



Para Sport Against Stigma (PSAS)

Pillar 3: Athlete Development

Coach Toolkit

Delivered by



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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 Coach Development Toolkit

The Para-Coaches Guide

This toolkit is aimed at supporting coaches who work with disability athletes within their national and international sporting systems. This includes coaches who are starting out within the parasport system, and also those who currently have athletes on national training programmes supported by the National Paralympic Committee (NPC) and competing under their international federation (IF) rules for a particular sport.

The toolkit is designed to provide useful information and step by step guides on important aspects of Para sport such as classification systems and processes, competition requirements, coaching checklists and communication methods. 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 and their coaches in Ghana, Malawi and Zambia, but it is not country or continent specific and can be used by any coach wanting to support para-athletes in an 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. Para Coaches are a small and unique group of individuals, often starting their coaching career in able bodied sport, and finding a passion for working with disabled athletes part way through their career. Being so niche, you can easily become a role model and inspire other people to get involved in para sport and have a 'voice' so that you can influence positive societal change towards disability and equality.

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 coaches, be able to use 'check lists' 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 coach who wants to coach athletes 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 coaches and athletes resulting in them being underprepared for competition.

How do you use the toolkit?

This toolkit is divided into five main sections covering the 5 'C' s: context, communication, classification, competition, and 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 be become the coach of elite para-athletes.

2

Communication

How you communicate with other people and how they communicate back to you is an important consideration when becoming a coach of para athletes. 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 your athletes will need to be classified. The classification system informs the athlete of the sport and the class in which the athlete is eligible to compete, given their specific type of disability (impairment).

4

Competition

All athletes need to 'learn to compete' and finding the best opportunities to do this takes a lot of planning and preparation. Once your athlete has learnt to compete, you will be able to coach them to 'compete to win' at 'pinnacle' (critical) events.

5

Coaching

Coaching in para sport has some differences to coaching able bodied athletes and it is important that you are prepared and equipped to manage these additional responsibilities.

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 to ensure that you can apply the information directly to your own context.



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 of these people/ groups are 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-athletes are.

From an athlete's 'context', the ecosystem is rather a complex one, with many people / groups that influence and impact their journey through their sport career. There are people / groups within their national network such as family, training groups, NPC, national sporting federations who they 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.

As a coach it will be your responsibility to:

1. Support the athlete in their navigation of this ecosystem
2. Know which areas you have ownership over
3. Ensure you understand what areas your athlete has ownership over.
4. You can also have a significant impact on the social acceptability of disability through showcasing the athlete's ability and your commitment to helping them achieve excellence.

Potential Challenges to Participation

Challenges can be real or perceived, and experienced by the athlete, their family and/or the sport.

These can include:

- **Stigma**
From ignorance; fear; offensive or patronising treatment; lack of support and encouragement.
- **Poor Communication**
Inappropriate type or style of communication; ineffective marketing and advertising; insufficient communication skills within the sport.
Lack of media coverage.
- **Lack of Opportunity**
Offering not sufficiently flexible or inclusive; not enough trained coaches or volunteers; lack of awareness in the community.
- **Insufficient Support**
Lack of transport; insufficient carers, friends or family members to accompany players.
- **Prohibitive Costs**
Specialist equipment for the sport; transport for the players.
- **Physical Access Issues**
Inadequate access for players; no disability friendly facilities

Questions to ask yourself:



What do I understand about my, and my athletes' contexts?

What local and national groups are part of system that I need to thrive in?

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 and how do I communicate with them?

What is my plan to develop 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?

Are there any local sponsors, media people or government ministers that I could get to know so they could support my journey as a coach of disabled athletes?

Research Findings

The research painted a picture of para-sport being in its infancy, with little known about it apart from small pockets of knowledge and experience at NPC level. Many who were introduced to seeing disabled children / adults taking part in sport for the first time were amazed by their achievements. Every person interviewed for this study stated that sport had changed their lives for the better, by giving them confidence, improving their health, and giving them a purpose in life.

However, living in a country where disability stigma is still rife and where sporting infrastructure and resources are scarce, there are many challenges that have to be overcome in order for an athlete to compete successfully at international level.

The research showed that the facilities and equipment available to para-sport 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 para-sport 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 and their coaches 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 your athlete progresses 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

Richard was a former national weightlifter for Ghana and had claimed many medals at national and international level competitions. Since retiring from competition, he had taken on two promising young weightlifters to coach, and they had also become very successful under his tutelage.

