

Disability Sport Coaching: “You just coach the athlete not the disability”.

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Abstract

Disability and parasport provide visibility and representation of disability and disabled people, providing a space where cultural understandings of ‘disability’ can be challenged and reshaped. As a result, disability and parasport is often assumed a ‘non-disabling’ site or associated with disability ‘empowerment’ and identity work, that is resisting and reconstructing negative disability-specific associations. The disability and parasport field, is therefore, replete with the encouragement and development of ‘athlete-first’ or ‘athlete-centred’ discourses. However, few critically interrogate these notions, and as a concept ‘athlete-centred’ has become ‘taken-for-granted’, is presented uncritically and enthusiastically accepted as a ‘good’ for disability and parasport. The purpose of this chapter is to contribute to discourses on the social construction of disability in sport and through coaching. In particular, challenging the notion of ‘coach the athlete not the disability’ discourses as ‘empowerment’, highlighting the sometimes unintended consequences of well-intended actions that reside in in social formations where power relations mediate.

1 **Introduction**

2
3 The importance of understanding the intersection of sport, impairment and disability is
4 considerable. Disability and parasport play an important role in disrupting and challenging
5 cultural beliefs and discourses about disability and disabled people (Howe and Silva, 2016).
6 Indeed, disability and parasport provide a unique platform for the visibility and representation
7 of disability and disabled people, providing a context in which cultural understandings of
8 ‘disability’ can be challenged and reshaped (DePauw, 1997). Disability and parasport is often
9 assumed a ‘non-disabling’ site or associated with disability ‘empowerment’ and identity work,
10 that is, resisting and reconstructing negative disability-specific associations (Ashton-Schaeffer,
11 Gibson and Autry, 2001; Howe and Silva, 2016). As such, the disability and parasport field is
12 replete with the encouragement and development of ‘athlete-first’ or ‘athlete-centred’
13 discourses (Townsend, Huntley, Cushion and Fitzgerald, 2018). However, few critically
14 interrogate these notions, and as a concept ‘athlete-centred’ has become ‘taken-for-granted’, is
15 presented uncritically and enthusiastically accepted as a ‘good’ for disability and parasport. A
16 key tenet of an ‘athlete-centred’ approach is it purports to be ‘power-free’ or attempts to
17 democratize power (Foucault, 1975). This means that disability and parasport is seen as a
18 neutral, benign space where participation is a desirable activity to develop ‘better’ people who
19 are ‘empowered’ or made ‘autonomous’ (Townsend et al., 2018; Cushion & Jones, 2014).

20 As a crucial part of the disability and parasport, disability sport coaching was identified
21 as a priority for research over 30 years ago (DePauw, 1986; DePauw & Gavron, 2005), and an
22 emerging literature has begun discovering something of the complexity of coaching in
23 disability sport (e.g. Tawse, Sabiston, Bloom & Reid, 2012; McMaster, Culver & Werthner,
24 2012; Taylor, Werthner & Culver, 2015). However, most of the established work in disability
25 coaching tends to distance itself from discussions about impairment (e.g. Cregan, Bloom &
26 Reid 2007; Tawse *et al.*, 2012; McMaster *et al.*, 2012) implicitly forcing disability into the

background. Only recently has work looking at coaching in disability sport engaged with models of disability (e.g. Wareham, Burkett, Innes & Lovell, 2017; Townsend Cushion & Smith, 2015). Hence, the interrelationships between disabled people and broader social relations and practices are so far largely unexplored in sporting contexts.

Interrogating disability sport through a critical lens is an important step as coaching is a de-limited field of practice that is “imbued with dominant values and common beliefs that appear natural and are therefore taken-for-granted” (Cushion & Jones, 2014, p. 276). Coaching is a practice where situated discourses of disability, disabled athletes, and the knowledge-practices of coaches are enacted (Townsend, et al., 2018). Because many coaches have limited or no training in coaching disabled athletes (Townsend, et al., 2017), they instead rely largely on experience and informal learning (McMaster, et al., 2012) and therefore lack opportunities to make social and cultural sense of disability (cf. Casper and Talley, 2005). Understanding the ways that coaches think about, respond to, and integrate impairment into their coaching practice provides an important contribution to broader debates about impairment and bodies in the disability sport context (cf. Hughes & Paterson, 1997). Coaches draw on discourses that circulate in the wider culture to construct identities, interventions and practice for disabled athletes. As a result, sport and sport coaching provide a lens through which to analyse the social relations that ‘construct, produce, institutionalise, enact and perform disability’ (Smith & Perrier, 2014, p. 12). Taking ‘disability’ as both socially constructed, culturally fashioned, and lived (Smith & Perrier, 2014; Thomas, 1999), suggests that different cultural fields produce distinctive contextual understandings of disability. Sport as a distinctive cultural field creates some disruptive potential generated from the visibility of disabled people¹ (DePauw, 1997; Ashton-Schaeffer et al., 2001). However, there remains a tension between cultural perceptions

