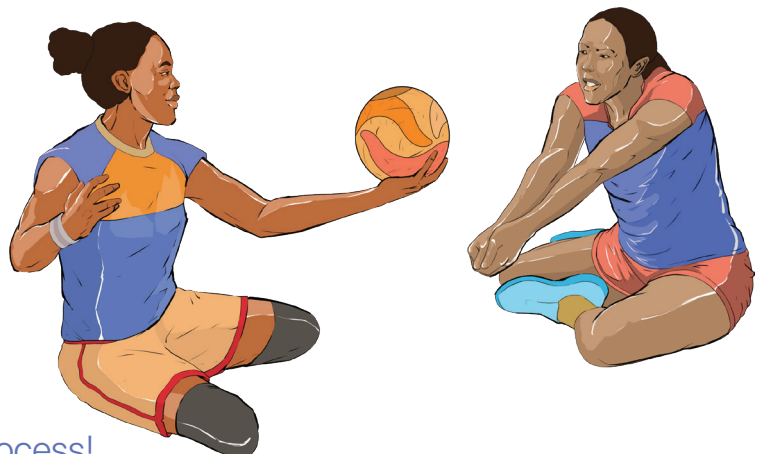
WhatsApp: Within the athlete group, the national federations and the NPC, the most popular form of communication was WhatsApp. This is primarily because it is free, easy to use, you can form groups easily and share various forms of information.

2. The results from asking the athletes and coaches if they felt their NPC was good at communicating with them varied massively with some NPC's and individuals faring well, and others quite poorly. It must be noted that the NPC's are run by volunteers with a vast workload and differing skillsets. The priorities of an NPC may need to change and flex depending on the current environment, opportunities, and challenges that they face.

Again, most communication from the NPC to athletes and coaches was through WhatsApp and this seemed to work well.

Most NPCs had a Facebook page, and this was hugely valuable to communicate with the wider community – provided it was kept up to date and had interesting content.

NPCs had a good relationship with a small number of media groups and would proactively inform them if there was a competition coming up or if they had a newsworthy story.



Remember – communication is a two-way process!

Communication Frameworks

We have covered why it is important to be a good communicator and to have a media presence. As a para-athlete, you have a huge opportunity to make a real difference for yourself, your community, and the disability culture in your country by using the platform that sport gives you.

The table below shows some key groups that you may communicate with – some has been filled in for you, but please complete the remainder and add in any others that we have missed:

Who?	Why communicate?	What method?	When / how often?
Coach		WhatsApp	
Family and Friends	Keep in touch, show what you are doing / achieving		
Other athletes	To share training, motivation, information	WhatsApp	
NPC	Information sharing		
Supporters		WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter	
Media	To raise your profile and showcase your skills and achievements		

Athlete Profile

It is often useful to have something prepared about yourself that you can give to the media, potential sponsors and even competition organisers so that they know something about you.

A good way of doing this is to create a one-page profile – a brief information sheet that explains who you are, what you have achieved and what your aspirations are. You may want to adapt this slightly depending on who your target audience is – perhaps add a section in on the number of 'likes' or 'followers' on your social media profiles if sending it to a sponsor so that they can see how many people you can reach if you promote their product.

You could use your narrative that we discussed in section 1 as shown below in the example:

You could use your narrative that we discussed in section 1 as shown below in the example:

ATHLETE PROFILE



Name

Firstname Lastname

Age

26

Country

Zambia

Classification

-

What sport your are involved in and why you enjoy it

What are your main achievements so far?

What do you hope to achieve in the future?

Who are your biggest supporters?

Who is your coach?

What impact do you hope to have?

How to write a Facebook / Twitter message

When writing a message on social media it is important to really think about what you write, how you write it and what impact you want it to have. Below is a short list of things to consider, there is a space for to add other things as you think of them:

- Know who is likely to see your message and what will be interesting to them.
- Be polite, professional and happy!
- Pictures are always helpful, so long as they are clear, clean and relate to the story that you are writing.
- Think of the beginning, middle and end of the story you are writing.
- What do you want people to know / think or feel once they have read it.
- Add in people that you want to thank at the end such as sponsors, venues etc.
- Make sure you respond to people who ask you questions and thank those that leave you messages.
- Never ever use social media to moan, complain or upset anybody!

