

Coaching Athletes with a Disability

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Why This Manual?

People with a disability who get involved in sport are first and foremost athletes, and they have the same basic needs, drive, and dreams as any other athlete. And, for them as well, coaching is a crucial factor to the quality of their sport experience.

Many coaches who have never worked with athletes with a disability feel that, to be effective, they need highly specialized skills, knowledge, or training. This is a misperception. In fact, most coaches who work with athletes with a disability soon discover that coaching these participants is fundamentally no different than coaching any other athlete. The challenge is to truly understand the person, to focus on their abilities, and to see what they can achieve.

Generally speaking, most coaches already possess the necessary technical skills and knowledge required to coach athletes with a disability. Typically, the only piece missing in their coaching “toolkit” is a basic understanding of a few key aspects that are unique to people with a disability. The purpose of this manual is to provide grassroots coaches who have never worked with athletes with a disability with basic information, guidelines, and tips that will assist in creating conditions for effective participation and inclusion. While some specialized information on disabilities is provided, this document is first and foremost a generic resource.

As such, it focuses primarily on aspects that are likely to be encountered by all coaches, regardless of the sport or the disability. Where necessary, more technically oriented information can be obtained through National Sport Organizations or by contacting organizations that offer specific programs for athletes with a disability.

The themes covered in this publication have been carefully chosen by a group of experts who have extensive experience in sport for people with a disability. This group includes coaches, athletes, scientists, program leaders, and sport administrators. The information has been organized in a way that should be user-friendly for the reader, addressing frankly and openly some situations that are unique to coaching athletes with a disability. Testimonials based on “real life experiences” are also provided throughout, which should help in illustrating and reinforcing key messages.

Many coaches have expressed how working with athletes with a disability has enhanced their coaching abilities as they were compelled to see things differently and be creative. We hope that this resource will give coaches, parents, and teachers alike some practical guidelines on how to welcome athletes with a disability into sport programs, and make their sport experience an enjoyable and rewarding one.

John Bales
President
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President
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Mary Bluechardt
Director, Coach Development
Special Olympics Canada



Stages coaches may go through when working for the first time with an athlete with a disability

General remarks

As with any athlete, the best way for persons with a disability to develop sport skills is under the direction of a qualified coach. Coaching athletes or participants with a disability is fundamentally no different from coaching able-bodied people.

“The core element in coaching is to determine where people are, assess where they need to get to, and find a path down that road,” says Colin Higgs. “The basic issues are much the same with persons with a disability.”

Initially, however, it is not unusual for coaches who have never worked with persons with a disability to worry about whether they can provide the right type of support, be it at the grassroots or at more advanced competitive levels. There may be situations where coaches may not yet be totally confident with their own knowledge or abilities; there may also be questions about safety and about how to communicate properly with a person with a disability.

This section briefly outlines some stages that coaches may go through when working with athletes with a disability for the first time. Coaches should know that it is normal to experience some unease initially, but that they can go fairly quickly beyond these first reactions to do what they do best: coach.

Stage 1 – First reactions

When the occasion presents itself to coach an athlete with a disability for the first time, a coach's first reaction could be fear, or worry about speaking to the person with a disability in terms that might be inappropriate. Some coaches may be asking themselves what they can do, and have doubts about their own ability to provide adequate coaching support. Others may have a tendency to focus too much on the disability at first, to question how much a person with a disability can accomplish in the playing field, or to have concerns about safety. A person new to coaching athletes with an intellectual disability may also question the level of understanding of the athlete, or be concerned about behavioural issues.

“There's sometimes apprehension in the early stages,” says James Hood. “It's really a matter of coming back to what you know as a coach, and experimenting with it.”

Finally, there may be concerns about the logistics of integrating athletes with a disability into a program, the reactions of other participants or their parents, or even the impact on team or individual performances.

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Stage 2 – Making assumptions

Beyond the first reactions, many coaches may make various assumptions about what persons with a disability can or cannot do.

Rather than speculating about the athlete's capabilities, coaches should engage in a frank dialogue. Communication is a key component in any successful coach–athlete relationship, perhaps even more when athletes with a disability are involved. When persons with a disability decide to join organized sport, most have accepted their disability, and are at a stage where many of the initial issues have been addressed. In general, they are also open-minded about discussing personal issues and concerns, and this can help coaches better understand their abilities and motivations.

"I just ask athletes what they feel they can and can't do," says Jean Laroche. "At first, there is certainly a worry about talking to them openly about personal situations and their disability. You can't be scared to ask them what they think and what they feel can make them better in their sport. Remember, they have just taken a big step by joining organized sport. It's important at first to work with their abilities. You only learn about limitations later on."

Some people may also assume that coaching athletes with a disability increases their liability. There is no need to be any more concerned about liability issues when working with athletes with a disability than when working with any other athletes.



Stage 3 – Accommodating the situation

Once the coach overcomes those initial assumptions and learns more about the person with a disability, the general conclusion is that there is not much difference in the same basic skills used for able-bodied athletes. "What the coaches tell me is that the necessary modifications or adjustments were not extensive" says Mary Bluechardt. "It is the fear of the unknown at first – wanting to do the right thing but not feeling comfortable about what to do or how to do it."

Swimming coach James Hood has been floored on several occasions by how swimmers with a disability have surmounted their disability and surprised even themselves. "You need to be aware of their capabilities, but I try not to put limitations when they shouldn't be there," he says. "I generally follow that philosophy. For example, if a swimmer comes in and says 'I can't kick in the water,' my challenge is to find a way to prove the contrary if I know it's possible. You must emphasize their qualities to help them reach and sometimes even exceed their goals."

Stage 4 – Getting into the technical aspects

After going through the previous stages, most coaches become curious about the technical aspects of coaching athletes with a disability and reach a degree of comfort in the process.

When this occurs, coaches seek and usually find answers to questions such as how the performance of the specific athlete can be improved? They say that reaching this stage is a major victory. The disability is no longer a factor, and the focus is on coaching and on helping the person improve his or her athletic abilities.



Comments from expert coaches

Jean Laroche has coached some of Canada's greatest wheelchair athletes in track and field, including André Viger and Diane Roy. He has also coached able-bodied athletes in several sports, including hockey and soccer. "My first experience with athletes with a disability was a surprise; I didn't really know what to do," Laroche says. "I really had to sit down and learn about their situation." Laroche says that coaches must have the right attitude when coaching a person with a disability for the first time. "You have to be open-minded," he says. "For my part, I didn't have any preconceived ideas. I tried to work with the abilities they did have and I treated them right off the bat as athletes. In able-bodied sports, a kayaker doesn't train the same way as a high jumper. So for me, that's how I viewed the situation."

Peter Eriksson, an award-winning national team and international wheelchair racing coach whose stable of athletes includes quintuple Canadian Paralympic champion Chantal Petitclerc and world record holder Jeff Adams, says that coaches should simply remember at first that they are coaches. Eriksson has coached athletes to more than 100 medals at the Paralympic Games over the last 20 years. "You're not there to be a nurse or a helper," says Eriksson, the first Canadian wheelchair coach to be certified at the highest level of the National Coaching Certification Program in track and field. "It's important to do what you would with any other athlete at first, such as determining their fitness levels, identifying what skills need to be improved, and educating them about good training. You should look at coaching the person with a disability as an opportunity to help her or him develop in the sport."

Dino Pedicelli has been coaching athletes with an intellectual disability for over 25 years. During this time, he has coached virtually all Special Olympics sports, but he now focuses primarily on floor hockey. "These athletes must be treated the same way any other athletes of the same age would be. Adults must not be dealt with as though they were children" he insists. "It is some times necessary for the coach to adjust, and to talk at a level they can understand, but this only means that instructions must be simple and clear". Pedicelli describes his approach this way: "As a coach, I like to give the athletes a chance to show what they can do. Then, my job is to design activities to improve their skills and their ability to perform".





First contact

This section offers coaches practical suggestions for establishing a positive first contact with athletes with a disability and for effectively initiating the more technically oriented work.

Three main themes are developed:

- welcoming the person with a disability to the program
- finding out more about the disability
- assessing fitness, coordination, and skill level

Welcoming the person with a disability to the program

First impressions must be positive

First impressions can influence anyone who joins a sport program: new participants may ask themselves whether they'll fit in or have enough basic skills to meet the expectations of the coach and the group. Those questions also run through the minds of many persons with a disability. However, persons with a disability who join a sport program are generally moving into a new phase of their lives — ready to explore new challenges and eager to develop new skills.

Making a new person feel welcomed into a sport program is not much different from making anyone feel welcomed into your house. Each person with a disability must be accepted as an individual, and the wheelchair, prosthesis, guide dog, or level of understanding should not be seen as a barrier.

"It must be athlete and sport first," says Patrick Jarvis. "For example, the mindset should be that this person is a sprinter who happens to be an amputee. This basketball player happens to play in a chair. The key is getting past the disability. The passion for sport should be the common ground. Sport is the communication mechanism."

Introduce the athlete with a disability and create conditions for successful integration

When a person with a disability is joining an integrated program, it is important for the coach to inform the other participants ahead of time, and to remind them that everyone — able or disabled — has the right to participate in sport. The coach should then introduce the person with a disability to the sport environment and initiate interaction. It may also be useful to explain what your program is about and how the athlete with a disability will fit into the program.

"The coach should receive the information from the person with a disability of what they can and can't do in terms of mobility," says Ozzie Sawicki. "It's a discussion that you then pass on to the group, and we can determine what areas need to be addressed and designate people to help out if necessary. But it should be remembered that a lot of persons with a disability are very independent and don't want help. If they need it, they'll ask for it."

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"Kids are kids," says James Hood. "They stare and can make fun. So it's important for the coach to build a positive relationship with a person with a disability right from the start and to lead by example."

In an integrated program, a person with a disability may initially be the centre of attention. In this case, the personality of the participant can be a primary factor in whether she or he will have a positive first experience. Some may be shy and won't enjoy being in the spotlight, even if ever so briefly. Others who are more extroverted may be keen and determined to show that they can keep pace with their able-bodied counterparts. In other cases, the person with a disability may lack sport experience and need additional time to catch up.

Ozzie Sawicki also points out that at the youngest age groups, kids with a disability can be left out of the social circle. "The young kids can be hesitant at first because they are unfamiliar with coping with that kind of situation," Sawicki says. "But once they figure it out, they are usually the friendliest bunch."

"I introduce newcomers to some of my better athletes," says Bob Schrader. "I'm lucky enough to have some Paralympians, so that's a motivator to help them understand that they aren't the only ones — that they can do the sport and could excel at it."

In wheelchair basketball, players come from three different sources: children who come through junior wheelchair sport programs, athletes from other sports, able or disabled, and those who are simply interested in trying wheelchair basketball. "Those are three very different backgrounds. When we get new people, our goal is to give them a positive and physically satisfying experience, so they'll come back," says Tim Frick, who has also coached the sport to Rick Hansen and Terry Fox. "You like to get the newcomers to participate with every other person in the group during practice, and hopefully they can chat during breaks. I like to make sure that a new player is paired off with a veteran."

For participants with intellectual disabilities, use developmentally appropriate activities

There may be a misperception that people with an intellectual disability who participate in sport are mostly children. It is always important that coaches focus on the person's capabilities. Age-appropriate games and activities should be at the forefront of the coaches planning. The specific skills required for a given game or activity may have to be modified to meet the athletes' developmental abilities.