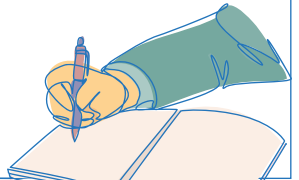
At the gym he coached in, he had noticed a man with just one leg arrive on occasion with a friend who would help him with the weights. Richard was really impressed with the weight that he was lifting, although his technique needed some help. This fascinated Richard and one day he approached the man and asked if he could assist him. The athlete told him that he wanted to become a Para powerlifter and compete for Ghana at the Paralympic Games.

Over the next few weeks, the athlete's technique and power increased and the two started to forge a good strong relationship. Richard became very interested in the sport and the techniques required to coach a Para Powerlifter the top level. He started to do some research and spoke with the NF and the NPC to see if there were opportunities for his athlete to compete and for him to learn more about the sport.

Over the next few years, the athlete went from strength to strength and was selected to compete at the Commonwealth Games where he won a bronze medal.

Richard is now coaching para-athletes full time, has had lots of training himself, and is recognised as one of the top para powerlifting coaches in Africa.

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 a coach and all of the things which influence this. The environment in which you flourish is impacted by many things, but being the coach of disability 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 coach. 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 athletes 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.

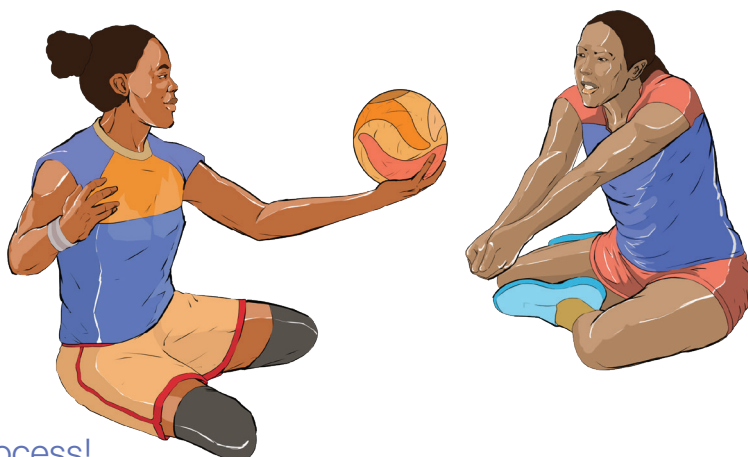
WhatsApp: Within the athlete group, the national federations and the NPC, the most popular form of communication was WhatsApp. This is primarily because it is free, easy to use, you can form groups easily and share various forms of information.

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!

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 you 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!

- _____
- _____
- _____

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.



NOTE

There is no such thing as privacy!! It's important to review your privacy settings regularly on any social network, 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 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.
- ▶ Be silent – keep your head down quietly and concentrate on yourself.
- ▶ Generate interest – with gentle murmur of excitement.
- ▶ Reflect – take time to assess your progress and achievements.

Bridging the Divide

A key role for the coach is to bridge the communication gap between the athlete and the NPC. Some NPC's do not like to communicate directly with the athlete and would rather pass information to the coach. Information could include national training camps, classification opportunities, competitions, media appearances.

In order to be most effective at managing this communication responsibility it is suggested that you:

1. Build good relationships with the NPC
2. Ensure the NPC know the best way to communicate with you – WhatsApp, email, phone.
3. Ensure communication is two way
4. Become familiar with IPC systems and online materials
5. Communicate and build networks with other coaches locally and through regional/international competitions.
6. Do not overwhelm athletes with information.
7. Understand how your athlete likes to receive information – make a communication agreement between coach and athlete.

Summary

Effective communication is essential when supporting athletes to progress in their sport. It covers how you find out information, how you share information, how you learn, how you interact with others, how you promote your successes and how you identify opportunities.

It is important to have a strategy as to how you want to communicate with your various stakeholders. Work this out in conjunction with your athlete and share the responsibility.

3.0 Classification

Introduction

Unique to disability sport is the classification process whereby athletes are equated across functional ability, so they do not have to compete against athletes with less severe impairments. Success at competitions should be defined by an athlete's skill and ability, not their impairment.

Classification should give all athletes the confidence that they are competing against others on an equal basis. Coaches need to be cognizant of athletes who may cheat to get classified at a level lower than their capabilities, resulting in facing inferior competition and increased odds of winning. Certainly, disability sport coaches should be aware of this practice and ensure their athletes do not engage in it. The use of performance enhancing drugs is also present in disability sport and is unethical and unsafe.

