Improving Paralympic Development Programs: Athlete and Institutional Pathways and Organizational Quality Indicators

To reflect the interest and excitement of the 2016 Paralympic Games that recently concluded, we are pleased to publish a number of articles related to Paralympic sport. These articles were all accepted in APAQ at around the same time, after going through the usual thorough review process. Due to this opportunity, the Editor decided to invite scholars identified with the Paralympic sport movement and developmental programming for persons with disability to write an editorial concerning the establishment of quality indicators for sport systems and program development for athletes with disabilities.

The athletic performances we witnessed in Rio were the result of various development systems of which, for the most part, little is known. This is perhaps surprising, since the vision for the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) is “to enable para-athletes to achieve sporting excellence and inspire and excite the world” (International Paralympic Committee [IPC], 2015, p. 5). Accomplishing this vision requires a firm understanding of the various elements that affect persons with disability to be physically active, pursuing sport and ultimately becoming high-performance athletes. More specifically, one of the goals identified in the IPC Strategic Plan 2015–2018 (IPC, 2015) is to “empower para-athletes and support the development of para-sports” (p. 15). This means working to “increase and improve the opportunities for para-athletes to develop from the grassroots to Paralympic level, raising the quality of their environment and supporting transition beyond sport” (IPC, 2015, p. 22). This ambitious goal covers the developmental and life-span perspective of Paralympic sportspersons, which may be nurtured and developed through a variety of organizations and programs. On a practical level, the goal of improving sport systems is also presently being pursued by 34 national Paralympic committees and national and international federations, who made an historic pledge to strengthen winter para-sport development around the world after a 3-day workshop in Ostersund, Sweden, April 22–24, 2016. The Ostersund Declaration outlined a number of measures to improve athlete development and talent identification and recruitment on which all the organizations agreed to move forward. An example of one of the challenges to achieving the vision of the IPC and the Ostersund Declaration is that, to date, few attempts have been made to identify the pathways and stakeholders’ roles, as well as quality indicators in the athlete-development system. In this editorial we will review a few of the attempts made to identify such systems.

One approach has been to describe the athlete’s pathway, with an example being the long-term athlete-development (LTAD) model developed in Canada (Balyi, 1999). This model depicts a six-phase progression across age and stages...
of athlete development, namely, FUNdamentals, learn to train, train to compete, train to win, and the transition phase, active for life. The FUNdamentals stage is typically from ages 6 to 9, with the competitive train-to-compete phase introduced in later adolescence, typically ages 15 to 16 and up. Balyi’s work was expanded into the Canadian Sport for Life model, which then added an active-start phase for children up to 6 years of age, designed to expose young children to various physical play activities and to develop a habit of being physically active. To extend the model to para-athlete development, the Canadian Sport for Life movement added two additional stages, namely, awareness and first involvement. Lack of public knowledge about the opportunities for Paralympic sport and for “setting the stage” to enable an individuals’ involvement in physical activity through family’s, peers’ and important others’ support requires raising awareness (Balyi, Way, & Higgs, 2016). In addition, information about available sport options and how to access them are provided. First involvement describes the special care that instructors or coaches should provide to help make the first encounter of a child or adult with disability in a sport-specific experience a positive one. Failing to do so is common. A wheelchair user with limited arm strength who tries to score a basket and whose shot does not reach the rim makes for a disappointing outcome, which might result in the athlete dropping out even before he or she has started regular participation in sports. Instead, the coach should encourage this participant to initially play “touchdown” (an introductory game following American football rules, where a goal is scored when a player enters into the opponent’s zone while possessing the ball) or to use a low basket, such as in the case of twin basketball (Uchida et al., 1994).

A second approach to helping us improve development opportunities for persons with disability to participate in sport and recreation is to describe and thus enable a better understanding of the foundations in the entire sport system. Presently there are several models that have been developed, describing the pathways and factors affecting sport systems (e.g., De Bosscher, Bingham, Shibli, van Bottenburg, & De Knop, 2008; De Bosscher, Shibli, Westerbeek, & van Bottenburg, 2015; Digel, 2002; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Green & Oakley, 2001; Houlihan & Green, 2008; Petry, Steinbach, & Tokarski, 2004; Smolianov & Zakus, 2008; Truyens, De Bosscher, Heyndels, & Westerbeek, 2013). In particular, one of the models that may provide a comprehensive and meaningful perspective for a Paralympic sport system quality assessment is the SPLISS (Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success; De Bosscher et al., 2008). 2015SPLISS 1.0 includes six participating countries (De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, Shibli, & Bingham, 2009), followed by SPLISS 2.0 with 15 countries The SPLISS model suggests that there are nine pillars that lead to Olympic medal success. These include financial support; the organization and structure of sport policies; the foundations of sport in the country, including initiation and preliminary development; talent-identification processes; athletic career and postcareer support; training facilities; coaching development and provision; access to international competition; and scientific support. This model thus incorporates many of the stages discussed in the LTAD approach, as well as the hallmarks of quality programs, both discussed earlier. According to the SPLISS model, Olympic medal success is then further underpinned by more than 100 critical success factors that are vital for policy planning and success.

The next step is seeing if these factors apply in a Paralympic context and in non-Western developed nations. Recent presentation abstracts by Legg and Darcy...
(2015) at the International Paralympic Committee’s 2015 VISTA Conference and by Pankowiak, Brocket, De Bosscher, and Westerbeek (2015) at the SPLISS 2015 World Congress on Elite Sport Policy are two examples of attempts to shed light on Paralympic development using the SPLISS approach, but more are needed. In particular, as noted by Pankowiak et al., a greater understanding of how the Paralympic sport domain is unique compared with able-bodied sport, and thus differs from the original context on which the SPLISS model was based, is required. What Pankowiak et al. already noted was that the organization of para-sport is complex and fragmented and is affected in varying ways by societal attitudes about inclusion. Key differences between Paralympic and Olympic athlete development were further identified by Radtke and Doll-Tepper (2014) and include the use of a sport-classification system and the unique impacts of technology in a Paralympic context. Finally, Pankowiak et al. reflected on the many challenges and barriers specific to the Paralympic domain identified by Misener and Darcy (2014), including lack of funding, coaching provision, accessibility, and training and competition opportunities.