"It is inappropriate to place adults with an intellectual disability in programs for children, says Mary Bluechardt. Athletes with intellectual disabilities need to be placed in programs with peers of similar age. But at the same time coaches must be prepared to modify skills and drills to address developmental needs."

Initial misconceptions can be overcome

Parents of able-bodied children may sometimes balk at the inclusion of persons with a disability in their children's sport program. The feeling may be that the person with a disability can slow down the progress of the able-bodied group. However, there are enough integration success stories to ease any parental worries. And the bottom line is that everyone has the right to participate in sport programs.

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"It's important that the other participants and their parents know that things are not going to change because you have person with a disability in the program," says Mary Bluehardt. "It won't change the quality of the program, the coach won't lower the standards, and the coach won't give all the attention to the person with a disability."

Finding out more about the disability

Must knows about disabilities

The different types of disabilities are grouped into broad categories such as mobility impairment, sensory impairment, and intellectual impairment.

Disabilities are either congenital (i.e., present at birth) or acquired (i.e., not present at birth, but acquired through a traumatic injury or an illness).

Providing extensive information about each type of disability is beyond the scope of this document. However, coaches should aim to develop a reasonably good understanding of the disability or disabilities of the athletes that they coach. Some basic information, including specific safety considerations and recommendations to coaches, are presented in Appendix 1. Interested readers can also find out more about specific disabilities by contacting some of the organizations listed in Appendix 6.

Get information that concerns the person's ability to perform in sport

Generally, children with a disability have limitations from congenital conditions such as spina bifida, cerebral palsy, blindness or intellectual disabilities, while people who became disabled as adults were involved in accidents or were afflicted with a major illness. For the coach, it can be important to know whether a disability was acquired or congenital. A person who acquired a disability in an accident may possess skills from previous sport experience and may know about training but now need to relearn some skills. Someone born with a disability has typically adjusted to how his or her body operates; however, sport opportunities may have been limited, and as a result some motor or sport-specific skills may be delayed.

Persons with a disability have usually gone through rehabilitation or therapy during which they have provided their life story on numerous occasions to nurses, doctors, and others. Sharing personal information about their disability is generally not an issue. "I don't think you need to go into details about how someone got injured" says Colin Higgs. "But a good question would be how the disability affects the ability to balance or whether the athlete needs more side support – that kind of stuff ... information that concerns their ability to perform in sport."

Behavioural patterns may differ greatly amongst persons with an intellectual disability. Assessment methods are available to help coaches identify the situations that may cause changes in behaviour, and information is available on specific strategies to effectively manage these situations.

Some athletes with a disability may also need medication. Generally, the medication issues for people with a disability are the same as with able-bodied people. For example, medication may be required for diabetes, asthma, a heart condition, seizures, or some other health-related problem.



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Be with them, observe, and ask what they feel they can and cannot do

Just being with the athletes and watching how they conduct themselves and react to situations on and off the playing field is a good way to know the individuals, says Jean Laroche. "It's important to be with the person often, especially at the beginning. That can help you pick up tips to adjust your training methods for this athlete at both the technical and psychological levels."

Initially, the person with a disability (or, in the case of young children, a parent) is the best judge of what the individual can or cannot do on the playing field. The best way to get these answers is to ask. "They know best what skills they can and can't perform," says Colin Higgs.

Some athletes with an intellectual disability can easily explain their needs and objectives to a coach, while others may not be as verbal or as clear. Therefore, it may be essential for a coach to talk to a parent or guardian to learn more about the disability.

Coach Peter Eriksson keeps the focus on sport as much as possible. "I don't even know how some of my athletes became disabled," he says. "It has no bearing for me. The only things I really ask are injury level and classification to ensure fair competition. The rest is about what their goals and dreams are."

Establish goals and objectives that are realistic but not limiting

Persons with a disability will have goals and expectations when they enter a sport program for the first time. It is important for the coach to discuss with the person how those goals will be established and realized. Goals have to be realistic and achievable, but not limiting for the individual. The slogan "See the potential, not the limitations" should apply. Everybody has the right to take risks and to fail, and this applies to persons with a disability as much as to any other athletes.

For teenagers and adults with a disability, coaches need to know the person's objectives and get a feel for why she or he is getting involved in sport. Jean Laroche says that he has had persons with a disability come to his office saying that they want to be world champions in five years. "There's a lot of hard work for an adult or teenager starting out, and they should know that they can take their time; there is no rush," says Laroche. "They need to get through the steps to get better, and that can be slow at some levels. Everybody's different."

Coaching tips

Bring the athlete on a tour of the surroundings where practice and competitions will take place and explain the functions of the equipment that the athlete may use.

If there is another practice going on, let the athlete eavesdrop into that session so that she or he gets a sensory, auditory, or visual feeling.

Encourage the athletes to educate you about what they can and cannot do, and work slowly to extend the intensity, duration, and complexity of their athletic activities.

Like able-bodied people, persons with a disability may learn faster or may be motivated by watching videos of others or themselves.

Persons with visual or with cognitive impairment may require a more tactile teaching methods, and will learn primarily through repetition of exercises.

Assessing fitness, coordination, and skill level

General remarks

An assessment of the physical, cognitive, and social aspects of athletes with disabilities is essential in order to provide them with adequate support and sound programming.

An athlete with a physical disability may have difficulty with movements, a low fitness level, or hyperactivity. Intellectual disabilities may lead to learning delays, short attention span, difficulty with abstract concepts, and difficulty with transfer of learning. Social aspects of athletes with disabilities are similar to those of able-bodied athletes, such as resistance to change, difficulty with transition and routines, difficulty following standard behaviours, frustration, and fear of failure.

Use a process similar to that used with able-bodied athletes, but be creative

One of the first challenges a coach can face with an athlete with a disability is determining the person's fitness level, coordination skills, and natural sport instincts. As with other matters, the process is similar to that with able-bodied athletes. "When I'm evaluating persons with a disability, I'm looking at their abilities" says Bob Schrader. However, the coach must sometimes be creative while implementing or devising tests to ensure they are compatible for the various groups and levels of disabilities.

Regardless of the disability, certified coaches are the best people to teach sports to athletes with a disability. The coach has the best eye for analysis and the best mind for creative change, error detection, and correction.

Tim Frick, head coach, national women's wheelchair basketball team

Disability or not, athletes should be assessed based on the demands of their sport. Dean Kozak recalls that, in goalball, a sport for the visually impaired, there was a lot of training similar to other sports with different conditioning components. "The coaches would assess our power like that of a football player or bobsledder, but the conditioning would be assessed more like that of a volleyball player," Kozak says. "Some Paralympic sports have unique demands, so a different approach may be needed to assess athletes."

"It's all about adaptation," says Kozak. "For someone in a wheelchair, assessing the athlete is going to be sport specific. For someone with a visual impairment, mobility is not necessarily an issue, but that depends sometimes on the level of vision. If I had to run between lines, then I would throw a towel on those lines so I could decipher them. Sometimes you just need to make small tweaks to the drills."



An athlete's perspective

Four-time Paralympian Elisabeth Walker joined her first swimming club at age 11. Walker was born with two shortened arms, a condition known as dysmelia. She praises her first coaches, who made her feel very comfortable training alongside the able-bodied swimmers. It wasn't long before she was swimming faster than many of them.

"When I first joined I just wanted to be treated the same as everybody else," she says, "and I wanted some pointers on how I could improve. Physically at first it was difficult for me, but the coaches were great. It was so encouraging when we just did kicking exercises and I was faster than my teammates. It showed that I had talent; it was a type of measuring stick and gave me confidence."

"Now I can pull without my legs, using only my arms almost as fast as I kick. It surprised me and gave me so much self-esteem. That was something I wouldn't have thought would have been possible." Walker says that coaches should get to know the personalities of their athletes with a disability. Many are straight shooters, but some are shy. She also notes that some can use their disability as an excuse for not working hard in practice. "Everyone needs to be challenged," she says. "And coaches shouldn't shy away from using techniques that they know best to help all their athletes improve. For an athlete with a disability, a small improvement in the playing field can potentially make a big difference in overall life skills."





Communication and Interaction

Get to know the person first

Head-to-head dialogue is encouraged from the start as both the coach and the athlete with a disability get to know each other better. The coach can communicate a feeling of enthusiasm that this athlete has joined the group and how much the individual will benefit from the program. It helps if the coach can display knowledge of the athlete's talents, for instance past sport or academic success. Of course, the usual questions about why a person chose a certain sport, what the short- and long-term goals are, and what the commitment is to the program are all important.

As a coach, you need to find which buttons to push to keep each individual athlete around and wanting to stay involved in sport for a long time.

Bob Schrader, track and field coach

Ultimately, the key is not ignoring the disability but getting past it and seeing the person for who she or he is. "The coach should create a welcoming environment, and that includes displaying some knowledge of sport for people with disability," says Carla Qualtrough. "The coach should refer to the person as an athlete first, who just happens not to see or walk or whatever the disability is. The coach should emphasize right away that the athlete is part of the group just like any other athlete."

"In the end, the most important thing, I believe, is to get to know the person first," says Dean Kozak. "Then get into specifics."

Establish trust early in the process

Open communication is vital, and coaches can ask a question that may be assumed to be offensive. The best question for coaches to ask themselves is what they would ask of able-bodied athletes. "Honesty is key to successful communication with a person with a disability," says Cathy Cadieux.

"The coach should be up front about past experience in coaching or working with persons with a disability and express an eagerness to learn. You want to establish trust right off the bat. And if the coach needs an answer to a very personal question, go to the athlete first, not someone else," adds Cadieux.

Parental involvement

General remarks

When people dream of becoming parents, they never think that their child could have a disability. The parents of healthy children are challenged every day, but when the disability factor comes into play, both the child and the parents must face emotionally charged issues such as access and acceptance.



When children with a disability join organized sport for the first time, some have not been as active as their able-bodied counterparts, and their motor skills can be delayed. Those with intellectual and learning disabilities may have been teased at school. Understandably, many parents are cautious about sport, since sometimes the basic stages of early life that able-bodied people take for granted have been more challenging for them and their children up to that point.

Dealing with overprotective parents

Several coaches agree that, initially, many parents tend to be nervous about registering a child with a disability in sports. Concerns include social integration, safety, access, and needs. The viewpoint from coaches is that these parents are generally overprotective.

Coaches who encounter overprotective parents may communicate that their child has the same rights as anybody else to participate in sport and enjoy its challenges and risks. Once the child is on the playing field, the goal is for the parents to discover the values of sport in social development — the increased discipline, teamwork, self-esteem, social interaction, and social responsibility of the child.

Bob Schrader understands parents' concerns, but says they can let their children with a disability be independent for the period of the day in a sport program. "I've had people in their 20s struggle to be self-sufficient because they have been so guarded by their parents," he says. "I've had parents steer the chair for their child when they try to go around the track. That's not helping them. The children have to learn to do it themselves. The coach is there to provide the proper help and instructions to make that happen, so it won't be frustrating for the child."

Disability or not, the overall picture with parents is similar

The overall picture with parents of children with a disability is much the same as with the parents of able-bodied children. Some parents drop their children off at practice and return later to pick them up. Others are keen to get involved in various facets of volunteering.

