Understanding the Athlete Experience of Para-Sport Pathways: Para-Swimming

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Understanding participation pathways is a key element of sport development planning (Soitiriadou, Shilbury & Quick, 2008). In Canada, the Long Term Athlete Development Model (LTAD) has been adopted by many national sporting organizations (NSO) (Balyi, Way, & Higgs, 2013). The LTAD has been used as a guideline to establish a structure of sequential, developmentally appropriate skill acquisition for athletes across the physical, mental, tactical, technical, and lifestyle aspects of sport. A variation of the LTAD has been created for use with athletes with a disability, with the addition of two stages, Awareness and First Involvement (Balyi, Way, & Higgs, 2013). However, the model is based on poorly defined outcomes, offers little flexibility for understanding sport development planning, and neglects to recognize the potentially unique developmental nuances of athletes with a disability (Dehghansai, Lemez, Wattie, & Baker, 2017; Paradis & Misener, 2018). Thus, the focus of this study was to understand the experiences of current para-sport athletes regarding development pathways and system structures. The athlete voice is key to understanding sport development process and implementations, barriers, constraints and/or challenges throughout athlete involvement.

A phenomenological methodology was chosen and semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. Working in partnership with the Ontario Para-Sport Collective (OPC), a group of 24 partner organizations who came together in 2015 to construct a common vision for developing para-sport in the province of Ontario, Canada, we focused on the sport of swimming as a pilot project. Focusing on para-swimming, we sought to consider athletes’ experiences in relation to the LTAD, and their experiences of existing systems and structures. Both athletes (n=4) and parents of youth athletes (n=7) were interviewed. The sample included athletes with congenital and acquired disabilities, male (n=6) and female (n=5) athletes were represented, a range of years of involvement and diversity in level of athlete competitiveness.

Three stage coding of the data was undertaken (Gratton, & Jones, 2010). Key themes from the preliminary findings include; personal introduction/invitation being vital to para-swimming engagement, the need for specialized attention during the learn to swim phase, the impact of coaching knowledge of para-sport and interpersonal skills on swimmer experience; the significance of classification, importance of meaningful competitive opportunities and challenge of limited resources. Participants had limited knowledge of the LTAD. The link between the lived experience of para-swimming and the LTAD pathway appears to be quite weak, as participants’ level of competition did not match their stage of training, participants did not train the prescribed amounts (number of sessions or hours per week) and participants tended to move through their development quicker than the model prescribed. The findings could assist sport managers in producing a development pathway that more accurately reflects the experiences of para-swimmers, which may in turn inform other para-sport development models. This can in turn help para sport organizations improve the supports and resources offered to athletes by creating a more aligned development system that will help increase the likelihood of athletes remaining in the system (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2008).