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 coaches and athletes 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. It is helpful for you, as coach, to have a good understanding of the classification system, process and grades to ensure that you are training your athlete for the correct class. The 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 does an athlete 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.

Is your athlete eligible to participate in Para sport?

In order for an athlete to be eligible for international competition in their chosen sport, they must meet the impairment criteria. Detailed medical information, alongside a practical look at how their disability impacts on their ability to perform the sport, is required in order for the panel to consider each athletes 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 your athlete classified as early as possible in their career so that you can ensure you are training for the right goals. Be honest about their disability and the limitations that this gives them 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.

To get further information and understanding of the classification system head to the IPC website, and also check out the LEXI system. Search Lexi Classification on a search engine or go to lexi.global

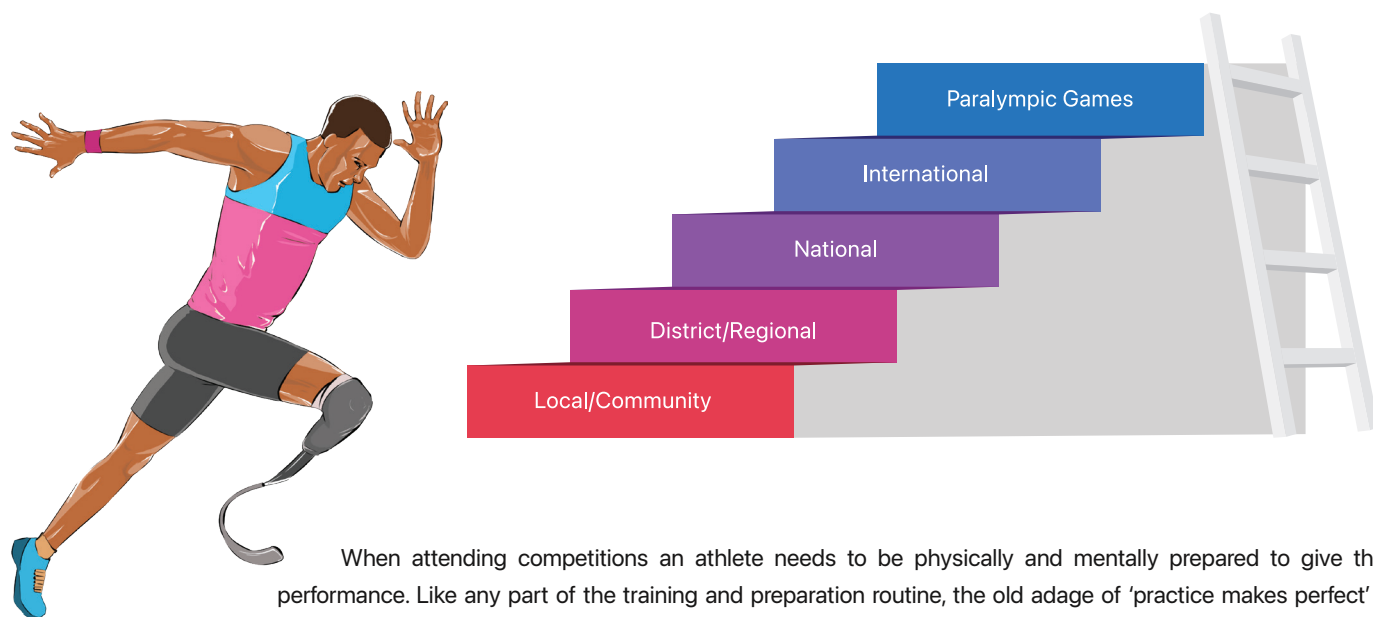
4.0 Competition

Introduction

Competitions are a great way to travel the world, meet fellow coaches, watch other nations train, and enable you to benchmark your athlete's performance against others. They are also where you may receive training, and your athletes will get classified 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 – perhaps having been spotted by someone who knows about para sport, or having seen people with disabilities training or performing at a local centre or in the media.

Whatever your entry route into the wonderful world of para-sport, there will come a time when the athletes you work with want to enter competitions. Our research showed that there are not very many local or national competitions each year – so grab the chance when you can, even if you don't feel the time is perfect. Some sports will have competitions on a national level between clubs, regions or schools. These may progress to a national championship for the best athletes 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 how best to plan and prepare your athlete for a competition so that they can be in the best possible position to give your personal best.

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 straight in 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. Here the role of the coach is so critical in the planning phase, and also at the competition and the post competition debrief.

Funding to send athletes and coaches to competitions was very scarce and NPCs needed to carefully prioritise which competitions are attended and by which athletes. 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).

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 is a competition pathway important?