A parent's involvement is not necessary in most cases, but is a great benefit to the program when offered. The involvement also be to a level that is comfortable for the child. "Parents are our volunteer base," says Cathy Cadieux. "We can't forget that."

Parents should be encouraged to help

In sports for persons with a disability, parents should be aware that if they can spare the time, their services could be extremely valuable to a coach. A visually impaired swimmer, for example, may need a tapper. Visually impaired cyclists and runners may need guides. In team sports, the coach may need an assistant to keep playing time equitable. Parents can also assist in training drills and transportation issues. "Organized sport is not a glorified day care," says Greg Lagacé. "It's nice to have one or both parents involved, even if they are just on the sidelines cheering on their child and the other participants. We encourage all parents to participate in the lives of athletes, able or disabled."

"Having able-bodied support is always welcomed," says Cathy Cadieux. "It's needed to move teams around and to provide help for teams in environments that are not ideal for persons with a disability. It's important to make sure that able-bodied help doesn't come only from the coach, and that mentality should start at the grassroots level."

Everyone has the right to take risks. Kids — able or disabled — need to fall down and get their bumps and bruises. That's how they learn.

Dr. Colin Higgs



The need for volunteers may increase when athletes with a disability are involved. Tasks can include helping with transfers, loading and unloading equipment from a car, and help in a change room. Such tasks are not necessarily the coach's responsibility, and by doing them, the coach might be sacrificing time that should be devoted to other athletes. These extra needs should be discussed by coach and athlete and a strategy or support to provide for these needs should be developed.

Dos and don'ts

Do not be scared to ask questions

The dos and don'ts for communicating with persons with a disability vary from person to person and disability to disability. Ultimately, most coaches learn as they go along what is out of bounds with their athletes. (A glossary of proper and accepted terms is available in Appendix 5.)



"The athlete, even if a youngster, should be the first point of contact in most cases," says Greg Lagacé. "That alone will break down a barrier, and the child will know that the coach is there for him or her. The key is not to be scared to ask the questions. It's just like you would ask anyone else. Keep it simple. There should be no preconceived ideas."

National team wheelchair racing coach Peter Eriksson says that coaches may sometimes need to ask what they feel are tough questions in order to determine the mobility of the person with a disability. "You need to know if the athlete can walk up the stairs, for example, or bench press," he says. "There are many things they can do, and you should never assume that there is something they can't do."

Ensure equal treatment

When working with an athlete with a disability, the coach should aim to individualize his or her interventions as would be done with other athletes — no more, no less.

Carla Qualtrough says that coaches should remember not to totally avoid the disability issue. "The disability is part of who we are. I don't want to be ashamed of it and try to fool people that I can see when I can't, just because I want to fit in. We don't want special treatment, but we may need different treatment at times." A coach learns through experience how to handle these situations.

Qualtrough says that one of her best memories is of when she was suspended by a coach at age 18 for missing two practices. "I just thought it was so cool that I could be suspended too," she says. "Treating people equally doesn't mean treating them the same and it also doesn't mean treating them so differently that they are the exceptions to the rule."

Tim Frick limits the conversation to sports. "I'm there as a coach, and I want to talk about the sport but I also want to develop a rapport with the athletes," Frick says. "What's happening on the court is what is important to me. How they got into a wheelchair? I couldn't care less. Able-bodied or disabled athletes — I coach the same way."



Do not assume that athletes with an intellectual disability do not understand

For people with an intellectual disability, coaches must never assume that the athletes don't understand. Their disability doesn't necessarily mean that they don't have the abilities to listen and learn. "Coaches quickly realize that what works best is to give very precise instructions and to check frequently for understanding" says Mary Bluehardt.

Include the person with an intellectual disability in any conversation and avoid talking over her or him, even in discussions with a parent or guardian.

Have a well-structured practice plan and use a progressive approach with athletes with an intellectual disability

Dino Pedicelli insists on the importance of planning and organization to provide effective support to athletes with an intellectual disability: "It is extremely important that the coach be well organized and that he or she have a structured practice plan. This will make the athletes more comfortable and they will learn better. Activities must also be adapted to the athletes' developmental age. In the same group, there may be participants of variable ages and it may be necessary to implement activities and drills that suit different developmental stages. Again, this illustrates the importance of good planning and organization."

Regarding effective methods to promote learning, he mentions the need to take a progressive approach: "The coach must demonstrate the skills and the drills thoroughly and nothing should be rushed. It is important to take into account the level of deficiency and to adjust accordingly. As a general rule, lots of repetitions are needed."

Sit down when talking to a person in a wheelchair

One initial tip is to sit down when talking to a person in a wheelchair. It can give the impression of an air of superiority if you are standing while in conversation with a person in a wheelchair. "For people in wheelchairs, you should make sure you are not looking down at them. You should sit down so you're both at the same level. You don't want this superior-inferior kind of relationship," says Colin Higgs. "These are athletes with a different piece of equipment, that's all."





Other practical suggestions

When interacting with persons with mobility impairment

Try to know in advance where accessible routes and facilities are located.

Ask permission before touching a wheelchair, crutches, or walker.

When interacting with persons who are visually impaired

Identify and introduce yourself.

Be careful not to distract service animals such as seeing-eye dogs. Do not feed or touch the service animals.

Allow the person to take your arm, and walk slowly ahead of him/her.

Give verbal directions and describe obstacles where necessary.

When interacting with persons who have auditory or speech impairments

Speak slightly slower and pronounce each word clearly.

Give clear and simple information, and repeat as necessary. Be patient.

Face the person when speaking.

If necessary, consider communicating in writing.

When interacting with persons with intellectual impairment

Treat adults as such. Address the person directly, not his or her assistant or guardian.

Ask questions that can be answered by YES or NO.

Give clear and simple information, and repeat as necessary. Be patient.





Part four

Inclusion and integration



Inclusion and integration

The value of participation for people with a disability

When asked for their opinion, both coaches and disability experts quickly point out that sport can open a new world of access for people with a disability: they become stronger, gain more endurance, and are generally healthier and more confident outside the playing field. But these benefits are not limited to the participants themselves. Ultimately, everyone gains from the inclusion of persons with a disability in sport programs.

Bob Schrader can list numerous reasons why parents should register their child with a disability in a sport program. "Parents of a child with a disability should know that sport helps their kid to be more self-sufficient, which can help them be better in school," he says. "In sport they challenge themselves and do things on their own. Other kids can be high strung, and sport can help them be active. And finally, just for their health. Because they are active, their whole body will be healthier."

"The values of sport are well documented," says Tim Frick. "The values are the same whether you are able or not, young or old, male or female. My advice to parents is to let the kids take a chance and get them the best possible equipment. That can be the difference between loving it and hating it."

Dean Kozak says that sport can enrich the lives of persons with a disability and also says that role models must be presented to the beginners. "A lot of persons with a disability don't tend to get out a lot," he says. "Sport will give them a better sense of belonging in the community." Kozak adds that sport skills can be valuable to a person with a disability in everyday life. He recommends that coaches point this out to apprehensive parents. And he says that the key to a successful integration program is to get everyone involved and helping each other out.

Participating in sport for persons with a disability changed my life. When, as a teenager, my disability made it impossible for me to keep pace with my able-body counterparts in the sports I was involved in, I was encouraged to find out that I could swim against people with a similar disability, and that I could train with a coach who would teach me the sport more in depth and adapt it for my disability. I learned through sport that I could do whatever I wanted. And I did.

Carla Qualtrough, former member of Canada's Paralympic swimming team

The value of inclusion for able-bodied athletes



Sports such as cycling, skiing, and running for the visually impaired may require guides. Lisa Sweeney of North Vancouver, an able-bodied competitive road cyclist for six years, saw an opportunity to enhance her own training by working with a visually impaired rider. This past fall she competed at the Paralympics as a guide for Shawn Marsolais. "I phoned the B.C. Blind Sports and Recreation Association last year to see if there was a way I could volunteer," says Sweeney. "I figured I'd be helping people ride around Stanley Park. I knew there was racing, and I was hoping all along that I'd be lucky enough to find someone to race with."



Part four

Inclusion and integration

The value of inclusion and participation for coaches

There is a general view that most coaches are interested in coaching persons with a disability. The problem is awareness. Most people simply don't know that these opportunities exist and generally need to be lured or have a person with a disability come into their sport program. "It's all about awareness," says Carla Qualtrough. "Coaching athletes with a disability is something most coaches don't go looking for. It is brought to them."

Jeff Snyder has re-energized his coaching career from his experiences with Canada's national sledge hockey team. Snyder was previously head coach of the Kitchener Rangers of the Ontario Hockey League, one step below the NHL. "You'll get the same satisfaction as you would get from working with an able-bodied person. You are helping a child or individual progress in a sport, whatever their goal and whatever level they want to be at," he says.

Coaching persons with a disability is an all-encompassing experience. You're building social skills. You're taking able-bodied kids who are looking at that person with a disability as just another member of the team. Once they are out in the real world, they'll be aware of what persons with a disability can achieve.

Former National Team Alpine skiing coach Ozzie Sawicki

Says Tim Frick: "When we get a new coach, we want that person to enjoy the experience and provide a situation that assures success. When a coach asks me what he or she needs to know, I say: You need to know basketball. The rest you can learn as you go along."

The value of inclusion for sport administrators

Leagues, clubs, schools, and associations can integrate programs for persons with a disability or provide separate training groups. Both Tim Frick and Bob Schrader see the benefits. Persons with a disability are a large and distinct portion of the population, and they feel that it should be an easy sell.

"There's no other opportunity for this kid to go five days a week and pursue his or her dreams," says Frick. "This is the best chance. It's not a big deal to incorporate an athlete in wheelchair in practices."

"Providing sport programs or integrating programs for persons with a disability is something clubs need to do to serve their community," adds Bob Schrader.

With 3.6 million Canadians living with a disability and more than 2 million more who provide direct support, Greg Lagacé says that the numbers are too big to ignore. "Don't look at this as cumbersome" Lagacé says. "Look at it as an opportunity to grow your sport. And as sport administrators we have a collective responsibility to provide sporting opportunities to all Canadians."

Cathy Cadieux is encouraged by the progress being shown by Canadian sport organizations to include sports for persons with a disability in their programs, but says it still needs to improve. "Programs with a disability are still an add-on and an additional unknown in most programs at most levels," she says. "At the grassroots level right now there is no money within the able-bodied system to support programs for athletes with a disability. For us it's our wheelchair sport association that delivers programs to wheelchair athletes."



Part four

Inclusion and integration

Sport opportunities for people with a disability

There is no shortage of sport opportunities for persons with a disability. Some sports, such as goalball for the visually impaired, wheelchair rugby for quadriplegics, and boccia (a popular sport with athletes with cerebral palsy), are unique to athletes with a disability. Others, such as swimming and track and field, offer competitive opportunities at almost all levels and types of disabilities. In some instances, athletes with a disability may also compete with able-bodied athletes. For instance, Alpine Skiing offers options to athletes with disability to compete in certain age groups with able-bodied athletes, or with masters. Likewise, able-bodied individuals can train and compete in some sport activities for persons with disabilities (i.e., wheelchair basketball). But these are far from being the only disciplines in which persons with a disability train and compete. A more detailed list of sports, as well as the methods that are used to assure fair competition amongst athletes with a disability, are provided in Appendix 2.

