

STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ATHLETIC CAREER PATHWAYS IN PARALYMPIC SPORT: FROM PARTICIPATION TO EXCELLENCE



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ABSTRACT

Research questions: Underpinned by the existing athlete development models to gather insights into the different developmental phases, this study explored how athletic career pathways in Paralympic sport are developed by identifying and describing disability-specific characteristics that influence each developmental phase.

Research methods: Para athlete development was explored through the lens of 32 stakeholders from the Brazilian Paralympic sporting context who participated in semi-structured interviews.

Results and findings: Thematic analysis identified six developmental phases and the specific characteristics that outline athletic career pathways in Paralympic sport (i.e., attraction, retention, competition, talent ID & development, elite, (voluntary and involuntary) retirement). Results ratified the complexity and individuality of Para athlete development, highlighting that the differences according to impairment groups, an early or late start in the sport and the classification systems, have implications for the development of the phases of athletic pathways in Para sport.

Implications: The findings lend weight toward the need for models other than those traditionally used for able-bodied athletes; rather, Para athlete development models need a disability-specific approach.

This is a summary of a published paper that should be referred as follows:

Patatas, J.M., De Bosscher, V., Derom, I., Winckler, C. (2020). Stakeholders' perceptions of athletic career pathways in Paralympic sport: From participation to excellence. *Sport in Society*, published online, DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2020.1789104.

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STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

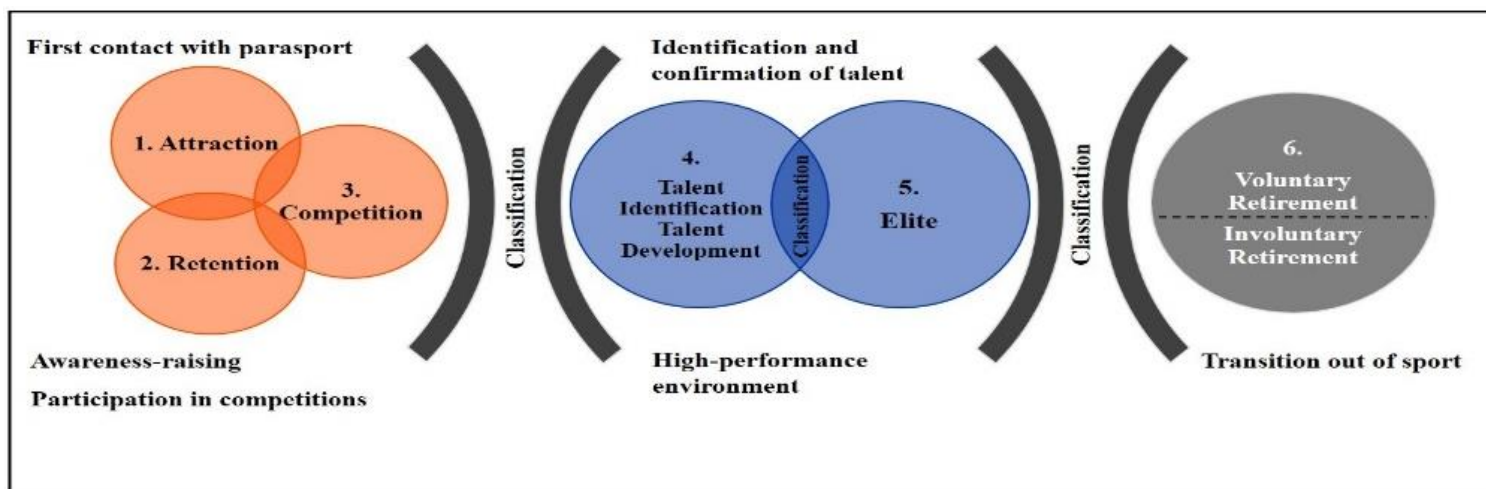
- Given the heterogeneity of Para athletes' profiles, Para sport pathways should be regarded with fluid and dynamic approaches that embrace the particularities of each impairment group.
- The definitions of athletic career pathway phases presented in this study can be applied towards the genesis of appropriate evidence-based models for Para athlete' development.
- The classification system(s) was identified by the stakeholders as an influential factor that shapes Para athlete development and progressions in each phase. The trajectory of Para sport athletes might vary according to their sport class.

IMPLICATIONS

- Delivering a disability-specific approach and understanding the related nuances of Para sport (e.g. the classification system(s), type and nature of impairment) are essential when considering multiple pathways to expertise and designing models.
- Understanding Para athletes' trajectories in sport may inform and enhance (inter)national sport governing bodies' strategies to promote Para athlete' development, which might lead to an increase in general participation, competition, and success at the elite level.
- As recognition of Para sport increases, identifying an appropriate athlete development pathway can be an asset to grow the number of participants and justify appropriate funding allocation.

Figure 1: Initial conceptual framework of the developmental phases of athletic career pathways in Paralympic sport.

The athletic career pathways in Paralympic sport can be divided into six key phases which cover the various areas of Para athlete development: (1) Attraction; (2) Retention; (3) Competition; (4) Talent Identification and Talent Development; (5) Elite; and (6) (voluntary and involuntary) Retirement.



- **Attraction** is the phase in which athletes are recruited to participate in sport. It is characterised as the first contact with Para sport. It can happen either during rehabilitation or as a means of sports activities to children or adults with impairments.
- **Retention** can be considered as awareness-raising phase, due to the need to promote Para sport-specific programmes to increase awareness in clubs to retain Para athletes. In some cases, can be interconnected with the attraction and competition phases.
- **Competition** is an intermediate phase leading towards talent identification since, most often, Para athletes are identified as potential talents during the athlete's participation in competitions. It is a characteristic of parasport that the athletes start participating in competitions early on in their pathways.
- **Talent ID & Development** phase involve identifying and confirming a potential Para athlete talent.
- **Elite** phase's focus lays on the achievement of national and international sporting success through the implementation of policies aiming to support the athletes.
- **(Voluntary and Involuntary) Retirement** represents the transition out of the sport. Some athletes are 'forced' to terminate their athletic career due to Para sport-specific reasons, i.e., as impairment progression, (re)declassification (meaning an involuntary retirement).

It is possible to understand the Para sport system as a 'classification-oriented system', meaning that – apart from determining competition and athlete support policy programmes – classification can be seen as a strategic and fundamental determinant for successful Para athletes' career pathways.

Implications of the classification in Para athlete development

- The factors of particular sport classes (e.g., few athletes competing in a class), a low technical level of athletes in a given class, or how the sports events are distributed and (not) included in the Paralympic Games programme can serve as critical parameters for talent identification.
- It seems that, in order to develop athletes in Paralympic sports, one should not look only at the sports, as in the able-bodied system, but within the sports and the intricacies of the classification system(s).
- It is important to note the potential negative effects of this prioritisation through classification as it could potentially lead to less support for some sports or impairment types, such as athletes with more severe impairments. Prioritisation should be implemented with caution, to avoid raising further issues surrounding the in/exclusion of 'impaired' bodies within the Paralympic movement.