- Learn your 'trade' so that the athlete can compete to win.
- Clearly understand the rules and policies.
- There will be expected levels of behaviour and etiquette that will need to be followed.
- To learn from others.
- Get to know your competition and what their strengths, weaknesses and strategies are.
- Gain media interest.
- Encourage sponsorship opportunities.
- The use of high specification equipment and facilities that should be standardised at international competitions.

If access to competitions is limited (for example only one or two per year), then it is vitally important that you plan and prepare your athlete and yourself 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).

Practice makes Perfect!

Run a mock competition, under competition rules so that you can have a practice run. Maybe invite some other athletes to so that it feels more authentic!

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. Encourage your athletes to take ownership for themselves, as you may not always be able to be there to manage everything for them.

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

- 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

James was going to his first international competition as a para coach. The competition was in France, and neither he nor his athlete had never been on an airplane before. He was quite nervous, but he had spoken with other coaches and 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, his athlete, was also going to be classified for the first time, so together they 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, James 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 coaches 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 the preparation though had been sitting down with Joseph and talking through their plan so they were really clear of how they would train, how they would compete, and how they would debrief. Having this plan clear meant that no matter what else was happening around them, they could stay focused on the goal – to record a PB, to enjoy themselves and to be seen as a fine representative from their country.

Put in my competition pathway slide with the triangle on it.....I don't have it on this computer but will send it if you don't know which one I mean.

Summary

Being confident and focused at competition is critically important for the athlete in order for them to give their best performance. The old adages of 'practice makes perfect' and 'if you fail to prepare, you prepare to fail' are very real and it is up to you as the coach to ensure that your athlete is physically and mentally ready to perform at the right time.

5.0 Coaching

Introduction

Coaching is a critical part of an athlete's learning and development. A good coach will help the athlete to achieve their personal best results through work on fitness, strength, mindset and tactics. Becoming a coach that athletes can trust and demonstrating commitment and technical skill is essential for you to progress quickly and seamlessly through your coaching career.

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

As a disability sports coach, you can provide individuals with the empowerment and confidence they need to engage in sport and make the most of the opportunities that do exist. Disability sports coaches are key to breaking through the ignorance about disability – that it will hinder sporting development – and show through emotional intelligence that disabled people have equal opportunity to become elite athletes.

Underpinning guidelines:

- Recognise a disabled athlete as an individual, not an impairment.
- Have a shared vision with your athletes in terms of coaching goals and expectations. Communicate and work together to achieve them.
- Talk to your disabled participants about their impairment to plan effective coaching sessions and adapt practices.
- Know the sport you coach. Have a passion to develop yourself as a coach.
- You don't need to learn everything there is to know about every impairment. Talk to the athlete and adapt your sessions accordingly – they are the best person to tell you what their body is able to do.
- Talk to and learn from other coaches, share your experiences and ideas about what works.
- Develop your sport specific knowledge as well as your understanding about their disability.
- Communicate continually, and always debrief a session so you know how well it went for the athlete.

Quality coaching provided by knowledgeable coaches has a significant influence on athletic success. In addition to the knowledge a coach possesses, the coach-athlete relationship is also critical.

Coaches must gain knowledge of their athlete's disability condition. Because most coaches lack the life experience of living with a disability, disability specific knowledge must be learned.

Disability sport coaches have the dual challenge of understanding their athlete's sport and their disability. They influence critical competitive psychological states in their athletes; in particular, confidence and anxiety, which play an important role in athlete's sport performances.

“If you are coaching a powerlifter with a disability, it's important to have good knowledge of what the disability is, that way you can make the distinction between what they can't do because of the disability, what they chose not to do, and what areas their training needs to focus on. “

In addition to the challenges of coaching in general, disability sport coaches often face additional issues that are quite unique to disability sport, including understanding the nuances of their athletes' disabilities, dealing with accessibility issues, and navigating travel logistics.



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.

COACHING TIPS 1

Coaching a VI athlete

Coaching people with visual impairments can provide varying levels of challenge, as different people will have varying levels of sight. Some people may see nothing; some may see outlines; some may see a small area in detail but nothing around that area; some may see best in good light; some in poor light; some may have seen in the past and have a memory of this; and some may never have seen and will therefore have to learn everything by description. As a result, communication is key when coaching visually impaired people and you will need to talk to the participant prior to the session to understand their personal support needs.