EXAMPLE



Haruna Tahiru
about 2 months ago



I am truly over the moon to receive this award! Your recognition puts a spring in my step and makes my heart feel light as a feather. Thank you for filling my day with sunshine and allowing me to bask in the glow of your appreciation. This experience has been a real cherry on top of my professional sundae, and I can't wait to share this sweet moment with the world. [IRON MAN Supplements Sports Writers Association of Ghana \(SWAG\) Prince MorganRoyal Prince KwameDora KumiGeorge Oh...](#)
[See more](#)



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WhatsApp

Most athletes and coaches will be a member of several WhatsApp groups and there are a few simple rules to follow:



- Always be polite and considerate.
- Respond to messages when you can – if you need to! Remember that the sender can see when you have received and read a message.
- Keep your WhatsApp groups to a manageable level and simply leave the ones you're not actively interested in.
- Communicate with known contacts only – but be aware that they can forward your message on to anyone of their contacts.
- Ask for permission and respect boundaries.

How to stay safe:

- Only communicate on WhatsApp with people that you know.
- There is no such thing as privacy!! It's important to review your privacy settings regularly on any social network. But it's also important to remember that it's possible that everything you send or post – even to your friends – could potentially become public. Once that has happened, it could be seen by anyone and everyone, forever.
- _____
- _____

What do you use WhatsApp for?

Which groups are you part of and for what reason?

How do you want to people to see you through your WhatsApp messages?

News Outlets

Journalists are always looking for good stories. You can help journalists to cover your story by preparing key information for them. Give them the key facts, event details, news story ideas and contacts for them to do interviews to make it easy for the journalists to follow up.

Always be friendly and polite to journalists. If you are ever unsure of what to say, then you are best not to say anything, and ask your NPC for advice – certainly if it is something confusing or controversial.

Who are your local and national media outlets?

Just remember, there is a time to...

- ▶ Make noise about what you are doing and achieving.
- ▶ Creating silence - keep your head down quietly and concentrate on yourself.
- ▶ Generate interest with gentle murmur of excitement.
- ▶ Spend time reflecting.

3.0 Classification

Introduction

Classification is a system to determine which athletes with disabilities may compete against each other in para-sport events. Classification is intended to group together athletes with similar levels of physical ability to allow fair competition.

The system is in place to minimize the impact of impairments on sport performance and to ensure the success of the athlete is determined by skill, fitness, power, endurance, tactical ability and mental focus.

All Para athletes wishing to compete in Paralympic Sport will need to be classified to have a sports class specific to that sport. In each Paralympic sport, the process of grouping Para athletes by the degree of activity limitation resulting from the impairment is called "classification". Through classification, it is determined which Para athletes are eligible to compete in a sport and what class a Para athlete is grouped together for competition. This, to a certain extent, is like grouping athletes by age, gender or weight.

To be eligible for Paralympic sport a Para athlete must fit into one of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) 10 eligible impairment types:

- Visual Impairment
- Intellectual Impairment

Eight different types of Physical Impairment:

- Impaired muscle power
- Impaired passive range of movement
- Loss of limb or limb deficiency
- Leg-length difference
- Short stature
- Hypertonia
- Ataxia
- Athetosis.

The process of becoming classified is covered in this section.

Research Findings

The research showed that the majority of athletes and coaches understood what classification is and why it is important to have a classification system in para sport. However, most were unsure of the process that they would need to undertake in order to get a full international classification.

In many cases, an athlete would not get classified until they had arrived at their first international competition. At this point there are a lot of 'new' things going on and it can be very confusing and rather daunting. Planning ahead, being prepared with the relevant information and being open and honest are very important.

Athletes should be classified as early as possible in their para sport career to ensure that they are training and competing in the correct class. Your coach, NPC and medical practitioners should be able to help you with this.



