

Women, Disability and Sport

Unheard Voices

by Lisa M. Olenik, Joan M. Matthews, and Robert D. Steadward

Dans cet article, les auteures nous font part de témoignages d'athlètes qui présentent un handicap et qui participent aux sports d'élite. Une telle approche signifie un pas important dans le processus d'identification des barrières et des inégalités qui existent dans les sports pour personnes handicapées.

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Disabled women struggle with both the oppression of being women in male-dominated societies and the oppression of being disabled in societies dominated by the able-bodied

— Susan Wendell

Women with a disability aspiring to high levels of sport competition often face double discrimination associated with disability and gender. The social construction of disability has been influenced by a variety of interrelated factors which restrict the way in which society attaches meaning to disability. Included among these factors are western society's cultural rules, economics, and political climate. Likewise, the woman with a disability attaches her own meaning relative to the nature of her impairment, her socio-economic status, ethnicity, sexuality, and specific attitudes, experiences, and expectations developed through interactions with others. Having a disability and being in the world of sport are compounded by systemic barriers associated with being female and participating in a male dominated sports arena.

At the elite level, disability sport

has grown and developed at a pace unprecedented in sport history. The Paralympic Games are the pinnacle of elite competition for athletes with a disability and the second largest sporting event in the world—second only to the Olympic Games. The 1996 Atlanta Paralympic Games will bear witness to 4000 elite athletes representing over 115 nations, in 19 sporting events.

Despite the accomplishments of the Paralympic movement, however, serious inequities continue to exist for women. Participant numbers have traditionally been skewed, in that two to three times more men than women compete at the Paralympic level (IPC; Sherrill). Professionals within the adapted physical activity field have speculated on the barriers which exist for women with a disability in sport (Sherrill; Sherrill *et al.*). These authors suggest that barriers to participation have developed from historical conditions which include: classification systems that are insensitive to women; too few women involved in the power structures of the disability sports movement; and an under-representation of women athletes in wheelchair sport, the latter of which often receives the most attention by the sport media. To date, there is little, if any, empirical research which examines the issues and concerns from the perspective of women athletes with a disability.

The purpose of this research was to permit the voice of women athletes with a disability who participate in elite sport to be heard. By illuminating the issues and experiences of the female athlete, we can begin to reveal her view of reality within sport and the context within which she participates. Research of this nature is the first step in the process of identifying and addressing the inequities and barriers in disability sport facing present and future female athletes.

Gender inequity has been identified in previous work within the able-bodied sport world (Eccles and Harold; Hall; Theberge). To date, an analysis of issues or barriers for women with a disability involved in sport has not been published. Simply generalizing from able-bodied sport to disability sport, ignores, denies, or erases the significance of women's experiences within disability sport. Although issues for both groups may be similar, simply accepting current theoretical models of issues for able-bodied athletes (male or female) and applying them to women with a disability negates the experience for all women with disabilities and ignores the historical and political context of their experiences.

In this study, we placed the women athlete with a disability at the centre of the research as an active agent in the production of knowledge surrounding participatory issues. This basic feminist strategy has been notably successful in history, literature, and anthropology (Stacey and Thorne). Our objective was not to make generalizations to all women athletes with a disability based on an analysis of a representative sample, rather it was to gather comparative impressions of their experiences as elite athletes.

Five female athletes (informants) who competed at the 1994 Lillehammer Winter Paralympics were interviewed. Each athlete was from a different country within Europe and North America. They were between the ages of 24 and 35, and had been competing in Nordic and alpine skiing from two to 14 years and had a variety of disabilities including: spinal cord injury, brachial plexus paralysis, congenital visual impairment, and lower limb amputation. Participation in this study was voluntary. Each athlete was asked, under informed consent and assurance of strict

confidentiality, to describe her experiences and discuss issues that were important to her in today's sport society and culture. The study was limited to those who used English as their first or second language. The interview framework comprised four open-ended questions related to initiation, participation, and involvement in elite competitive sport.

Many issues emerged which were captured in over 20 categories relative to context of

participation or non-participation in sport. These categories were then collapsed into seven major themes: sport appeal; participatory and

competitive opportunities sustaining participation; acceptance of self; acceptance by society; interpersonal support; and, institutional support. The following discussion presents a brief synopsis of each theme, with an example of the athletes' experiences.

According to the athletes, sports that are more appealing to women are not promoted by governing organizations to the same extent as traditionally male oriented sports. Likewise, they felt that sports traditionally popular with able-bodied women were not necessarily the "sport of choice" for women athletes with a disability. As one athlete articulated, "we have a different biology and history; it is wrong to assume that we have the same sport interests and expectations as an able-bodied women athlete." All the athletes determined that their choice to participate in elite sport was influenced by a "hunger" for the challenges and excitement of competition. It was often stated that the disability sport movement, including athletes, should take more responsibility for increasing awareness of the diverse sport opportunities available to women with a disability, in order to make them more appealing to participants.