Integrated sport programs

General remarks

Sport programs that integrate able-bodied athletes and athletes with a physical disability are more common today. Sports such as swimming, weightlifting, rowing, and triathlon now hold integrated national championships, and national team athletes — both able bodied and with a disability — train alongside each other.

Mary Bluechardt says that a discussion with the able-bodied athletes could be necessary to tell them about the needs and interests of an athlete with a disability joining their program. “You can’t deny participation”, she says. “Regardless of whether an athlete has a disability or not, individualized coaching strategies must be implemented. But it’s also important that the support and resources be available to provide assistance for coaching a person with a disability where necessary.”

For a person with a disability, it is recommended at first to set achievable goals while keeping the sessions challenging. This should ensure progressive skill development and encourage persons with a disability to meet the requirements of the sport to the best of the athlete’s ability. Skills should be taught one at a time, and all players should see the skill being demonstrated. For visually impaired athletes, a tactile demonstration is usually required.

Successes and challenges

This section describes integration and inclusion experiences in different sports. Other success stories are outlined in Appendix 3.

The Manta Swim Club: Coaching able-bodied athletes and those with a disability in the same group can be a challenge for a coach at the grassroots level, and a lot can depend on the nature of the sport. There are success stories in some sports, while in others integration has been difficult at the grassroots level. One such success story occurred at the Manta Swim Club in Winnipeg, where Tom Hainey, the club’s head coach and a former Paralympic swimmer, coaches several nationally ranked able-bodied and swimmers with a disability (also known as SWADs), including Kirby Cote, who won five Paralympic gold medals in 2004.



Part four

Inclusion and integration

Planning a workout that takes all the participants into account is an important factor for a coach in an integrated program. “You don’t want to be running around after the SWAD swimmers and fiddling with equipment during training,” says Hainey. “That would be unfair to the able-bodied swimmers. For example, if you’re doing fast-paced sets, visually impaired swimmers may need someone next to them to warn them when it’s time to turn.”

In integrated groups, it is common for the coach to ask able-bodied participants to pitch in. They may be asked to provide help for drills such as serving as a training partner or recording split times, to carry equipment, or to provide some other type of assistance. Hainey says that he has never received a single complaint from an able-bodied athlete or from parents.

“We had one SWAD who was severely disabled, and we created a one-on-one scenario for her at first,” says Hainey. “We were able to raise her skill level to the point where she could integrate. We explained to the other kids ahead of time what her abilities were. A couple of kids volunteered to help her during practice.”

Alpine skiing: Alpine skiing has successful, integrated programs at the entry and club levels. Ozzie Sawicki, a coach for the past 18 years of skiers with a disability, says that after a few days of training, a coach can find a comfort zone for a skier with a disability within an integrated group. “Initially a coach should get some sport background on the person with a disability,” says Sawicki. “From there, it’s figuring out how this person will fit into the able-bodied program such that there is a smooth transition and the athlete becomes part and parcel of the program.”

Sawicki says that persons with a disability greatly benefit the integrated skiing programs, and it’s a proven motivator for all the skiers. “In skiing, you do have to dedicate a certain amount of time to a wheelchair-bound person,” says Sawicki. “That athlete can’t carry gates and assist in setting up a training venue, for example. But the great thing about an integrated program is that the other skiers can help out and provide additional assistance to the skier with a disability.”

Wheelchair tennis: It is not always possible for sports to offer programs that are entirely integrated. In wheelchair tennis, it can be a challenge, particularly at the grassroots level. However, at the higher levels of competition, good opportunities for interaction exist between able-bodied athletes and athletes with a disability.

“When they start out, wheelchair players generally prefer to play amongst themselves,” says Wayne Elderton, “because the new mobility skills they need to learn are fairly demanding and represent a major challenge initially. If the ball is three feet over to the right or to the left, an able-bodied player just needs a couple of steps to retrieve it. On the other hand, the wheelchair player has to learn to turn and move, and keep the momentum going, all while using the racquet and pushing the wheel. There’s a lot of special mobility training for the wheelchair player that must be mastered first. We want to promote integration at the grassroots level, but we also need to take into account this reality.”

The key to our success has been that our coaches make an effort to understand the nature of the disability and they are comfortable with it. But even more importantly, we explain to the swimmers with a disability that they must provide the necessary information to the coach so that the coach understands their initial concerns.

*Tom Hainey
head coach and a former
Paralympic swimmer, Manta
Swim Club, Winnipeg*

At the high levels there’s been a synergy and an appreciation between the able-bodied and wheelchair players. There’s a lot of mutual respect. Since wheelchair tennis has been under Tennis Canada’s umbrella, the junior players get a lot of motivation from seeing the wheelchair players compete professionally and travel around the world.

*Wayne Elderton, National team
wheelchair tennis coach,
Vancouver*



At the Grant Connell Tennis Centre in North Vancouver, there is a separate court for developing wheelchair players, and once they reach a certain level, they are integrated into a more mainstream program. At the higher level, the national able-bodied junior team and the senior wheelchair tennis team train at the same time and often execute the same drills; however, they play on different courts and not pitted one against the other.

Adapting the sport or the activity

Key principles

In some instances, adaptation of a sport may be necessary to enable participants with a disability to fully enjoy the activity.

Whether adaptation occurs on a recreational or a competitive level, a key principle to keep in mind is to adapt only if necessary. Needless to say, it must always be the sport or the activity that is adapted, not the person with a disability. If a sport or an activity must be adapted, it should be kept as close as possible to its traditional counterpart. This is important to maintain the integrity of the sport for everyone involved — the person with a disability and the other participants. The challenge must remain adequate and reasonable for everyone.

Key parameters that can be used to adapt an activity include:

- space
- time
- speed of execution
- equipment
- environment
- rules

Creativity in the design and modification of equipment and rules can make almost any sport accessible to athletes with a disability.

Examples of adaptation

The sports of wheelchair tennis and racquetball are virtually the same for able-bodied players and athletes with a disability. The exception is that the wheelchair player is allowed two bounces instead of one bounce in which to return the ball.

In wheelchair basketball, the court dimensions and height of the hoops are the same as in able-bodied basketball, and the length of games is the international standard 40 minutes. A player may wheel the chair and bounce the ball simultaneously; however, if the ball is picked up or placed on the player's lap, the athlete is allowed to push only twice before he or she must shoot, pass, or dribble the ball again. There is no double dribble rule in wheelchair basketball. A traveling violation occurs if the player takes more than two pushes while in possession of the ball and not dribbling.





Accessibility

Accessibility is a multi-faceted issue

Accessibility for persons with a disability remains an issue in today's society. There are many facets to the issue, and many improvements still to be made and recognized by governments, building operators, and the population in general.

Improved accessibility can benefit everyone

Accessibility can benefit everyone, not only people with a disability. For example, people traveling with children in strollers or with heavy luggage probably prefer an elevator to an escalator. People with a temporary leg injury may benefit from a railing on an access ramp. It should be noted that the term accessibility not only means easy to reach, but also easy to use.

Canada has a strong track record when it comes to improving accessibility. Still, there are older buildings or more remote communities that could have some accessibility issues. Another detriment for Canadians with a disability can be the weather. Manoeuvring a wheelchair or, for someone with a visual impairment, even just walking can be arduous and treacherous on snow and ice.

"In Canada, for the most part, our facilities are accessible," says Greg Lagacé. "That's because of law. Still, a coach has to be cognizant of that major barrier. It's great to have a program that's well developed, but unless people can get to the facility, it's all for naught."

"Coaches must be knowledgeable about accessibility issues," adds Cathy Cadieux. "Then they'll find it easier to find solutions."

Transportation

Transportation is an accessibility issue for persons with a disability in sport right across the board. Whether an athlete is in a wheelchair, has an intellectual disability, or lives with cerebral palsy, transportation to facilities and events is an issue, particularly for adults. The cost of accessible vehicles and the availability of those vehicles are other major concerns. Renting a bus with a lift for people in wheelchairs costs about three times more than renting a regular bus.

Coaches should be aware of and sensitive to transportation issues and can assist in overcoming this barrier by exploring options. Perhaps another athlete in the program lives close to the athlete with a transportation need and can help.

"Coaches must always keep the accessibility and transportation issues on their radar and on their check sheet," concludes Bob Schrader. "They should know how each of their athletes with a disability is getting to a venue. It may be an issue."



People in wheelchairs generally face the biggest transportation issues. Some can require adaptable vans and special buses; however, those buses don't go by the front door every 10 minutes. They must be reserved. Most other persons with a disability generally can manage with the same transportation options as anybody, such as city buses, but in smaller communities drivers could be needed for assistance.

"Many persons with a disability can't just hop in the car," says Chris Bourne. "They may have to book their transportation two days in advance, they might be late, and they might be sitting around after practice waiting for their ride."

Sometimes there are not enough programs, teams, or leagues available to persons with a disability who play in sport programs that require more travel. "For us in wheelchair basketball, there's not a program at every single school," says Tim Frick. "So there might be one program a week for an entire community, and you might have to drive a half hour to take your kids to that program. And if you want to play more than once a week, you might have to drive another hour to get to the next closest venue. Sometimes parents don't have that extra time to take a kid to a sport."

Buildings, facilities, and outdoor venues

In Canada, most facilities, whether schools or community centres, are accessible. That's good news, because access to the playing field can be a major barrier for anyone wanting to pursue a sport. Still, there are other facility concerns, including accessible changerooms and washrooms. However, most modern facilities house rooms that can at least be modified to be accessible.

"Not all buildings are fully accessible" says Greg Lagacé. "Although some facilities are more accessible than others, it's not common anymore to see a person with a disability quit a program because of building access issues."

Chris Bourne says that coaches can provide a great benefit by assuring proper signage for persons with a disability in buildings and also by removing any clutter for the visually impaired in areas such as a weight room. But sports are not only played indoors. One of the fastest rising sports for persons with a disability is water skiing. It is a sport that adapts well to any form of disability. Plus, it is played outdoors in the summer and on the water. And it is ideal for those who enjoy speed and action in their sports.

"When a water skiing site is picked for our workshops, accessibility issues can't always be completely solved," says Chris Bourne. "There may be only stairs available to get to a dock, or a rocky path down to a shore. Able-bodied help must be assured under those circumstances. Sometimes workable solutions rather than ideal ones have to be developed. Things may not be made completely accessible, and a person might not be able to be totally independent, but we work with what we've got and do our best to make it as close to ideal as reasonably possible."

"A coach should get information from the person with a disability directly on what would be needed to make a facility easy to use," adds Bourne. "Then it depends a lot on how much pull the coach has in assuring that there is a degree of change in improving accessibility."

Canadian alpine skiing clubs and outlets have a strong reputation for providing excellent services to persons with a disability in order to assure access to the hills. “Washroom access is still a noticeable problem at some ski hills,” says alpine skiing coach Ozzie Sawicki. “But relative to Europe, it is great in Canada. There can be some tough spots, though, where a person may need help, and that is often weather related. For example, a snowfall can create a lot of slush for a person in a wheelchair.”

Traveling

The amount of assistance required will vary depending upon the athlete's degree of disability.

There are a few tricks to managing team travel for athletes with a disability. The key words are organization and preparation. Athletes with a disability often travel with additional equipment, which can include tapper sticks and guide dogs for the visually impaired, wheelchairs for quadriplegics and paraplegics, and additional limbs for amputees. In airports, for example, a wheelchair repair kit may not be popular with security officials these days, but it's just an accessory of everyday life for a person in a wheelchair. For overseas trips, it should be noted that some international airlines require that each person in a wheelchair has an able-bodied assistant on the plane.