What is classification?

The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) have devised a para-athlete classification system which ensures that athletes can only compete in classes against those with a similar degree of impairment. The system has been devised over years by doctors, physiotherapists, coaches and athletes to ensure that it is fair and robust.

This ensures that the best athlete (most skilled, fit and tactical) wins (not the athlete with the lowest level of impairment)

An athlete that competes in more than one sport will require a separate classification for each one. This is because the same impairment will affect an athletes' ability to perform in different sports to a different extent.

The Classification process will be explained in this section, but there is a lot of information available on this subject including diagrams, policies and procedures, rules and regulations on the IPC website and from your international federation.

Levels of Classification

Provisional Classification

Provisional classifications are temporary classifications valid for a limited period of time or until such time the Para athlete can be classified by a classification panel. A provisional classification may be subject to change upon classification assessment by the sport's specific classification panel. Para athletes may be eligible for medals but will not be eligible for records.

National Classification

A national classification is a sport specific classification carried out by a trained classification panel. The classification process is the same process administered by the IF and outlined in the section below. A national classification is generally offered at national sport events where medals and records can be allocated to those Para athletes with a national classification.

International Classification

An International Classification is allocated to all Para athletes reporting to an International Competition for the first time.

Why do I need to be classified?

To ensure that the competition is fair and that the most skilled, fit and tactical athletes win, (rather than just the person who has the lowest level of impairment) all athletes competing must be given a sport class and sport class status by an international classification panel.

Am I eligible to participate in Para sport? What sports can I compete in?

In order to be eligible for international competition in your chosen sport, you must meet the impairment criteria. Detailed medical information, alongside a practical look at how your disability impacts on your ability to perform your sport, is required in order for the panel to consider your situation.

Where and when are athletes classified?

Most international level classification sessions are held at a competition venue immediately before competition. They may also provide classification opportunities at IPC or NF events such as conferences, training events and key national competitions.

Athletes that have an impairment that may alter over time and young athletes may require to be classified more than once during their athletic career.

Who classifies athletes?

Athletes are evaluated by classifiers, who work in a group called a classification panel. These classifiers are trained and certified as officials by the International Federation who governs the sport. Classifiers are experts in their sport and impairment type.

Who can come with me to classification?

An athlete can bring one extra person with them and an interpreter (if needed) to athlete evaluation. This extra person should be familiar with the athlete's impairment and sporting history and must be a member of the athlete's National Federation or authorised in advance by the chief classifier.

What does a Para athlete need to bring to classification?

- A Para athlete must present to the classification venue at least 10 minutes before the scheduled time
- A Para athlete can be accompanied by one support person: a coach, parent or other.
- Appropriate sports gear must be worn to classification
- Para athletes must bring all equipment and devices as required by the sports classification rules including but not limited to assistive devices, competition and/or daily use wheelchair, competition and/or daily use prostheses and/or orthoses, any other device that they intend to use during the competition
- A medical certificate of diagnosis and recent and relevant medical documentation will be required to verify eligible impairment

What if you do not agree with my sport class?

Classification panels take objective and transparent decisions on the basis of the sport classification rules. It may happen that do the athlete does not agree with the outcome. Each sport will have 'protest' rules. These rules will outline:

- Who may lodge a protest?
- Which timelines apply?
- Which documents are required?
- Which fees are to be paid?
- The protest decision is final and cannot be further challenged.
- The athlete cannot lodge a protest: this can only be done by your National Federation.

Athletes may need to be classified more than once.

Once an athlete has undergone classification they will be given a sport class and sport class status. The sport class is the category they compete in, the sport class status tells them if and when they need to go to classification again.

Every athlete will be evaluated at least once at the beginning of their international career. Further evaluations depend on the type of impairment: some athletes must only be seen once in their career and others regularly (e.g., for progressive or fluctuating impairments or young athletes). Also if they are the subject of a protest, they will need to present for classification again.

Athletes need to be classified for each sport they participate in.

Each Para sport requires different activities affecting impairment in different ways, being eligible for one sport does not mean an athlete is eligible in another.



