The Next Level: An Examination of Barriers for Athletes with Disabilities at Different Levels of Competition

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The benefits of participating in disability sport are well documented. These include greater likelihood for employment (Lastuka & Cottingham, 2015), increased self-esteem (Vermillion & Dodder, 2007), deepened social integration (Hanson, Nabavi & Yuen, 2001), and higher life satisfaction (van Koppenhagen et al, 2013), among others. It has been hypothesized that sport is the greatest benefit to quality of life of any social service available to those with disabilities (Brittan, 2018). Despite this, people with disabilities face serious barriers to participating in disability sport. These barriers have been studied among both people who do participate in disability sport (Cottingham, Carroll, Lee, Shapiro, & Pitts, 2016) and those who do not participate in sports (Rimmer, et al., 2004; Rimmer, Ruban, & Braddock, 2000). However, these studies have made a consistent flaw, in that they have not considered the level of competition of athletes, nor whether barriers to participation differ across the athlete spectrum from recreational casual to Paralympians and world champions. The purpose of this study is to explore if barriers impact athletes with disabilities differently depending on their level of sport participation.

This study is part of a larger study funded by Challenged Athletes Foundation (CAF) to further their mission of supporting athletes with disabilities. CAF did not assist with analyses, providing our research team full autonomy in the interpretation of all results. The study’s survey was completed by 366 athletes with disabilities Participants were athletes identified their current level of participation (e.g. Paralympic athlete or hopeful, nationally competitive, elite recreational) and whether various barriers affected their sports participation. A total of 12 barriers were selected from Rimmer’s (2004) work on disability, physical activity and barriers (e.g. transport, finances, or accessibility).

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to determine if types of barriers differed for the participants’ level of playing disability sports. Results indicated three barriers had statistically more significant impact to their level of playing: accessibility to team program (F=2.901; p=.036), no athletic competition (F=2.816; p=.041), and accessibility to gym spaces (F=2.633; p=.052). Post hoc analysis of overall mean scores further indicated “high level recreational athletes” seem to face these barriers more seriously. The overall analyses explained almost 25% of variance.

Results indicated that high-level recreational players experienced three types of barriers more than other levels of athlete participation: (1) access to a team/program that met their needs, (2) access to gym space, and (3) not having enough athletic competitions to attend. This suggests that high-level recreational athletes are, in part, unable to reach the next level of sport competition due to these specific barriers. Results are compelling, showing most starkly the impact of barriers on elite recreational athletes. Their tendency to clog the development process at a determinable point. These findings are valuable as the United States Olympic Committee strives to bring more people into the Paralympic pipeline.