There are potentially some additional accessibility logistics in hotels. While accessing the hotel itself is not a problem in most Canadian cities, inside the rooms, bathroom doors may not be wide enough for wheelchair access and the free floor area may be cramped, especially at two per room. Therefore, on road trips, able-bodied support and care may be needed. The experienced athletes also tend to help the novices. “When a player goes on the first road trip it's very beneficial,” says Tim Frick. “The more experienced athletes have all these tips, techniques, and shortcuts that work in real life.”





Part six

Words of advice from the experts



Words of advice from the experts

This manual is geared toward grassroots coaches who are interested in or just starting coaching persons with a disability or who have had a person with a disability recently join their program. The key message is that a coach should coach and focus on the sport, regardless of whether the person is able bodied or has a disability. The coach's primary objective is to provide technical expertise to help people improve in the sport.

Our experts agree, however, that there can be subtle differences between coaching able-bodied people and coaching persons with a disability. This manual has touched on some of those potential differences.

Here are some final words of advice from our experts.

Mary Bluechardt

"It is not simply the athletes with disabilities that benefit from an inclusive sport system; all athletes, coaches, sport administrators, parents, and members of the larger community also benefit."

Chris Bourne

"Look at coaching athletes with a disability not only as providing an opportunity for him or her to get involved in something that may become a life-long passion, but also as an opportunity for you as a coach to enhance your coaching abilities and knowledge of your sport".

Cathy Cadieux

"Be honest, focus on the person related to the sport, and be patient."

Wayne Elderton

"We just tell our coaches to teach tennis. But understand the differences, such as how the athlete moves the chair around; that's an area, for example, where the coach needs to develop expertise."

Peter Eriksson

"Treat the athlete with a disability the same way you would treat any athlete. Make sure you know the athlete's goal. Don't look for the limitations; look for the possibilities."

Tim Frick

"I would like to see kids in wheelchairs at elementary schools involved in activities such as basketball. I would like to see that elementary school coach have those kids at every single practice and provide them some extra work on their own, just like for an able-bodied kid who is keen on basketball. There's no reason those kids can't be practicing with the rest of the able-bodied kids. There should be more integration in the running game programs. Also, kids should be rewarded for doing things the right way. Give tons and tons of positive, specific feedback and reinforce it."

Tom Hainey

"Knowledge and planning are important. Get comfortable with the athlete and the family. The more comfortable the athlete is, the more information they'll divulge."



Colin Higgs

"It's not difficult; it's just another kid in your program. Work with them and you'll find it really easy. There are a lot of people with knowledge in your area, so don't be afraid to get information. There's probably a coach or athlete who would love to come down and help you out."

James Hood

"Don't be afraid to challenge people with a disability. Don't be afraid to ask questions about the disability. And don't be afraid to try different things so you can get an idea of what they are facing."

Bob Kierstead

"Let them lead you and they'll tell you what you need you know. You can provide the technical knowledge."

Dean Kozak

"Really get to know the person and the specific disability. Expand your horizons on adapting, keeping in mind that any sport and any training session can be adapted to that athlete. It's just a matter of learning."

Greg Lagacé

"Don't be afraid to ask a question even if you think it could be offensive. And just coach. Open your eyes to the opportunities both for yourself and for the person with a disability."

Jean Laroche

"Focus on what you know. Don't be scared of the disability. See the person, not the disability."

Carla Qualtrough

"To get persons with a disability involved you have to use role modeling," says Carla Qualtrough. "If kids see other persons with a disability involved, they'll get involved. A great way to raise awareness is with parents and at schools so we can promote social integration."

Ozzie Sawicki

"Understand the different disabilities through communications and awareness."

Bob Schrader

"Get involved. Look at their ability and motivate them. You are constantly working with them to keep them involved. It's no different than with able-bodied athletes."

Elizabeth Roman

"Don't get stuck worrying about little things, like if you're saying the right thing or doing the right thing. Just do it. Coaching is coaching, regardless of whether the person has a disability."



**You are a coach, you can do it!
You are not alone.**

There are people and organizations that are willing to assist and help you in the process of coaching athletes with a disability.

Appendix 1: Disability must knows

Athletes with intellectual disabilities

The term “intellectual disabilities” describes a wide range of conditions having the main characteristics of low or very low intelligence and deficits in adaptive behaviour. The term “intelligence” refers to intellectual functioning in a general cognitive ability sense, rather than one facet of ability (or problems in just one area). “Adaptive behaviour” refers to the effectiveness with which individuals meet the standards of personal independence and social responsibility expected of people of their age and cultural group. Deficits in adaptive behaviour are evaluated according to developmental age. During infancy and early childhood, these deficits may be observed in areas such as sensori-motor, communication, self-help, and socialization skills. During childhood and early adolescence the deficits may focus more on the application of basic academic skills, reasoning and judgment, and social skills. During late adolescence and adulthood, adaptive behaviour centres more on vocational and social responsibilities.

Key characteristics	Implications for sport participation	Benefits of sport and physical activity	Safety considerations	Special considerations	Recommendations to coaches
Heterogeneous group of characteristics, wide range of ability levels. Chronological age may not match developmental ability. Key concepts: - Sub-average intellectual functioning - Deficits in adaptive behaviour - Disability occurs during developmental period (birth–18 yrs) - May lag behind in basic motor skills - Under-represented group, may not have had opportunity to participate in sport and physical activities - Associated disabilities or disabilities in addition to intellectual may be prevalent, more common ones include Down syndrome, seizures, autism, Atlanto-axial instability (greater than normal flexibility in upper two vertebrae; characteristic of approximately 17% of people with Down syndrome) - Greatest needs often reported in the learning/cognitive and social/emotional areas.	Note heterogeneity and varying abilities. May require basic motor skill development as a prerequisite to performing or executing specific sport skills, and increased supervision. Transportation to practice/competitions may be a key accessibility issue. Some athletes may be on fixed income and consideration needs to be made for purchase of equipment and registration fees.	Evidence supports that participation in sport and physical activities has a positive impact on the quality of life of people with intellectual disabilities (e.g., fitness, self-esteem, employability, as well as cognitive, motor, and social development). Sport and physical activity also provide the opportunity for increased participation in society for people with intellectual disabilities.	Collaborate with athlete, parent or guardian on behavioural and supervision needs. Emergency Action Plan must include procedure for seizures. Obtain seizure history to include type, length of the seizure, and presence of auras (athlete able to anticipate onset of seizure). If coaching athletes with Down syndrome, determine if they have been cleared for Atlanto-axial instability (examination includes x-rays by a physician briefed on the nature of the condition). If not examined, restrict from participation in sports and activities such as contact sports, diving, and gymnastics. Determine if athlete with Down syndrome has other characteristics you should be aware of such as congenital heart condition, underdeveloped circulatory system, or low respiratory capacity.	A large number of athletes with intellectual disabilities medicate for various medical or behavioural conditions. Be aware of what these medications are and of potential contraindications for participating in sport and physical activities. Articulate your need to know if medications change and the impact this change may have on performance and behaviour. Athletes may have difficulty with transfer of skills from one environment to another (e.g., from one playing field to another or from indoor to outdoor setting). Change of routine, or change in coaching staff or volunteers, may elicit behavioural reactions (e.g., the participant may become apprehensive about getting involved in the activities; he or she may be stubborn or show signs of decreased attention). Athletes with intellectual disabilities are comfortable with routine and structure. Talk with the parent, guardian, or caregiver to get the information that is needed to provide consistent management of behaviours that may require special considerations or interventions (this includes necessary supervision and correction of behaviours).	Do not be afraid to ask questions. Review or discuss with best contact any athlete medical considerations (including medication and associated disabilities) you as coach may need to be aware of from a practice planning or safety perspective. Plan drills/activities that are age appropriate (i.e., chronologically appropriate but also adapted to the degree of cognitive understanding of the participant). Communicate about changes in medication (that may affect performance or behaviour) and any incidents that may have occurred prior to practice or competition. Determine level of ability in all domains (learning/cognitive, social/emotional, physical/motor). Determine level of participation in the past in sport or other physical activity programs (integrative or not) and the outcome (if they were involved). If the athlete will be participating with athletes without disabilities, find out about prior experiences that other members of the team or group (including coaches and other volunteers) have had with athletes with disabilities. These discussions will assist in clarification and create a more welcoming environment. Be aware of necessary prerequisite skills (e.g., basic motor skills) required for success in specific sport skills. Do not “overload” participants with instructions. Check for understanding. Make sure you have the athletes’ attention before giving instructions (e.g., maintain good eye contact). You may need to complete a task analysis in more detail than first thought. Adhere to appropriate and safe supervision practices at all times. This is especially important during the early stage of the coach–athlete relationship (e.g., when the coach is still assessing the athlete’s abilities). The athlete with an intellectual disability may take longer to process information or instructions. Remember to check frequently for understanding. Repetition, structure, and routine are helpful. Research and review SOC sport rules to prepare athlete for Special Olympic competitions if the athlete is training in a generic program but competing in Special Olympic competitions. Familiarize yourself with the SOC divisioning process or concept that addresses fairness of competition.

Remember. Coaching is Coaching.

Appendix 1: Disability must knows

Athletes with physical disabilities

Mobility Impairment - Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)

Description: Disruption of the spinal cord prevents transmission of nerve signals from the brain to the muscles, keeping muscles below the level of injury from functioning. Spinal cord injury is most often acquired through traumatic injury.

Key characteristics	Implications for sport participation	Benefits of sport and physical activity	Safety considerations	Special considerations	Recommendations to coaches
The level of disability is related to where in the spinal cord injury occurs. The nearer the injury is to the head (higher up the spinal cord), the greater the disability. Quadriplegia means that arms, trunk, and legs are affected. Paraplegia means that the trunk and legs are affected. Most SCI athletes use a wheelchair both for daily living and for sport. Different sports use different wheelchair designs for high performance sport. A "sport" type daily living wheelchair is adequate for introduction to most sports. Following the initial body changes in the months after the injury, disability remains the same over time, with little progression.	SCI athletes engage in all wheelchair sports and most other sports. Popular competitive sports are quad rugby, wheelchair basketball, wheelchair tennis, swimming, track and field, cross country skiing, and downhill skiing. With appropriate adaptations to equipment and rules, SCI athletes take part in almost all sports. People who were athletes before injury often adapt to wheelchair versions of sports more readily than people who were not involved in sport before injury. Transportation and facility accessibility are major barriers to participation. Wheelchair-accessible transportation to and from training and competition can be difficult. Facilities need to be equipped with wheelchair-accessible playing surfaces, pools, washrooms, doors, ramps, etc. In addition, alternate formats of signs are needed, and facility staff must be sensitive to the needs of athletes with a disability.	Sport participation for people with SCI is important to their cardiovascular health, since it is more difficult to raise the heart rate to a "fitness-benefit" level when the large muscles of the hips and legs are not used. Sport develops good wheelchair handling skills and endurance, which make daily living easier. Athletes with a disability have a feeling of being included. In addition, there are important self-esteem and social benefits to sport participation.	Since there is often little or no feeling in the lower limbs, it is possible for the athlete to injure a limb and not be aware of it. The coach and the athlete with a disability therefore need to keep an eye open for feet or toes dragging on the ground, and athletes may need to be reminded. For the same reason, care needs to be taken that SCI athletes do not transfer onto surfaces that are hot from summer sun or very cold in winter. Some quadriplegics have a limited ability to control their body temperature. Care therefore needs to be taken to prevent the athlete from getting too cold or overheating. Because of difficulty accessing bathrooms at some sport venues, athletes sometimes restrict fluid intake. Encourage adequate hydration.	SCI athletes use wheelchairs for both daily living and sport, and in both cases almost all of the motion is in a forward direction. This uses some muscles around the shoulder much more than others and can lead to overuse injuries. For this reason, pre and post exercise stretching is important, and training should strengthen all the muscles in the shoulder region. If the muscles of the trunk function poorly, then sitting balance will be difficult, and the upper body will need to be supported by the wheelchair design, including proper strapping. Difficulties with bowel and bladder control may require athletes to interrupt or discontinue a particular training session.	Think of the wheelchair as a piece of sporting equipment, like a kayak, that is propelled by the arms: - Pushing on the hand rim causes wear and tear on the hands. Athletes should protect their hands with gloves or tape. - For best communication get eye-to-eye with the athlete by kneeling or sitting. Don't make the athlete always look up at you. - Be aware that the surface the athlete is wheeling over makes a huge difference to how hard the athlete has to work. Smooth hard surfaces are better than rough soft surfaces. The key message is that athletes need to self-identify their needs and their abilities. Don't ask what caused an athlete's injury. If athletes want to tell you, they will.