The Classification Process

1. Classification will take place at an international competition or a specific event such as a conference or training workshop. The NPC will need to register the athlete to be eligible.
2. Athlete Evaluation is the process that checks that you are eligible against a checklist of approved impairments for each specific sport. It will identify which Sport Class the athlete can compete in by looking at whether they are able to do specific tasks and activities that are required for that class.
3. Medical Assessment: The type of medical information required may be sport specific or disability type specific. Medical classification for wheelchair sport can consist of medical records being sent to medical classifiers at the international sports federation.
4. Functional Assessment: observation in the training environment, observation in competition
5. Classification Status

EXAMPLE

Para powerlifting is a competition in which athletes are categorized by gender and weight class. It's open to Para athletes with one or multiple of the eight eligible physical impairments: Impaired Muscle Power, Impaired Passive Range of Movement, Limb Deficiency, Leg Length Difference, Short Stature, Hypertonia, Ataxia, Athetosis.

- Powerlifting is open to all athletes with a physical disability and is classified by weight alone.
- Powerlifters competing at the Paralympics have disabilities in their lower limbs or hips, including paralysis, cerebral palsy and lower limb amputation.
- Both male and female competitors take part in 10 separate weight classes.
- **SU5** competitors are standing athletes with upper limb impairment.
- **SH6** competitors are short stature (dwarf) athletes.

Checklist

TO DO	DONE	NOTES
Confirm classification date with your NPC		
Ensure your coach / carer can also attend if you want them to		
Ensure a translator can attend if necessary		
Get the Medical Diagnostic Form (MDF) completed by relevant people		
Submit MDF (or ask your NPC to do so for you)		
Talk with other athletes about their experiences		
Wear suitable clothes – ideally loose-fitting sports clothing.		
Know your time and where to go to be classified		
Smile and be respectful :)		
Understand the appeals process (just in case)		

Try and get classified as early as possible in your athlete career. Be honest about your disability and the limitations that this gives you when performing in your sport.

Case Study

Vera competes in para-athletics as a VI runner and her ambition is to win a medal at the Paralympic Games. She attended her first international competition last week, arriving three days early in order to be classified and to settle into her new surroundings. Vera and her coach had prepared for the classification by getting her eye doctor to complete the medical diagnostics form and talking to the NPC and other athletes about their experiences, so they knew what to expect. They had also borrowed a computer and looked at the World Para Athletics web site and the IPC web site for more information on classification.

Vera was pleased she had done this preparation as the assessment was quite long and detailed. They did a visual examination and lots of other assessment, including watching her in a training session with her coach that afternoon, before making their final decision on which class she was eligible for. They classified her as a T11 and she was very happy with this as this is the category she had been training for.

Summary

Every para-athlete requires an international classification in order to compete at an IF sanctioned competition. The process follows the same format although the details will vary depending on the sport and the athlete's impairment.

There is a lot of information available on the types of impairments that are classifiable and the process. It is worth being well prepared so that it does not distract you on the final few days prior to competition.

SIGNPOSTING

Great video explainer for athletes on the classification process:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZZXsdQB9KQ&t=90s>

LEXI: The system called LEXI was developed for London 2012 Paralympic Games and it uses traffic light colours on stick figures to show what classes look like. For example, this link shows what the T46 class looks like in athletics (predominantly arm amputees) <https://lexi.global/sports/athletics/track/t46>.

Then if you click on the stick figure that most closely resembles the athlete, it shows you the other sports that the athlete will likely be eligible for and the class they will most likely fall into, see this link:

<https://lexi.global/sports/other-sports?lexiid=6&returnurl=/sports/athletics/track/t46>.