¹ The use of the term “disabled people” reflects our position that disability is a product of social relationships (cf. Thomas, 1999, 2004). This social relational perspective focuses on the various social mechanisms by which people with impairments face disablism within social and cultural contexts.

of disability framed in medical model discourses (cf. DePauw, 1997, Silva & Howe, 2012; Howe & Silva, 2016) and sport, of which coaching is central and a defining practice (Townsend *et al.*, 2016; DePauw, 1997; Silva & Howe, 2012). Therefore, if sport and coaching are to function as a platform for empowerment (Purdue and Howe, 2012a), it is crucial to examine how the social practices of coaching are ‘generated and sustained within social systems and cultural formations’ (Thomas, 1999: 44) such as disability sport. The purpose of this chapter therefore is to contribute to discourses on the social construction of disability in sport and through coaching. In particular extending debate on ‘empowerment’ in sport and highlighting the, sometimes unintended, consequences of well-intended actions. In other words, the chapter focuses on deconstructing taken-for-granted conditions that disabled people face, exacerbated in social formations where power relations mediate who has voice, autonomy and identity, and who does not.

‘Coach the athlete not the disability’

In the disability sport context, coaches both produce and are the products of certain discourses about disability that have a direct impact on the coaching and training practices adopted. For instance, while disabled people are usually understood symbolically, only insofar as they “deviate from a prescribed set of norms” (Edwards and Imrie, 2003, p. 244) and disability sport itself is structured according to categorical approaches to disability (DePauw, 1997), within disability sport there is a tension between disabled identities and identities that have more symbolic value, such as ‘Paralympian’ or ‘elite athlete’ (Townsend, *et al.*, 2018). To look past an athlete’s impairment is commonly assumed to be an empowering position that transforms disabled athletes’ identities from being “disability-based to sport-based” (Le Clair, 2011: 1113). A more critical look at such rhetoric, however, reveals a nuanced position in which disability is understood in relation to able-bodied norms within the social structure of sport.

Coaching, therefore, is a “product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 6) where coaches are afforded the power to impose the ‘legitimate definition of a particular class of body’ (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 362). The implications for claims of ‘empowerment’ are important because for disabled athletes, social structure and power are determining of their identity but not individual autonomy. Hence, by adhering to discourses such as ‘coach the athlete, not the disability’, the range of agentic choices and strategies available for athletes to shape their experiences are limited. In other words, disabled athletes are required to adhere to particular definitions of self which may be oppressive rather than ‘empowering’ but are labelled as the latter.

The notion of empowerment is complex and contested within disability sport (e.g. Howe & Silva, 2016; Purdue & Howe, 2012), mainly because there is no consensus as to a universal definition. However, a common feature evident within disability sport research is the notion of ‘gaining’ or ‘having’ power. Here, following Purdue and Howe’s (2012) example, empowerment is defined as a ‘multi-level construct that involves people assuming control and mastery over their lives in the context of their social and political environment’ (Wallerstein, 1992, p. 198). In light of this definition an immediate issue arises with the facile nature of ‘coaching the athlete not the disability’, when it contributes nothing of substance to the idea of ‘control and mastery’ over a person’s life. Indeed, within the para coaching literature, there is an assumption that having a disability limits sporting potential (e.g. Tawse et al, 2012).

Consequently, to impose an identity on a disabled person as ‘athlete’ whilst seemingly progressive (e.g. Cregan et al., 2007; McMaster, et al, 2012) and offering escape from the trappings of the disabled body in fact constructs a boundary of acceptance within the sporting context. For example, in Powis’s (2018) study of disabled cricketers, players found that ‘incorporating their disability into an athletic identity’ removed the ‘stigma’ of being visually impaired and made it more ‘palatable’ (p. 12). However, a consequence of this was to be

accepted as an ‘athlete’ meant disability was pushed to the background or denied. Similarly, Townsend et al. (2018) found that coaching in both Paralympic and disability sport constructed a logic of practice that acted as the ‘principal locus’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 89) for the production of generative schemes, hierarchies and classifying systems about disability. This included the production and maintenance of ‘able bodied high-performance values’ that had important implications for the social construction of disability. ‘Coaching the athlete not the disability’ became a process of misrecognition that assimilated disability into more valued performance discourses assuming this to be ‘empowerment’. This had a dual function. On one hand, coaches were encouraged to look beyond the ‘disability’ in order to challenge and develop the players. On the other hand, there were tensions whereby the distance between disability and sport was maximised. These conditions meant that the language of coaching framed in terms of ‘empowerment’ was, in fact, a method where coaches had the ‘power to impose the legitimate mode of thought’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 170) about coaching disabled athletes. For the athletes, the power to challenge these coaching discourses was not located in individual autonomy but constrained within stratified social configurations that had all the appearances of being a liberating structure that was actually oppressive. In this sense, under certain conditions ‘coach the athlete not the disability as empowerment’ is largely taken-for granted that is fundamentally linked to issues of power, ideology and domination.