TOP TIPS:

- Find out how much sight an individual has – do not be afraid to ask how well an individual can see
- Ensure the athlete knows what is around them and who is present . Ask them if they want to be shown or guided around the environment . If a visually impaired participant asks to be guided, hold your arm out for the person to hold and keep that arm relaxed and still.
- Advise the participant that you are going to put them into a correct position or stance, and explain how you are going to do this, prior to touching them
- Keep background noise to a minimum and make sure you are clear and precise in your verbal information .
- Try not to overcomplicate instructions or information and always check for understanding by the participant
- Take the opportunity to learn from athletes different eye conditions, as they will each find different strategies to compensate

COACHING TIPS 2

Coaching a Wheelchair user

These coaching considerations for wheelchair users:

- Check athletes' range of movement as they may struggle with certain movements, strength and range.
- Even though they are in a wheelchair, some athletes may be able to bear weight
- Athletes may tire easily during a session due to their lack of motor-skill efficiency.
- Athletes may have a decreased breathing efficiency due to only their diaphragm supporting their breathing.
- Athletes may struggle with temperature regulation – both hot and cold.
- Make sure participants take in plenty of fluid during sessions.

Leadership Styles

Coaching is often cited as being a leadership quality. There are different types of leadership, and it is felt that the Coaching Leadership style is a closest match to how the athletes in this study state they want to be treated.

Coaching Leadership differs from other styles of leadership in that it is based on a collaborative coach / athlete partnership that is centred on achieving goals.

A coach who demonstrates a 'leadership style' will provide guidance, support and feedback to help their athletes improve their skills, performance and to achieve their full potential. This style of leadership fosters an empowering environment, with open communication, active participation and self-reflection.

Active listening – a coach leader demonstrates empathy and understanding to gain insights into their athletes' perspectives and challenges.

Individualised Support – the coach leader provides personalised guidance and support, tailoring their approach to the unique needs of the disabled athlete.

Other styles of leadership have different goals, for example:

Directive / Autocratic Leadership is based on power, with the coach making all decisions and not asking for feedback from the athlete. It involves strict supervision and direct orders that are expected to be followed without question.

Democratic Leadership is most similar to Coaching Leadership and allows the athlete to take part in some decision making. The coach will generally moderate discussions.

Laissez-faire Leadership gives the athlete total responsibility to make decision without guidance.

In summary, the diagram below shows the many skills that a coach requires to get the best out of their athletes.



Reflection

It is important for coaches to be reflective and learn from their challenges, successes and the times when unexpected outcomes occurred. Coaches serve as leaders to their training groups, their communities, and the broader para sport movement. As your journey as a coach progresses you should constantly reflect in order to reinforce things that led to positive experiences and learn from your actions when goals were not achieved or were unexpected.

Task

1. Can you think of a time when your coaching style led to positive change?
 - a. What did you do?
 - b. How did it feel?
 - c. Have you done anything differently since that time?
2. Can you think of a time when you did not achieve a goal?
 - a. Why do you think that is?
 - b. What would you do differently next time?
 - c. What advice would you give another coach?

Reflection leads to knowledge which in time leads to becoming a more impactful and thoughtful coach. You should also encourage your athletes to reflect on their training efforts, competition preparations and performance. Factor the reflection and learning into your training programmes.

Checklists

Help your athlete:

- Be prepared for all sessions.
- Be on time (or early)
- Be hydrated and fed.
- Be authentic and honest.
- Give feedback on sessions and check in with them on how they are feeling.
- Do not allow your athletes to become over-reliant on you – the athlete needs to 'own their programme' and be able to train and compete without you if the need ever arose.
- Above all, be kind.

How to find out more information about para coaching and associated opportunities:

- Ask your NPC.
- Ask your National Federation.
- Ask at a club or national training centre.
- Ask to be mentored by, or 'shadow' an existing para coach to learn the ropes and get to know the athletes and nuances of working with disability athletes.
- Once you understand the sport and the specific requirements, you may be able to spot potential athletes and see if they would be interested in trying out a para sport.

Case Study

Joseph was begging on the street when Coach Sam approached him and asked if he had ever tried Para Powerlifting. Joseph 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.

Joseph 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.

Coach 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!

Joseph 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 Joseph 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. Coach Sam has enjoyed the journey that he and Richard have been on and is so proud to see him on the podium. He has also enjoyed being interviewed by the media, taking part in international training courses and meeting the President!

Summary

Becoming the coach of para-athletes can be a hugely rewarding experience. The journey can be challenging as the facilities and equipment can be poor, the competitions are few, the financial support is limited and the stigma around disability is prevalent – however, seeing your athlete lift their first medal and being able to dispel the myths around disability being inability is priceless.



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