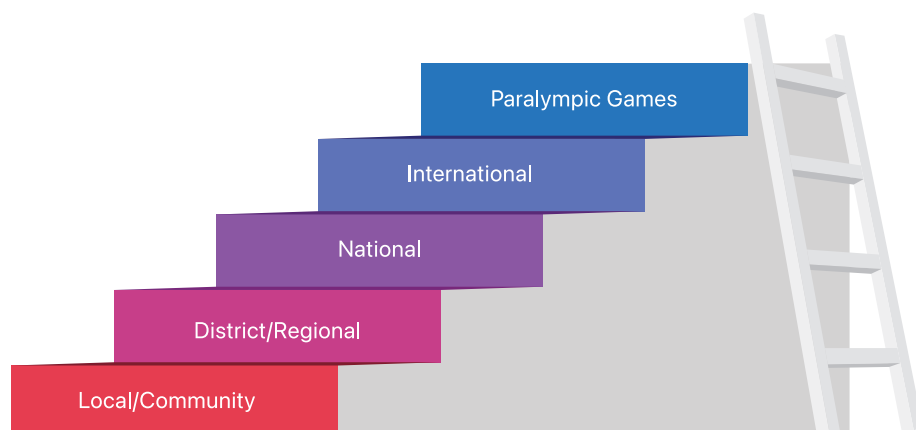
4.0 Competition

Introduction

Competitions are a great way to travel the world, meet fellow competitors, watch other nations train and prepare, and enable an athlete to benchmark your performance against others. They are also where athletes may get classified, represent their school / club / region, showcase their skills, talent and training, and qualify for the next level of competition – and of course win medals!

Some athletes will start competing at school age and may be fortunate that their school offers sporting opportunities for youngsters with a disability. However, others may not attend school or be at a school that does not allow para-athletes to take part in sport at all. There is also a group of athletes who have started to train at an older age and may have been spotted by a coach or seen a group of athletes with disabilities training and thought they would like to have a go.

Whatever your entry route into the wonderful world of para-sport, there will come a time when you start to enter competitions. Our research showed that there are not very many competitions each year that you can compete in – so grab the chance when you can. Some sports will have competitions on a national level between clubs, regions or schools. These may progress to a national championship for the best across the country. The next step of competition is onto international competition, these may be held in your country or another (such as Region 5, All African Para Games), and will involve competitors from other nations. These events will often give an athlete the opportunity to qualify to compete at the major championships such as the Commonwealth Games and the Paralympic Games.



When attending competitions an athlete needs to be physically and mentally prepared to give their best performance. Like any part of the training and preparation routine, the old adage of 'practice makes perfect' applies. Having a clear understanding of their competition routine, the rules and policies, the type of environment and the equipment will help to be able to focus solely on what is important – the performance.

Be prepared!

Just as an athlete learns how to train well, they also need to learn how to compete well, and the more experience that they can get at competitions prior to a pinnacle event (a major championship) the better. However, this is not always possible, so this section will help you know

LEARN TO TRAIN

TRAIN TO COMPETE

COMPETE TO WIN

Research Findings

The research showed that there were very few (if any) local, regional and national para sport competitions each year in the three countries surveyed. These competitions are usually the building blocks used to identify the most talented individuals, provide experience within the competition environment, and expose them to rules and policies that need to be adhered to. They enable a young athlete to 'learn the trade of competing' successfully.



It is evident that many para-athletes' first experience of competition is at an international competition, often overseas, where they require classification, new kit and clothing and are in a very exciting (and often rather scary) environment. There were many unknowns and uncertainties, last minute challenges such as broken equipment, new technical things such as hearing a starting pistol for the first time.

Funding to send athletes and coaches to competitions was very scarce and NPCs needed to carefully prioritise which athletes and competitions are attended. They will have decisions such as 'who needs to be classified', 'who is likely to medal', 'who needs to gain experience', 'what it qualifies you for', 'how many coaches need to be sent'. They will also need to think about sponsors, kit, travel and logistics, and other people with an interest in the competition and its outcome (such as the government and the media).

Competitions normally take the following progressive pathway.