This perspective has, in some respects, some familiarity with the application of the social model of disability, where ‘empowerment’ reflects access to a normative view of the social world – in this case sport – and in doing so disability arguably disappears. Hence several researchers promote the view of the ‘(in)visibility of disability’ (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Cregan, et al, 2007; McMaster et al, 2012) to the extent that disabled athletes can be viewed as the same as their nondisabled counterparts. However, as the research described suggests, such an approach uncritically applied can have unintended consequence where able-bodied sporting

1 and performance norms are projected onto disabled athletes without question. Therefore,
2 empowerment in this case may mean leaving the 'disabled body' but does not provide
3 individuals with control and mastery of their lives.

4 Importantly, once an athlete identity has been placed on the disabled participant, as
5 Townsend et al. (2018) have shown, coaches act as gatekeepers, with the power to impose the
6 values and expectations associated with the sport on their athletes. These expectations often
7 centre on the need for professional approaches and elite lifestyles (e.g. Cregan et al., 2007;
8 Powis, 2018; Tawse et al., 2012). For example, the coaches in Tawse et al., (2012) study
9 highlighted the need to foster an 'elite mindset' that reflected the increase professionalism of
10 the sport. However, in this study of coaches of spinal cord injured players, the reality of the
11 impaired body was integral to the coaching process. So, whilst a performance identity was the
12 focus, coaches had to consider the disruptive nature of acquiring a SCI which required players
13 regain confidence to undertake new and also return to previous exploits. The outworking of
14 this meant players were encouraged to become independent or learn how to manage their new
15 'body's'. Consequently, the disabled body was not invisible but real and for players with newly
16 acquired injuries, engaging with veterans in the sport offered opportunity to learn some mastery
17 of their physical life. However, positioning impairment in this way aligns with medical model
18 views of disability, where the focus is on overcoming the 'problem' of a changing
19 dysfunctional body. The medical model has historically been dominant in understanding
20 disability and positioning research (Smith & Perrier, 2014). The central focus of the medical
21 model frames impairment as the *cause* of disability (Swain, French, & Cameron, 2003) and
22 therefore the only limiting factor in coaching. From a medical model perspective, the disabled
23 athlete is an object to be 'educated ... observed, tested, measured, treated, psychologised ...
24 materialised through a multitude of disciplinary practices and institutional discourses'
25 (Goodley, 2011, p. 114). Medical model discourses in sport promote a dominant consciousness

1 where all problems are instrumental or technical problems to be solved and that coaching is
2 fundamentally about improving sporting performance against the limitations athletes with a
3 disability have. These practices are often so accepted that they influence, to greater or lesser
4 extent, coaching frameworks that coaches draw upon and as such complicate further notions
5 of ‘empowerment’.

6 A clear limitation of the research presented so far, is the exclusion of athletes’ voices
7 and the limited theoretical lens applied to understanding the complexity of empowerment.
8 Townsend et al., (2018) revealed the powerful socializing effects of coaching on athletes in the
9 disability sport context. As already discussed, coaches’ notions of empowerment were based
10 on performance ideals associated with rejection of disability and the foregrounding of ability.
11 Subsequently, coaches reported giving ownership of the coaching process to their athletes. In
12 this case, athletes had assimilated the coaches’ message of rejecting their disabled identities in
13 favour of a sporting identity ‘an Olympian’, ‘a pro’. This meant that the discourse of
14 empowerment centered on a ‘disability-ability’ continuum (Howe & Silva, 2016), where the
15 level of athlete ability, and striving for a particular athlete identity overshadowed the need to
16 associate or disassociate with disability. As such, coaches continually challenged their players
17 to overcome their limitations literally pushing athletes to ‘blood, sweat and tears’ (Townsend
18 et al., 2018), thus misrecognizing notions of empowerment for coach defined ideals. Similarly,
19 reflecting on the elite sport environment of visually impaired cricket players Powis (2018)
20 concluded ‘a number of participants did feel empowered by elite visually impaired cricket; yet
21 their empowerment was at the expense of other less-able players’ (p. 15). In these examples,
22 coaching as while paradoxically acting as a form of control over athletes. Thus, empowerment
23 in some cases could be considered an illusion that masks the very nature of the workings of
24 power.