Listen to the athletes: They are the "experts" on their disability and they know what accommodations they need.

Appendix 1: Disability must knows

Mobility Impairment - Amputees

Description: A person who has had all or part of a limb removed/amputated or is born without a limb.

Key characteristics	Implications for sport participation	Benefits of sport and physical activity	Safety considerations	Special considerations	Recommendations to coaches
Loss of a limb can be either congenital or acquired. With the use of a prosthesis (artificial limb) many athletes can compete in both able-bodied sport and Paralympic sport.	In lower limb amputees, the energy required for daily living and sport activities increases the higher on the leg the amputation occurred. The athletes may grow fatigued more rapidly. Sport prostheses are as important to amputees as sport equipment is to able-bodied athletes.	The higher level of energy required for daily living activities in lower limb amputees encourages a sedentary lifestyle. Sport and physical activity offer important contributions to reducing weight, increasing fitness, and protecting against heart disease and diabetes.	Care of stumps is a critical daily activity for people with an amputation, and sport performance may place additional wear and tear on both the stump and any prosthesis. It is therefore important for the amputee to pay particular attention to breakdown in the skin of the stump and to any hair follicle infections. It is also important to wear the right thickness of stump sock and to keep the sock dry (particularly after exercise). This is essential to help prevent skin irritations and blisters. Wearing a protective helmet should be considered, particularly during the early stages of sport wheelchair use.	Amputees who use a wheelchair for sport activity frequently tip their chairs over and fall out of them. This is due to their higher centre of gravity (no legs to bring the centre of gravity down lower) and no ability in many cases to brace the body in the chair using their legs. Tipping backwards is particularly common, and for this reason many athletes playing basketball or tennis have small wheels attached to stability arms coming out the back of the wheelchair. When the chairs tip back, these small wheels come in contact with the floor and stop the chairs from tipping.	In some ways, these athletes most closely resemble their able-bodied peers, and it is easier for many coaches to concentrate on the technical aspects of coaching when working with these athletes. Treat these athletes as you would any other athlete you coach.

Open your eyes to the possibilities, for the person with a disability and you!

Appendix 1: Disability must knows

Cerebral Palsy (CP)

Description: Injury to different parts of the developing brain during gestation, birth, or early infancy results in muscle weakness, paralysis, poor coordination, and uncontrolled limb movements. The person's disability can range from very mild to very severe. Although most individuals with CP have the same intelligence as individuals without a disability, some may also have an intellectual impairment.

Key characteristics	Implications for sport participation	Benefits of sport and physical activity	Safety considerations	Special considerations	Recommendations to coaches
CP may affect the arms, legs, trunk, or head, and may affect one side of the body more than the other or some limbs more than others. This disability affects all people differently. Some people with CP can run, walk and talk, some are in wheelchairs, and others have speech impediments. There are three major types of CP. Spastic CP is characterized by weak muscle tone, poor coordination, and muscle contractures that make affected limbs "stiff". Athetoid CP is characterized by almost continuous uncontrolled, purposeless movements that may involve the face and tongue as well as limbs. Ataxic CP is characterized by poor balance, uncoordinated movements, and a lack of spatial awareness. Lack of coordination and movement control does not mean that the athlete is less intelligent than other athletes.	CP athletes engage in a wide range of sports, with higher participation in swimming, basketball, cycling, bocia, soccer, and track and field. Lack of coordination and difficulty with rapid purposeful movements makes high level participation in ball sports or other sports with fast movements difficult. Since this condition is almost always present from birth (or very early in life), overprotective parents and caregivers may not permit young children with CP to engage in the full range of childhood activities that develop sport-related skills. It is therefore important to expose individuals with CP to a wide range of sport-related activities.	CP athletes benefit from sport participation physically, socially, and psychologically. Successful sport participation increases self-esteem and opens up additional possibilities for social interactions. Water-based sports in which the water supports body weight reduce the balance and coordination symptoms of the disability. Sport participation may improve balance and coordination, and systematic stretching activities may improve range of movement in affected limbs.	Since balance is often affected, falling is an ever-present risk for many CP athletes, and care should be taken to remove as many obstacles from the environment as possible. Situations in which the athlete is required to make rapid controlled movements to avoid collisions with other participants or objects should be avoided or undertaken with extreme care. Climbing, bike riding, and similar activities should be approached slowly and with caution, using appropriate protective equipment.	Stress, fatigue, and even hunger can have a large effect on the extent to which CP impairs movement and learning. Calm, well-rested, and well-fed athletes learn best. Care should be taken to allow the CP athlete to attempt new skills where they will not be the centre of attention. Despite historical concerns that resistance training might increase spasticity, the experimental evidence suggests that resistance training can improve movements of daily living, provided adequate stretching is also part of the training program. People who suffer head injuries that affect motor skills can be classified using a similar system as the one employed with CP athletes.	Athletes with CP have difficulty learning skills using methods in which they have the whole skill demonstrated to them and are then asked to copy that skill. For optimum learning, they need the skill to be broken down into very small steps and they need to master each step before continuing. Do not continue trying to teach a new skill when the athlete is fatigued, excited, or overly frustrated Some athletes with CP have speech difficulties that can make communication difficult, which can frustrate the coach, who wants to understand the athlete but cannot. Although this may be a new situation for the coach, it is a familiar situation for the athlete. Don't pretend to understand if you don't, ask the athlete to repeat what was said, and, if necessary, get help from the athlete's family, friends, or caregiver.

See the person, not the disability!

Appendix 1: Disability must knows

Brain Injuries

Description: Acquired Brain Injury (ABI), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Hemiplegia are designations for disabilities resulting from damage to the brain.

Key characteristics	Implications for sport participation	Benefits of sport and physical activity	Recommendations to coaches
ABI is the result of various non-traumatic but damaging conditions of the brain such as tumours or blood clots. As the name implies, TBI is caused by a trauma to the head. Both conditions may cause temporary or permanent damage to the brain due to pressure from swelling or direct damage from the trauma. Depending on which part of the brain was damaged, a person who has experienced a brain injury may be affected in motor control (sometimes affecting speech), personality, and/or cognitive abilities. Hemiplegia involves paralysis or partial paralysis of one side of the body. It may be caused by a variety of factors including stroke, head trauma, or cerebral palsy. The extent of involvement may vary or only be noticeable with increased activity.	Persons with ABI or TBI may have poor balance, uncoordinated movements, and/or a lack of spatial awareness resulting in difficulty walking, as well as impulsiveness or poor judgment. Lack of coordination and difficulty with rapid purposeful movements makes high level participation in ball sports or other sports with fast movements or rapid decision-making difficult. ABI and TBI athletes whose motor skills are affected can be classified using a similar system as the one employed with CP athletes. Persons with hemiplegia often have movement patterns present in the arm and leg. Typically, this includes flexion in the arm and extension in the leg. There may also be trunk strength and coordination deficits that cause the person to lean more to one side. Due to the difference in musculature on different sides of the body, activities that require a lot of balance may pose certain difficulties as the athlete may have a tendency to compensate with the strong side.	Successful sport participation increases self-esteem and opens up additional possibilities for social interactions. Sport participation may improve balance and coordination, and systematic stretching activities may improve range of movement in affected limbs.	Encourage them to educate you about what they can and cannot do, and work slowly to extend the intensity, duration, and complexity of their athletic activities. For ABI and TBI athletes who have motor disabilities, many of the strategies recommended for athletes with cerebral palsy are applicable. For ABI and TBI athletes whose personality or cognitive abilities are affected, collaborate with the athlete, parent(s) or guardian(s) on behavioural and supervision needs. Where necessary, implement some of the strategies recommended for athletes with an intellectual disability.

Understand the disability through communications and awareness.

Appendix 1: Disability must knows

Sensory Impairment

Description: In sport terms, the two most prominent sensory impairments are loss of sight and loss of hearing.

Key characteristics	Implications for sport participation	Benefits of sport and physical activity	Safety considerations	Special considerations	Recommendations to coaches
Blind/Low Vision Loss of sight may be total or partial, and with some conditions, vision may be progressively lost. Blindness may be congenital or acquired. Individuals born blind, or who lose their vision before fundamental skills have been learned, need to learn differently (and take much longer to learn sport skills) than people who learned the fundamental running, jumping, catching, and kicking skills before losing their sight. Deaf/Hearing impaired Many individuals who are deaf do not consider themselves to be disabled, but rather consider themselves to be members of an alternate culture – one that uses a different language (usually American Sign Language) for communication. Many individuals with hearing impairments use a hearing aid.	Athletes who are blind require the support of guides or pilots in some sports, and the trust relationship between the athlete and his or her guide is of great importance. Many deaf athletes compete in a very wide range of able-bodied sports, and in addition take part in events like the Deaf Olympics. Although participation in most sports presents no problem, accommodations have to be made to ensure that athletes who are deaf (for example, those who cannot hear a whistle) can receive and understand decisions made by referees and other officials. Coloured flags can be a useful way to do this.	There is considerable evidence that children and youth who have visual impairments or are blind have lower levels of fitness than their able-bodied peers, while at the same time needing to use more energy in activities of daily life. In addition, sport participation may improve balance and coordination as well as cardiovascular health. People who are deaf or who have a hearing impairment benefit from sport in the same ways as people with no disability	Athletes who are blind or deaf need well-established alternate signals to alert them to any dangers. It is particularly important to have them clearly understand a "stop immediately" signal, so that in the event of a developing situation they can be alerted and prevented from continuing into danger. In the case of contact activities, athletes with a hearing impairment who are involved in mainstream sport may not be able to benefit from verbal warnings or other messages from teammates or from the coach, and alternate communication strategies need to be developed.	Sensory impairments mean that alternate communication strategies need to be developed by the coach. For athletes who are visually impaired or blind, clear, concise verbal instructions coupled with physically guiding the athlete through the movement works well. Athletes who have been blind from birth or an early age have greater difficulty creating internal visualizations of skills and strategies than do those who lose their sight later in life when sport skills have been acquired. It may take much longer for an athlete who is blind to internalize sport experiences. For athletes who are deaf or have a hearing impairment, clear demonstrations and visual cues work well. Recruiting a volunteer who can sign instructions to the athlete can be a great help.	Don't give in to frustration – using new and different forms of communication can take time to develop. If you relax, the athlete will too, and that will help you both. Make sure that the athletes can use their available senses to best advantage. For blind athletes, try to coach in a quiet environment where they will have least trouble hearing instructions. Keep instructions short, clear and to the point. Make some noise when approaching the athletes so that you don't startle them, and use the athletes' names when speaking to them so that they know they are being addressed and can focus their attention. For athletes who are deaf or have a hearing impairment, ensure that they have a clear view of your face and lips and that background distractions are reduced to the minimum. Speak normally – don't exaggerate your lip and mouth movements; it doesn't help and probably hinders communication.