Participatory and competitive opportunities

There was a perceived lack of opportunity for women and girls with a disability at the grassroots level. Most of the athletes noted that their involvement in elite disability sport came later in life, after attempts at involvement in able-bodied sport or when a significant other, already established as an athlete, encouraged them to become involved in sport. Opportunities were rarely presented to them via disability sport organizations, and most athletes as children were not aware of organized sport or recreational opportunities.

Sustaining participation

When these women were provided with sport opportunities they were frequently forced to choose between livelihood and sport. If they selected sport, financial independence was sacrificed which resulted in a reliance on other family members and/or significant others for monetary support. Because of the financial constraints, it was not feasible for them to either employ coaches or receive sport specific training within their community. Therefore, most were self-taught or self-trained in their respective sports.

Two different types of motivational experiences existed for the athletes: intrinsic and extrinsic. Initially, attempts at sport and physical activity were motivated primarily by an outside source, such as family, friends, or significant other. However, once they began to compete, an intrinsic need began to develop. Many of the women stated that once they became athletes, they found themselves playing numerous roles: as advocate for the disability sports movement and people with a disability; athlete; teacher; and, role-model. Initially, these activities reinforced their participation in sport. Eventually, however, the informants confessed to a more internal incentive, in that the need to compete, win, and express themselves in a physical realm took precedence over the other

roles. One of the athletes indicated that she had adopted a "no mercy" attitude towards helping other athletes in their development, which allowed her to focus entirely on her own performance.

Acceptance of self

Acceptance of self, as a female athlete with a disability, took a variety of forms. Whereas two of the athletes felt that accepting their disability gave them the freedom needed to focus on sport and other aspects of their lives, others stated that they perceived themselves as not having a "disability." They felt that accepting society's label of "disabled" implied that they were accepting limitations commonly associated with disability.

Acceptance by society

Discussion surrounding acceptance often included the concept of normalcy. The athletes stated that one of the reasons many women did not participate in disability sport was a reflection on society in that their activities were not regarded as a "normal" avenue of sport. It was generally perceived that participation in disability sport meant that many women were possibly reinforcing an image of being "different" or "disabled." In order to achieve their respective levels

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of success, the athletes felt that a conception of themselves as "normal" was important for crossing some of the barriers faced by women with disabilities. Most of the athletes felt that society did not perceive disability sport as "normal" or "real" sport. However, all of the athletes felt strongly that with more coverage and promotion of Paralympic events, this

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perception would eventually change. They also agreed that today's media presented disability sport events as a human interest stories rather than elite level sports competition.

All the athletes agreed that the failure of society to recognize them as "athletes" was confirmed in their daily interactions with people. For example, they talked of being pitied; of being told they were extremely brave; and, being wished "a nice vacation,"



Photo: Courtesy of International Paralympic Committee

when preparing to leave for the Lillehammer Paralympic Games.

Interpersonal support

The athletes indicated that a support network was extremely necessary for participation in elite sport. Each one indicated that if it were not for one influential person in their lives, they would not be involved today in their respective sports. Family was one of the most important and significant factors in their choice to participate in sport. A spouse, or significant other, often played a predominant role in persuading the informants to become involved in elite sport, and reinforced their desire to continue in sport. Friends, coaches and adapted physical educators (teachers), were also mentioned as important figures.

Institutional support

Interestingly, the medical profes-

sion was not considered part of the athletes' support network. When mentioned, it was usually in a negative context, often as a deterrent from sport participation for women. When sport was promoted by physicians, it was viewed solely as a therapeutic tool, with a distinct hesitation to challenge the athlete to extend her physical limits.

Within all of the interviews, there appeared a genuine concern about

the structure of sports organizations, and resulting decisions made for women athletes with a disability. Sport organizations governing sport for athletes with a disability were not perceived favourably by athletes. They identified problems with: classification systems; rules and rule changes; unqualified coaches; and, untrained referees and officials. It was felt that sport organizations had been

designed for the able-bodied male population, and were not specific for women athletes with a disability. A general feeling among the athletes was that among professionals, limited awareness existed of the interaction between sport and disability. One athlete stated that she had "trained under coaches who were experts in disabilities; coaches who knew much about sport; but she had yet to have a coach with the combined knowledge."