Dowling, Legg, and Brown (in press) have also attempted to lay the groundwork for examining Paralympic sport in future comparative studies in a forthcoming book chapter, which concludes with a broader reflection on some of the inherent challenges of applying cross-comparative sport-policy research to the Paralympic domain. These authors agree with previous ones that the Paralympic sport-development system has both similarities and differences with the system serving nondisabled athletes, but these have not yet been fully examined. As but one example, the variability among national Paralympic committees alone might make it impossible to create a universal model for understanding Paralympic sport development.

A third way we can assist in the provision of better development opportunities for persons with disability to participate in sport and recreation is to improve our understanding of quality indicators for existing and new programs. Even when sport activities are developmentally appropriate, the quality of service provision may have a significant influence on adherence. Ensuring the quality of services has also not yet been prioritized as a practice or research focus in the Paralympic movement or in any other branch of adapted physical activity program development, such as community, regional, national, or international frameworks. The few examples of practice and research that do exist, however, may provide future direction.

The USA Paralympic Sport Club Excellence Program is an example of how a national Paralympic committee has attempted to foster a culture of high-quality coaching and organizational support for athletes (U.S. Paralympic Committee, 2016). Club Excellence is a three-level program with benchmarks designated at the bronze, silver, and gold levels, addressing criteria for transitioning from a basic provider to an elite (gold-level) provider of Paralympic programming. For example, bronze-level benchmarks include basic practices such as completing a safety training program, facilitating training and rewarding volunteers, providing competition opportunities, and performing an annual program evaluation. Silver-level benchmarks require more comprehensive organizational establishment and professional practices, including an annual operating plan, outreach for sport officials, coach and program-leader training, and athlete goal-setting processes. Gold-level benchmarks include even more ambitious practices such as strategic planning, advanced coach
certification, implementing sport-specific talent-identification days, and a review of sport lesson plans.

In another example, from Galicia, Spain (Méndez Rial & Cancela Rial, 2015), a comparison was performed between 50 federations—Olympic (n = 26; 52%), non-Olympic (n = 21; 42%), and Paralympic (n = 2; 6%)—based on the European Federation of Quality Management Model (EFQM-Excellence Model). Here, the authors used a questionnaire based on 50 quality indicators representing dimensions of enablers (e.g., leadership, planning, human resources, and services) and results (e.g., people results, process results, society results). The average scores of the two participating Paralympic federations on the EFQM were below the averages of Olympic and non-Olympic federations participating in this study.

We have described three different approaches that could improve Paralympic development programs focusing on athlete and institutional pathways and organizational quality indicators. The LTAD was adapted for athletes with disability—referred to as No Accidental Champions—as were the quality indicators in the United States and Spain, and now the SPLISS model is being proposed to be adapted in a Paralympic context. Whether these adaptations are appropriate, however, is debatable, due, in part, to vastly different environmental and individual challenges and constraints and to the varying cultural perceptions of disability.

This last concern is why, as alluded to earlier, research focusing on the Paralympic sport-development “system” must address the non-Western developing world. To date most research on sport systems, and the vast majority of research on participation of persons with disability (of which there is still little available), is focused on developed nations. This is also relevant and important in an applied physical activity context, as, according to the World Bank (2004), it is estimated that 15% of the world’s population has moderate to severe disability and that the majority of those live in developing countries. Research conducted in 2007 also highlights the lack of participation by developing countries in international disability-sport competitions. In total, 23% of developing countries have not participated in Deaflympic, Paralympic, or Special Olympics World Games competitions (Sportanddev, 2016).

One example of a study that has attempted to explore the Paralympic system in developing countries is by Forber-Pratt, Scott, and Driscoll (2012). Using case studies in Ghana and Bermuda, they reported that to successfully develop Paralympic sport, the following five areas were important to consider: the culture, the current state of affairs for persons with disabilities (i.e., policies, demographics, health care, education), existing opportunities and services, having a strong project leader, and level of interest in Paralympic sport. However, this attempt—similar to those described earlier—still requires further generalization and validation.

As a result of our understanding of the recent attempts to adapt able-bodied sport models to better understand and improve Paralympic sport systems, we therefore recommend and encourage that the development, validation, and utilization of organizational pathways and quality standards for Paralympic sport be given more consideration among stakeholders to improve service provision and enhance performance, as well as quality of life, in athletes with disability worldwide through lifelong physical activity. One can also hope that when quality-assessment tools for Paralympic sports are developed, they will not be used solely for high-performance systems and athletes but also for the entire LTAD pathway. Thus, quality
indicators for developmental programs of Paralympic athletes would contribute to
the standards for additional domains of applied physical activity practice, such as
adapted physical education in special or inclusive frameworks and health-related
and recreational physical activity clubs. Given the transitional nature of participation
in physical activity frameworks—from health-related or recreational to elite and
vice versa (during and after retirement from elite-sport participation)—one would
also expect that some of the quality indicators, such as using long-term training
schedules, regular monitoring and evaluation of attendance and performance-related
individual data, and having access to high-quality training facilities and equipment,
will be shared across applied physical activity domains. These quality standards in
a long-term athlete framework would then enable further appreciation and under-
standing of how the entire system interacts, so that all nations can improve their
sport and recreation systems for persons with disability.

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