Don't be afraid to ask questions!

Les Autres

Description: The category of Les Autres (the others) covers many different disabilities that do not fit within the other disability categories (e.g. clubfoot, dwarfism, etc). The people in this diverse group of athletes may be in this classification as a result of congenital or acquired conditions.

Considerations for coaches: Because of the wide range of disabilities that make up this category, it is almost impossible to provide any all-encompassing guidelines beyond talking to the athletes and, of course, the parents, guardians, or caregivers. The general recommendations below should also be considered by coaches:

- During workouts, coaches should encourage the athletes to indicate what they can and cannot do.
- The intensity, duration, and complexity of athletic activities should be extended slowly and progressively.
- From a safety point of view, coaches should pay attention to the loss of sensation in the affected limbs of some athletes; this is an important consideration to ensure limbs are not being damaged during exercise.



Sports in which athletes with a disability train and compete, and classifications for competition purposes

Canadian Paralympic Committee sports

The following summer and winter sports fall under the umbrella of the Canadian Paralympic Committee. A classification system based on the degree of function loss presented by the disability is in place to ensure fair competition among athletes.

Summer sports

Archery, athletics, boccia, cycling, equestrian, fencing, football 5-a-side, football 7-a-side, goalball, judo, powerlifting, rowing, sailing, shooting, swimming, table tennis, tennis, wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby, sitting volleyball.

Winter sports

Alpine skiing, curling, Nordic (cross country and biathlon) skiing, sledge hockey.

At the Paralympic Games, Canada currently competes in all summer and winter sports with the exception of football (soccer) and sitting volleyball.

Paralympic classification system

Classification is simply a structure for competition. Not unlike wrestling, boxing, and weightlifting, where athletes are categorized by weight classes, athletes with disabilities are grouped in classes defined by the degree of functional ability. It is important for coaches to ensure that their athletes are classified both appropriately and early in their training and competition process.

Classes are determined by a variety of processes that may include a physical and technical assessment as well as observation in and out of competition. The classes are defined by each sport and form part of the sport rules. Classification is both an ongoing and an evolving process. When an athlete starts competing, she or he is allocated a class that may be reviewed throughout the athlete's career. Sports certify individuals to conduct the process of classification, and these officials are known as classifiers. More specific details about the Paralympic classification system applicable to a sport can be obtained by contacting the Canadian Paralympic Committee or the national sport organization in question.

Deaflympics sports

The following sports are in the program of the Deaflympics, the Olympic games for people with a hearing disability: athletics, badminton, basketball, cycling, football (soccer), handball, orienteering, shooting, swimming, table tennis, tennis, tenpin bowling, volleyball – beach, volleyball – indoors, waterpolo, wrestling, alpine skiing, curling, ice hockey, nordic skiing, snowboarding.



Special Olympics sports

Special Olympics Canada recognizes certain summer and winter sports as being “official sports”. Other sports, which are not suitable for athletes with an intellectual disability or which pose particular risks for their safety or health, are referred to as “prohibited sports”. In addition to the list of official sports below, provincial/territorial organizations governing Special Olympic programs (known as chapters) can add specific development sports. Depending on where they live in the country, coaches may wish to contact a specific chapter to discuss other additional sport opportunities.

Summer sports

Aquatics, athletics (track and field), five-pin and ten-pin bowling, powerlifting, rhythmic gymnastics, soccer, softball.

Winter sports

Alpine skiing, curling, figure skating, floor hockey, Nordic (cross country) skiing, snowshoeing, speed skating.

Prohibited sports

Prohibited sports are those that do not meet the minimum health and safety standards of Special Olympics Canada or Special Olympics International or that present a potential danger to its athletes.

The following prohibited sports and events are not part of any Special Olympics competition, event, training program or clinic:

Athletics: discus, hammer throw, javelin, pole vault, triple jump

Aquatics: platform dives

Gymnastics: trampoline

Nordic skiing: biathlon, Nordic jumping

Contact sports: all contact sports, including American football, boxing, judo, karate, martial arts, rugby, wrestling

Other: fencing, shooting

Divisioning

Special Olympics Canada does not “classify” athletes for competition purposes. Rather, a system called “divisioning” is used. Divisioning is a process by which individual athletes and teams are grouped to ensure fair competition for athletes at all ability levels. The divisioning process can be applied to individual competitions such as aquatics, athletics, and skiing, and also to team sports, such as softball, soccer, and floor hockey. The primary divisioning factor is the Special Olympics athlete's ability; secondary factors are the athlete's age and gender.

More specific details about the divisioning system used by Special Olympics Canada can be found on the organization's web site at <http://www.specialolympics.ca> or by contacting one of the provincial/territorial chapters.



Perspective from the coaches

Jeff Snyder: Sledge hockey

The first time Jeff Snyder saw a sledge hockey player get knocked out of his sled, he was quick to the rescue ... a little too quick. “The player didn’t want any of my sympathy,” says Snyder, an insurance broker in Elmira, Ont. “I really respected that. These guys are hockey players who happen to have a disability, not disabled hockey players.”

Snyder is the head coach of Canada's national sledge hockey team, the only sledge hockey team he has ever coached. Sledge players strap their legs into a sled with a skate runner underneath and propel themselves across the ice with a pair of sawed-off hockey sticks that have picks on the butt ends. Snyder joined the program in 2002, and it was his first experience coaching athletes with a disability. Snyder previously was coach of the Ontario Hockey League's Kitchener Rangers from 1998 to 2001, one circuit below the National Hockey League.

“I found the attitude of the sledge hockey players very refreshing,” says Snyder. “They weren’t facing the same pressures and objectives as the juniors, who are obviously very concerned with hockey being a livelihood in the near to immediate future.

“In sledge hockey, I find my coaching is having a greater impact on the players and the players are more receptive to it. It was easier to adjust than I thought, because there are many similarities to able-bodied hockey.”

Snyder faced some initial worries when he started coaching sledge hockey. “I wondered how my experience in coaching able-bodied hockey would transfer over,” he says. “I was pretty honest with the players at the beginning. I told them it was going to be a learning process for me to see what works.” One of the first challenges for Snyder was assessing the talent level of his players. The team is split between paraplegic and amputee players. “There’s not a big pool of players in this sport, so there was a talent gap at the beginning,” he says. “And I think at first I made my drills too complicated. I always try to keep it simple, and I feel we’ve narrowed that gap. It’s been beneficial to all.” Snyder says some drills are the same as in able-bodied hockey, such as puck handling, shooting, and one-on-one drills. One different drill is teaching the players to shoot with both hands. “It’s a great move when you can slip the puck under your sled with one hand and then shoot with the other.”

In the end, there’s no secret recipe to making his players better. “If you want to be successful you have to work hard in practice and compete hard in games.”



Laurent Daignault: Short track speed skating

Speed skating is not a common sport for people with a disability, yet one of the biggest success stories for an athlete with a disability is Chantale Sévigny, a member of Canada's short track speed skating team. Sévigny is deaf, but she has overcome the odds to enjoy an 11-year career on the national team and was a member of the 1998 Olympic team.

Her coach is Laurent Daignault, an Olympic medallist himself in 1992.

Communication stands as the biggest challenge for an athlete with a hearing impairment. Sévigny can lip read, and her talking skills are improving constantly. Daignault says that it is crucial to face Sévigny when speaking to her. In large group discussions, she can lose the train of conversation.

"Sometimes those discussions bounce all over the place, and we forget she can't hear anything and she can lose the meaning of the discussion. Anytime we have a group meeting, we see her afterwards and recap what was discussed," says Daignault.

Developing a social rapport with Sévigny was one of Daignault's big worries when he first started coaching her. "My biggest worry at first was whether she would always understand what we were saying and whether we would be able to talk to her to get to know her better. But she has always blended in well with the group. We talk to her to make sure her needs are met. And we always keep it simple at her request."

"Right from the start it is crucial for the coach to demystify the disability by communicating with the person."

But Daignault says that athletes also must make efforts. "It's also important that someone like Chantale finds ways to express her thoughts and feelings. The last couple of years she has been much better in that area. She's not a demanding person by nature, so it was hard at first to get her to express herself."

In training and competition, Daignault says Sévigny has developed almost another sense. She can't hear skates slice through ice, whether they are her own or those of an approaching opponent, but Sévigny's strength on the ice is her anticipation. In the relay, the coaches have developed strategies in practice with Sévigny so that the exchanges go smoothly. Coaches communicate with Sévigny during races mainly with hand signals, but she can also read lips on the fly when she whizzes by the coaches. "There has to be visual communication," says Daignault. "For our team, it has not been a big problem for everyone to adapt. No one has complained about it. We're always vigilant when she's on the ice, but she doesn't get more attention than any other skater."

At the start of the race, Sévigny obviously can't hear the starter's gun. Therefore, when Sévigny is at the starting line, the starter always moves up so that he or she is full view of the skaters. This procedure is in place around the world when Sévigny competes. The coaches are responsible for assuring that the starter is informed of Sévigny's presence at the line.

"Our experience with Chantale has been very rewarding," says Daignault, who has coached the 28-year-old since the 1990s. "And that has nothing to do with her hearing impairment. It's her personality, her eagerness to learn, and her work ethics".



James Hood: Swimming

One of James Hood's best memories as a coach doesn't concern gold, silver, or bronze medals.

Two of his female CP swimmers were practising hard in the pool not only for competitions but also for a scheduled Caribbean cruise trip. Both athletes were polishing their swimming skills nicely, logging one or two kilometres a day in the pool. But they never used the ladder to enter and exit the pool. Their method of entry and exit was by rolling over on the side.

"Using the ladder was something we just never enforced," says Hood, the head swimming coach for the 1992 Paralympic team. "And I just thought it would make their trip so much more enjoyable if they could use the ladder. I certainly felt that they had the capabilities to do it."

For two weeks, Hood helped the pair master the ladder in the pool through repetition of exercises. "It made them feel much more like everybody else," Hood says. "I still talk to them on a regular basis, and they still mention the story. It had such an impact for them outside of sport."

Bob Kierstead: Shooting

Bob Kierstead hit a bull's eye when he decided he would make a pact with his adult-aged shooters with a disability. He agreed that he would teach them the fine art of marksmanship if they would teach him how to work with people with a disability.