The educational system was reported as largely responsible for limiting their participation in sport. Generally, their physical education teachers lacked knowledge and experience in integrating students with disabilities into traditional curriculum. They indicated that the views of their teachers toward their disability were pessimistic, and modifications of activities were rarely if ever attempted. When involved, their "participation" in sport was in the capacity of time-keepers, score-keepers or

observers. This learned helplessness was reinforced by the medical profession who provided written excuses prohibiting participation in physical activity and physical education classes. All of these combined factors resulted in a self fulfilling prophecy, with these women unable to perform the requisite skills needed to participate in a variety of sports and physical activity later in life.

Future directions and recommendations

The foregoing issues appear to be symptomatic of a broader spectrum of issues pertaining to the involvement of women in disability sport. Why is it that women's issues are becoming more salient, recognized, respected, and acted upon in the able-bodied sport and non-sport world, and not in disability sport? Based on the experiences of these authors and informants, the factors of likely importance include: sheer lack of numbers of female athletes and administrators (less voices); few avenues of expression for the female athlete with a disability; societal assumptions relative to disability and sport; and, finally, inertia from the effect of traditional expectations of being both disabled and female.

A lack of representation of women, both as athletes and as administrators, in disability sport continues to hamper efforts at increasing awareness of issues unique to the female athlete with a disability. Systemic support for the female athlete must be identified, increased and reinforced by the governing bodies of the disability sport movement. This support includes sensitivity to financial, time, and cultural constraints specifically experienced by women with a disability who have little institutional or interpersonal backing in general. Failure to sustain the participation of today's female athlete with a disability, will result in a decrease in participation numbers tomorrow

Empowering the female athlete to be an active participant in the process of advocacy and promotion of dis-

ability sport is difficult unless there are opportunities provided for female athletes to unite, share, and validate their experiences. There needs to be feasible avenues for the female athlete to address her concerns to the decision-makers. This would encourage a united political front that would represent all female athletes, regardless of disability label, or sport affiliation.

In order to counteract societal as-

sumptions of disability and sport, exposure must become a top priority for organizers of sporting events and competition. The media should continually be pressured to report the sport story, rather than the human interest story. An emphasis must be placed on educating physical educators, coaches, and decision-makers of sports organizations, as to the benefits associated with sport for people with disabilities. Likewise, the disability sport movement must develop standards for training and certifying coaches, trainers and sports officials.

Finally, if disability sport is to continue to flourish, we must continually examine the barriers that exist for marginalized groups such as women athletes. Double jeopardy exists for the athlete who is both female and disabled, which warrants attention by professionals, academics, and feminists in sport. There exists in our global society, a moral obligation to continue to expose the experience and most importantly to bring the

voice of the female athlete with a disability to the public consciousness. This is particularly important in view of the inherent physiological, psychological, and sociological value of sport to people with disabilities. The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) has identified the issue of representation of women in the Paralympic movement as one of the highest priority. Towards this end, the IPC Sport Science Sub-Committee is supporting initiatives to institute a line of feminist research in this area. This study has provided the impetus for three additional studies currently being completed on women, disability and sport. It seems the Paralympic movement is listening to voices previously unheard.

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Lisa Olenik is a teacher and researcher in adapted physical education. She has presented nationally and internationally on sociological and physiological issues related to adapted physical activity. She is currently completing her doctoral dissertation on women, disability, and sport.

Joan Matthews is actively involved in the development of athletic therapy programs in disability sport. As a doctoral candidate at the University of Alberta, she is currently developing a national injury registry and focussing her research on the female athlete.

Robert Steadward is an author, professor, coach, sport scientist and administrator. He has provided leadership and support for numerous research projects dealing with marginalized groups within the sport world. He holds the

prestigious position of President of the International Paralympic Committee.

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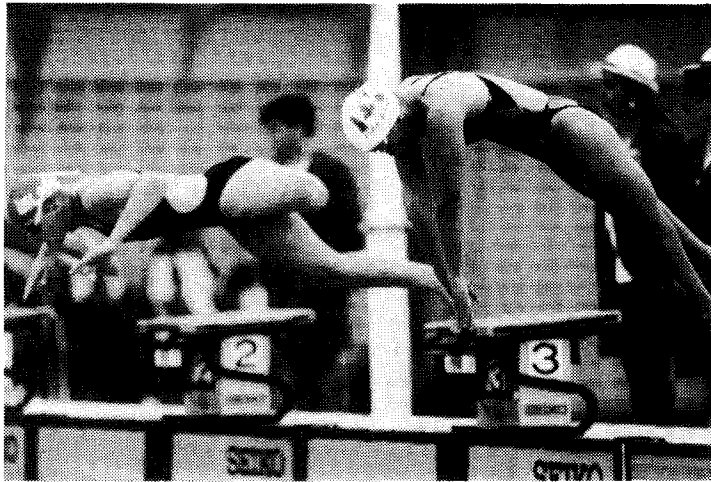


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