"Belonging is Key": Lessons Learned from Para Swimmers’ Development Experiences

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The Paralympic Games have grown steadily since its inception in 1960, with the 2016 Rio Games hosting a record breaking 4,328 athletes (International Paralympic Committee, n.d.). Despite the growth of the Paralympic Games and para sport, the trajectory of para athletes along the developmental pathway remains unclear, and concerns have been raised about the appropriateness of development approaches (Holt, 2010). In Canada, the Long Term Athlete Development Model (LTAD) has been embraced by national sporting organizations (NSOs) and utilized as a guide to create a structure of progressive, developmentally appropriate skill procurement for athletes (Balyi, Way, & Higgs, 2013). While the Awareness and First Involvement stages were added to the LTAD to make it more applicable to para athletes, concerns remain regarding the appropriateness of utilizing the LTAD with this population (Balyi, Way, & Higgs, 2013). These concerns include the model being based on poorly defined outcomes; a lack of flexibility for comprehending sport development planning; and not providing consideration for the unique developmental differences of athletes with a disability (Dehghansai, Lemez, Wattie, & Baker, 2017; Paradis & Misener, 2018).

Therefore, this study sought to understand the developmental experiences of para swimmers, with a focus on the cultural factors that impact these experiences. A grounded theory ethnographic approach was taken as the lead researcher served as a team manager for the Canadian swim team at the 2019 Parapan Am Games. Data collection included one-on-one semi-structured interviews with athletes and the head coach, as well as participant observations at training camps, and at the Games. Findings revealed that a feeling of belonging, whether present or not, had an impact on the development experience of para swimmers. Within the para sport context, Evans and colleagues (2018) furthered that “para sport participants develop relationships and gain group memberships that underpin a sense of connection and acceptance, as well as contribution to shared tasks or goals” (p. 86). Belongingness can be in connection to membership of a small group or a team or to a larger sport community such as a league (Evans, et al., 2018). Having a sense of belonging has been identified as an essential component of the human experience (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Participants who described having a strong sense of belonging were within the age categories typical of club level competitive swimmers (8-18), and were members of teams with other para athletes. In contrast, participants who described feeling a lack of belonging were training in programs with no other para athletes and were older than the typical club level swimmer (19+). Additionally, participants expressed concerns of belonging within the broader context of competitive swimming in Canada. Sport managers working in diverse contexts, such as para sport, with athletes of varying ages, developmental stages and life experiences, could use these findings in designing accepting and inclusive sport programming that fosters a sense of belonging for all participants, as well as, inform future para sport development models (Anderson-Butcher, Riley, Amorose, Iachini & Wade-Mdivanian, 2014; Warner & Dixon, 2011).