It was 10 years ago that Kierstead, Canada's legendary shooting coach who has developed numerous Olympians, brought his expertise to people with a disability. Since then the sport of shooting has developed into one of the most successful integrated programs in the country.

Kierstead was the head coach of the Canadian shooting team at the 2004 Paralympic Games. "When I started out I told them I would conduct practices the same way as with able-bodied people to see how it worked," says Kierstead, who lives in Fredericton. "From there we would be able to make the necessary modifications."

One of Kierstead's most successful methods to learn how to coach shooters with a disability was simply to sit in the wheelchair himself to get some perspective on what his athletes were experiencing. "I've found out what it's like to get into washroom stalls in a wheelchair and wheeled around restaurants. I've spent a lot of time in the chair, feeling the world as a person in the wheelchair does both in the real world and at the range. The shooters with a disability helped me through all of this and they really facilitated the transition for me to coach people with a disability."

What has impressed Kierstead the most over the years is how much determination persons with a disability display in his programs. "All day long, they are removing roadblocks," he says. "So they just go at everything as they do at life. And I thought, 'This is a great bunch to work with for a coach.' They are positive, upbeat and motivated."

From the start, Kierstead has integrated able-bodied athletes and athletes with a disability in his programs and training camps. He says that, often, the able-bodied are not comfortable with that situation because they have never experienced it before. "What is funny sometimes is that an able-bodied person will raise his voice to the person in the wheelchair. And the person in the wheelchair responds that he is paralyzed but can hear very well. It can be a slow process for some to reach a comfort level to interact with a person with a disability. "A good solution for bonding is to get the able-bodied person in a wheelchair and get that perspective."

Appendix 3: Perspective from the coaches

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At national shooting championships, able-bodied and wheelchair shooters compete side by side but are scored in separate categories. At lower club levels, they compete head on. Most shooters are persons who use a wheelchair, but there are also leg and arm amputees.

There are all kinds of devices and gadgets that have been designed to help shooters with a disability compete comfortably, such as special stands and gun-loading machines. “There’s no store to go and buy what they need,” says Kierstead. “We just sit there and work from the chair and design the needed equipment on the spot.”

Surprisingly, the sport of shooting isn’t at the top of the list for people with a disability. It’s a lifelong sport, with competition and recreational opportunities for young and old; there’s no gender or age specification. Kierstead brings new recruits to local competitions, where they’ll usually witness some national team members in action and meet them afterward.

For Kierstead, the biggest difference between coaching able-bodied athletes and those with a disability is the physical aspect. “You’re carrying, hauling, lugging, dragging, setting up, tearing down, transferring in and out the equipment and chairs,” he says. “That’s something a coach should be prepared for. A good sense of humour, of course, is recommended.”

But Kierstead wouldn’t trade his place with anyone and says that grassroots coaches should capitalize on the opportunity to coach a person with a disability. “You are going to challenge your coaching skills and you are going to find that you’re working with a focused and motivated group of people. What coach would pass that up?”

Elizabeth Roman: Figure skating

Elizabeth Roman coaches both able-bodied athletes and Special Olympians — athletes with an intellectual disability — at the North Surrey (B.C.) Skating Club in integrated sessions. Sometimes it’s hard to differentiate one from the other. And Roman wouldn’t have it any other way.

Ten years ago, when she integrated her first Special Olympian into her program, the veteran coach crossed some rough patches with parents and administrators. But she also opened minds and showed that an integrated program, one that is still questioned to this day at other figure skating clubs in Canada, can work.

“I always felt that skating is skating, so it can’t be that much different for Special Olympians,” says Roman, who has 13 mainstream and two special Olympians in her registered program and volunteers time to 10 other Special Olympians as well. “And a coach is a coach. I think if we get technical about it, everybody has some kind of disability.”

“So I just look at people’s ability and not their disability. We work toward their capabilities and focus on their strengths. Usually I encourage the Special Olympians to go through the Learn to Skate program initially so we have a good idea of their skill level and fitness when they arrive in the program.”

Roman admits that she lucked out when she started coaching her first Special Olympian in 1996, because hardly anyone could tell that the skater was different on the ice. “My first Special Olympian was completely physically able,” she says. “That made a difference, because no one realized that there was a special need. That skater opened the doors, and now I coach Special Olympians with various levels of disabilities. Today people support the program, but we still have the occasional doubter.”

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At the World Winter Games for Special Olympians held in Japan in 2005, Roman's skaters won two gold and a silver medal. "Now the clubs brag about their Special Olympians," says Roman. "Their pictures are plastered all over the noticeboards with World Champion beside their names. In some cases that's how the other kids find out that that skater in their group is in fact a Special Olympian. They never even knew. I don't make an issue of it."

Perhaps Roman's greatest attribute is her determination as a coach. Don't tell her she can't do something, because her nature is to prove you wrong. "I don't know why I'm like that, but I guess that helps my coaching," she says. "Coaching figure skating to Special Olympians was an interesting new challenge for me. But I discovered that there wasn't much difference with mainstream skaters. Just the approach was sometimes different, and I had to think of different ways to explain things. "A key to making Special Olympians feel comfortable is constant positive thought."

Roman has never worried too much about politically correct language for instructing Special Olympians. She isn't worried that she could hurt their feelings or insult them with a wrong turn of a phrase. "The only thing I avoid is 'You can't'. My belief is that they understand that my heart is in the right place. If I make a mistake in what I say, they'll know that I didn't mean it in a negative way."

"I can't spend my time worrying. I have to spend it giving."





Excerpt from “Sport for People with Disability - Final Report COACHING”

Access – the availability of programs, services and facilities to persons with a disability. It also refers to attitudes and support systems that ensure that persons with a disability can be participating and contributing members.

Accessibility – promotion of the functional independence of individuals through the elimination of disadvantages.

Accommodation – the providing of the supports necessary for a person with a disability to participate.

Adapt – to change something (the activity or environment, not the individual) to make it more suitable.

Acquired – not present at birth.

Adventitious – a loss of ability acquired through accident or disease.

Barrier – an obstruction which prohibits movement, personal growth, or access to activities, services or resources. Barriers can be attitudinal, physical, or systemic.

Classification – a system whereby athletes are divided according to degree of disability, to promote competition against peers in level of ability.

Congenital – present at birth.

Disability – reduction of functional ability resulting from impairment.

Divisioning - The fundamental difference which sets Special Olympics competitions apart from those of other sport organizations is that athletes of all ability levels are encouraged to participate and every athlete is recognized for his or her performance. Competitions are structured so that athletes compete with other athletes of similar ability in equitable divisions.

Dysmelia - Congenital abnormality characterized by missing or foreshortened limbs, sometimes with associated spine abnormalities; caused by metabolic disturbance at the time of limb development.

Equality – treating people the same despite their differences, or treating them as equals by accommodating their differences.

Equity – rules and principles based on fairness, justice, and equality of outcome.

Impairment – anatomic, physiological, or functional loss, which may or may not result in a disability.

Inclusive – everyone can participate equitably.

Inclusion – the inclusive process whereby everyone is included in a regular or mainstream program, service, or other component of society. The key word is include.

Integration – the process whereby individuals participate in a full continuum of experiences, for example in sport.

Intervener – an individual who provides a communication link between a person who is deaf-blind and a sighted, hearing person, and in specific circumstances, between a person who is deaf-blind and their environment.

Invisible disability – a disability which is not immediately apparent upon meeting an individual.

Sign language interpreter - an individual who facilitates communication between a person who is deaf and a hearing person.

Appendix 5: Disability Awareness

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Persons with a disability should be described in words and expressions that portray them with dignity. The following guidelines and terms are supported by some 200 organizations that represent or are associated with Canadians with a disability.

In general, remember to:

- describe the person, not the disability
- refer to a person's disability only when it is relevant
- avoid images designed to evoke pity or guilt
- ask before offering assistance
- address the person, not his or her assistant
- ask if in doubt; most persons with a disability will be more than willing to help you.

Use...	Instead of...
Person with a disability	Disabled, handicapped, crippled
Person who has ... or, person with ...	Crippled by, afflicted with, suffering from, victim of, deformed
Person who is mobility impaired	Lame
Person who uses a wheelchair	Confined, bound, restricted to or dependent on a wheelchair
Person who is deaf, hard of hearing	Deaf and dumb, deaf mute, hearing impaired
Person with a developmental or intellectual disability	Retarded, mentally retarded
Person with cerebral palsy	Spastic (as a noun)
Person with a physical disability	Physically challenged
Person with a mental illness, person who has schizophrenia, person who has ...	Mental patient, mentally ill, mental, insane
Person with a learning disability	Learning disabled, learning difficulty
Person who is visually impaired, blind	Visually impaired (as a collective noun)

Appendix 6: Organizations that can help

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Organization	Address	Telephone / Fax	Internet Site
Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability	720 Belfast Rd., Suite 104 Ottawa, ON, K1G 0Z5	Toll-free: 1-800-771-0663 Tel: (613) 244-0052 Fax: (613) 244-4857	www.ala.ca
Canadian Association for Disabled Skiing	27 Beechwood Avenue, Suite 310 Ottawa, ON, K1M 1M2	Tel: (613) 842-5223 Fax: (613) 842-7533	www.disabledskiing.ca
Canadian Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance	403 - 2197 Riverside Drive Ottawa, ON, K1H 7X3	Toll-free: 1-800-663-8708 Tel: (613) 523-1348 Fax: (613) 523-1206	www.cahperd.ca/eng/index.cfm
Canadian Blind Sports Association			www.canadianblindsports.org
Canadian Cerebral Palsy Sports Association	305 - 1376 Bank Street Ottawa, ON, K1H 7Y3	Toll-free: 1-866-247-9934 Tel: (613) 748-1430 Fax: (613) 748-1355	www.ccpsa.ca
Canadian Deaf Sports Association	4545 Avenue Pierre-de Coubertin CP 1000, Succ. M, Montreal, Quebec, H1V 3R2	Toll-free: 1-800-855-0511 TTY: (514) 252-3069 Fax: (514) 252-3213	www.assc-cdsa.com
Canadian Paralympic Committee	85 Albert St., Suite 1401 Ottawa, ON, K1P 6A4	Tel: (613) 569-4333 Fax: (613) 569-2777	www.paralympic.ca
Canadian Wheelchair Basketball Association	2211 Riverside Drive, Suite B2 Ottawa, ON, K1H 7X5	Tel: (613) 260-1296 Fax: (613) 260-1456	www.cwba.ca
Canadian Wheelchair Sports Association	2255 St-Laurent Blvd., Suite 108 Ottawa, ON, K1G 4K3	Tel: (613) 523-0004 Fax: (613) 523-0149	www.cwsa.ca
Coaching Association of Canada	141 Laurier Ave West, Suite 300 Ottawa, ON, K1P 5J3	Tel: (613) 235-5000 Fax: (613) 235-9500	www.coach.ca
Directory of National Sport Organizations			www.coach.ca/e/partners/nsf.htm
Special Olympics Canada	60 St Clair Avenue E, Suite 700 Toronto, ON, M4T 2N5	Tel: (416) 927-9050 Fax: (416) 927-8475	www.specialolympics.ca
Sport Canada	16th Floor, 15 Eddy Gatineau, Quebec, K1A 0M5	Toll-free: 1-866-811-0055 Tel: (819) 956-8003 Fax : (819) 956-8006	www.pch.gc.ca/sportcanada

References and further reading

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