Type of Competition		Frequency	National Organiser	International Organiser	Purpose
Local	School, Local clubs	2-3 times per year	School, Local clubs		First competitive experiences. Should be fun and educational. Identify talented locals. Qualify for regional comps.
Regional	School, Clubs	Once a year	Schools, Local clubs, often with NF / NPC support		More aligned to national and international rules.
National	School, Sport	Once a year	NF, with NPC support		Run under NF rules
International	Sport Specific	Once a year	NPC	IF	Classification, under IF rules. Qualification for major championships.
International Multisport (African Para Games), CWG, Paralympic Games)		Every 4 years	NPC	IPC, IF's, CWG	

Why are competitions important?

- Learn your 'trade'.
- Rules and policies
- Behaviour and etiquette
- Practice your sport.
- Learn from others.
- Get to know your competition.
- Get media interest.
- Get sponsorship.
- Facilities

If access to competitions is limited (for example only one or two per year), then it is vitally important that you plan and prepare super well. This will mean that when attending a competition, you are in control of all the things that you can be in control of [control the controllables]!

What can you control?

- What time you attend sessions
- What you wear
- Your attitude towards others
- _____
- _____
- _____

What can't you control?

- The weather
- How another competitor performs
- _____
- _____
- _____

If your country is fortunate enough to host an international competition such as the Para All African Games or Region 5 Games, then it is important to capitalise on (make the most of) this in any way possible.

Benefits of hosting:

- Additional athlete places
- Multiple classification opportunities
- Equipment and venue upgrades
- Exposure through media and sponsors
- Showcase para sport to a wide audience – show ability not disability.

Preparing for competition

- Read NF, IF and IPC rules
- Read all competition information, schedule, and notes.
- Be clear on the competition rules and regulations.
- Confirm travel plans, accommodation, and transfers.
- Pack clothes, training kit and competition kit
- Have any documentation, certificates and dispensations that may be required for travel, registration, and competition.
- Understand appeals process (sometimes your NPC will provide the necessary fee so that an appeal can be made if deemed necessary).

NOTE

Even though someone else may be booking your travel, accommodation and entries, it is up to you to know that everything is in order and what is going on.

“You need to be accountable and responsible for your own athlete journey”.

On arrival at the competition, the following will need to be considered:

- Familiarise yourself with the facility:
 - Warm up area
 - Competition area
 - Changing rooms and showers
 - Classification room (if required)
 - Café
- Set up a WhatsApp group (or multiple) with the people that you need to be in regular contact with
- Always plan to be early so that you do not miss critical timings.
- Check and double check critical timings (see comp schedule, IF rules and regulations etc).
- Plan and prepare every day with your coach and your critical team so that everyone is clear on what their role is, where they need to be and when.
- Consider how you want to deliver any media updates and stories.

Roles

Whilst each competition is different, you may well find that the roles outlined below are quite normal. However, it is up to you to check before each competition happens. Some empty dots have been left below for you to add further things to as you go to more competitions.

- NPC
 - Make entries.
 - Kit (consult with NPC over what kit is provided)
 - Travel and transport (including Visa applications which can take weeks to process)
 - Team communications

Whilst each competition is different, you may well find that the roles outlined below are quite normal. However, it is up to you to check before each competition happens. Some empty dots have been left below for you to add further things to as you go to more competitions.

- Athlete
 - Pack training clothes and any specific kit
 - Personal comms
 - Smart clothes if there is an opening official dinner / event.
 - Information for accreditation and classification
- Coach
 - Competition format
 - Training outfits
 - Specialised equipment
 - Venue familiarisation
 - Rules of appeals
 - Where presentations are carried out
 - Timings for training, comp, food etc

What are the main things that you will want to think about when planning for a competition?

Case Study

Joseph was going to his first ever competition, and it was a big one! The competition was in France, and he had never been on an airplane before or even left his own country. He was quite nervous, but he had spoken with other para powerlifters about what to expect, what to pack and the likely format of the competition so he felt fairly confident.

The NPC had arranged the flights, he just needed to pack and get to the airport in time to meet with the rest of the team. Joseph was also going to be classified for the first time so had made sure that he had all the information he needed from his doctors to pass on to the classification team.

