

# **Developing Paralympic Athletes' Pathways: An Analysis of the Sport Policy Factors and the Involvement of Stakeholders**

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## **Aim**

The aim of this research is to examine the influence of sport policy factors and the involvement of stakeholders in developing Paralympic athletes' pathways, working towards a practical paradigm for better understand and support para-athletes.

## **Theoretical Background**

Athlete development pathways are interactions between the various stakeholders that are involved in the delivery of a successful athlete's career and a combination of elite sport policies. It is shown in the mainstream sport literature that elite athlete development includes interconnected components at micro, meso and macro levels (De Bosscher et al., 2015). In order to develop elite athletes, high performance managers need to develop systems and processes that attract, retain and nurture athletes (Sotiriadou et al., 2008). From the Paralympic sport perspective, only few attempts have been made to identify pathways and stakeholder's role in the athlete's development phases, as well as, quality indicators in the para-athlete development system. Furthermore, there is a debate in the literature about whether adaptations of existing programs to the Paralympic context are appropriate (Hutzler et al., 2016). This is based on the fact that the Paralympic context differs from mainstream sport, for example such as environmental factors, societal attitudes towards people with disability, challenges and barriers faced by para-athletes to participate in sport, and especially the need for coaches to gain disability-specific knowledge (Patatas et al., 2018).

## **Methodology**

Drawn upon a hermeneutic phenomenological stance to explore the Brazilian Paralympic experts' lived experiences, qualitative research methods were used to examine the influence of sport policy factors and the role of stakeholders in the Brazilian Paralympic sporting context. 32 face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews were performed with high-performance directors, sports managers, academics and national coaches from five sports (para-athletics, para-swimming, para-powerlifting, wheelchair basketball and goalball). The interview protocol included a series of open-ended questions that were purposely expansive to encourage participants to talk at length and focused on the perception of the Brazilian Paralympic experts about the influence of the sport policy factors on the development of Paralympic athletes' pathways, the role of stakeholders, and the way Paralympic athletes careers are developed and supported in Brazil with specific reference to a sport policy perspective by systematically focusing on the nine SPLISS pillars (De Bosscher et al., 2006), used as a theoretical framework. Three types of analyses were performed to assist with abductive reasoning, which is a mix of inductive and deductive reasoning, as suggested by Sparkes and Smith (2014). This approach acknowledges the creative process of interpretation when applying a theoretical framework to participants' experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). These were as follows: (a) thematic analysis to code the responses under major themes, (b) constant comparisons to develop more specific sub-themes and (c) content analysis to identify the percentage of experts that referred to each of the factors.

## Results

Higher order categories revealed that sport policy factors and stakeholders are involved within five development phases in the Paralympic athletes' pathways, namely: (1) attraction, (2) retention, (3) talent identification and development, (4) elite, and (5) retirement. The results of this research have identified, on each phase of the Paralympic athletes' pathways, the sport policy factors, support programmes and stakeholders that are consistently involved throughout all development phases. The participants perceived that Financial Support (P1) and Coaching provision & Coach Development (P7) as the most influential sport policy factors that are present during all phases of the Paralympic athletes' pathways. Coaches and the National Paralympic Committee (NPC) were perceived as the most influential stakeholders during para-athletes' career development. The classification was pointed out as a parasport-specific factors and will influence the para-athletes' career trajectory in its entirety, impacting mainly the talent identification phase and the transition to elite phase, particularly when it is related to investments and support provided to a para-athlete. The findings revealed that stakeholders roles and sport policy influence manifests differently during each phase and it is dependent on the impairment-specific factors influencing the development of those pathways, the different type of impairments, and the influence of the athlete's classification and its implications.

## Conclusion

The results of this research add to the complexity surrounding para-athletes' development, more specifically on the effectiveness of sport policy factors and the involvement of sporting organisations and stakeholders on the development of specific parasport policies that influence each phase of athletes' pathways. This research can contribute to inform nations on how para-athlete development pathways and the characteristics of support programs on an impairment-specific level are developed in order to assist on para-athletes' recruitment and development. Sport organisations can identify preferred development pathways in their own sport, and then build programs and implement strategies to encourage participation and promote excellence by looking at the different types of impairment and different support needs for athletes with disability.

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