To prepare for the competition, Joseph had managed to borrow a friend's phone to go onto the World Para Powerlifting website and read lots of information about their rules, competitions, processes and systems. He really liked looking at the profiles of other athletes and was excited to be able to meet these people in person and compete against them in a high-profile competition.

One of the most important parts of Joseph's preparation though had been sitting down with his coach and talking through their plan so that he was really clear of how they would train, how they would compete, how they would recover. Having this plan clear meant that no matter what else was happening around them, they could stay focussed on the goal of why they were there – to record a PB, to enjoy themselves and to be seen as a fine representative from their country.

BUDDY SYSTEMS/MENTORS

Why not join up with another competitor from either your own country or another one so that you can share ideas, talk about your challenges, learn about other ways of doing things and possibly even train or compete together?

Who would you choose and why?

5.0 Coaching

Introduction

Coaching is a critical part of an athlete's learning and development. A good coach can help you achieve your personal best results through work on fitness, strength, mindset and tactics. Finding a coach that you trust and is willing to support you is essential for you to progress quickly and seamlessly through your sport career.

Working with a coach is like any successful partnership, there needs to be trust and respect from both sides for it to work well. Like a marriage :-) A good coach will know how to get the best out of you by instilling confidence and motivation, yet also understand and empathise with your limitations and personal situation.

Research Findings

All coaches interviewed through the PSAS research were volunteer's and worked many hours free of charge to support one or many para-athletes in their training and development.

All athletes felt that a coach of para-athletes required specialist skills and knowledge about disabilities and how they impact on an athlete's ability to learn and perform. They also felt that the following characteristics and skills were important:

- Well disciplined,
- Loyal
- Patient
- Empathetic
- Friendly
- Respectful
- Understanding



Helping athletes to learn their sport, to get to training and competitions, to manage family and NPC relationships, to eat correctly and to gain confidence were all cited as critical components of a good coach.

Most athletes, 92%, had a regular coach who they got on well with and could develop a positive, open and caring relationship with.

Coaches in your country may only get the chance to access a few courses for their own development each year and it is important that they feel encouraged to attend these to keep up to date with new training techniques, sport policy and competition guidelines.

Checklists

Help your coach:

- Be prepared for all sessions.
- Be on time (or early)
- Be hydrated and fed.
- Be authentic and honest.

- Help out where you can – set up, set down etc.
- Encourage them to go for personal development.
- Give feedback on sessions and how you are feeling.
- Do not 'over-rely' on your coach – you still need to 'own your programme' and be able to train and compete without your coach if the need ever arose.
- Above all, be kind.

How to find a coach:

- Ask your NPC.
- Ask your national Federation.
- Ask at a club or national training centre.
- Most coaches start off as able-bodied sports coaches – so find one of these and see if they have the right skill set to work with a para-athlete.
- A few coaches were previously good para-athletes themselves and have moved across into coaching when they retire from competition.

Case Study

Richard was begging on the street when Coach Sam approached him and asked if he had ever tried Para Powerlifting. Richard had a very strong upper body with huge arms and spent much of his spare time lifting home-made weights with his able-bodied friends.

Richard agreed to meet Coach Sam at the training venue the next day to watch the para-athletes train and meet them. He had never seen or heard such inspiring stories and was keen to become involved.

Sam had worked with para-power weightlifters for a few years now following a successful career as an able-bodied weightlifter. He had learnt how to work with athletes with disabilities and how to make them successful. He also understood how difficult it was to get to training regularly and the impact of not being on the streets earning money!

Richard and Coach Sam sat down and decided on a training plan for the first month, after which time they would review whether this was working or not. The plan involved a lot of fitness and strength work, plus lifting every day together with the whole group. This was the best part as the team spirit and camaraderie amongst the athletes was amazing.

Two years on and Richard has won three medals for his country, and he is fitter, healthier and stronger than ever before. His coach, Sam, and his teammates have become another family to him and he trusts them like a father and brothers.

Summary

Having a coach that you are comfortable working with is really important for your career as a para-athlete. Once you have found one, look after him / her, as they will be working for free to help you become the best athlete you can be.



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