Research within disability sport has allowed the notion of empowerment to be deconstructed which has implication for its derivatives such as ‘athlete-centered’ or ‘holistic-coaching’. In this respect, whilst the disability sport field may be understood as a site of resistance, whereby disabled athletes can be ‘empowered’, it may be further conceptualised as a site of domination whereby coaches and coaching position disability in opposition to certain sporting ideals around ‘performance’. As Townsend et al. (2018) argue, these understandings are often accepted and unquestioned within the structural conditions, constituting a taken-for-granted view of coaching that ‘flows from practical sense’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 68). This section as showed that notions of ‘coaching the athlete not the disability’ framed as ‘empowerment’ cannot be separated from, and must be considered in relation to, ‘power’ and how this is expressed and experience within different contexts and by different relationships.

How coaches can foreground disability and issues of power – the social relational model

It has been suggested that sport provides a context that can challenge and influence the social and cultural perceptions of disability and disabled people (Howe and Silva, 2016). Indeed, disability sport provides a platform for the visibility of disability in ways that understandings of ‘disability’ can be challenged and reshaped (DePauw, 1997). This is because situating disability in disability sport produces a unique tension between disability identity and athletic ideals (Townsend, et al., 2018). The disabled body is “a bearer of symbolic value” (Shilling, 2003, p. 111), which has important considerations for coaches who act as powerful figures in enabling disabled people to access sport and provide inclusive opportunities for developing independence, respect and agency as athletes. In this sense, coaches act as central figures in constructing, producing, institutionalising and enacting ideas and beliefs about disability and disabled people (Smith and Perrier, 2014; Townsend et al., 2018).

While this chapter has highlighted the potentially subversive effects of ‘athlete-first’ ideals in terms of promoting ableism and ‘normative’ ideals about coaching (cf. Townsend et

al., 2018) it is worth considering how coaches can act as advocates for disabled people, recognising the social barriers that are imposed *on top of* the very real and direct effects that impairment can have on disabled peoples' lives (Oliver, 1992; Thomas, 1999). Indeed, introducing the concept of disability, framed by models of disability, helps to shed light on issues of access, equity, inclusion while recognising that impairment can and does play a role in athletic performance. For instance, the social relational model (Thomas, 1999) is a key reflective tool for coaches to assimilate into their practice as it focuses attention on structural barriers that inhibit coaching practice. This model focuses on the various social mechanisms by which people with impairments can be disabled within sporting contexts. The focus of the social relational model therefore is on the social construction of disability in different contexts and its use helps to analyse the production of knowledge about disability where social relations comprise the "sedimented past and projected future of a stream of interaction" (Crossley 2011, p. 35).

Using a social relational model in coaching is useful as it highlights the unique construction of knowledge between coaches, athletes and the contexts in which they are situated. The model enables researchers to analyse the understandings of disability at individual, social and cultural levels (Martin, 2013) of coaching and coach education. Recognition and acceptance of the effects of impairment, as described in the social relational model, is an important factor for coaches to consider. Impairment can and does limit engagement in sport. Indeed, the psycho-emotional factors associated with disability such as low self-esteem, low motivation and low self-efficacy can be understood as a product of what Fitzgerald (2005) termed the paradigm of normativity within sport, where disabled people are defined insofar as they deviate from ableist 'norms' of sporting ability. However, impairment effects can only be 'disabling' in social formations which do not account for them – by recognising the disablism embedded in such normative expectations, affirmative environment

1 can be created whereby athletes are celebrated for their ability to show progression and
2 development. Furthermore, by attempting to shape a coaching environment that has high-levels
3 of contact with the players and their support systems (e.g. families), create coaching sessions
4 designed to facilitate player learning, independence and autonomy (Fitzgerald, 2005), and
5 provide opportunities for feedback, the effects of impairment are considered, but are not the
6 central focus of coaching. Using a social relational model can give greater appreciation,
7 recognition and power to the athletes in the construction of their sporting experiences (Richard,
8 Joncheray & Dugas, 2015).

9 Thinking about coaching in light of the social relational model can include, for instance,
10 highlight the disabling nature of access to facilities, lack of visible disability sport opportunities
11 as well as a lack of or difficulty implementing inclusive policies in mainstream sports.
12 Furthermore, Thomas (1999) highlights the impact of relational barriers on constructing
13 disability. In coaching these might include disabling stereotypes, lack of coaching knowledge
14 about routine adaptations to practice, and behaviours that inhibit full inclusion of disabled
15 people (exclusive and disabling language, communication difficulties, attitudes towards
16 inclusion). Finally, coaching within the social relational model emphasises a dialogue with
17 athletes, parents, support workers and coaching and support staff to understand their individual
18 needs and build individualised support systems. Such an approach promotes full participation
19 and autonomy while avoiding criticisms about prescriptions *for* coaching based on generalised
20 assumptions about impairment. With the potential of these examples, implementing models of
21 disability into coach education and coaching practice might be considered an important first
22 step in establishing genuine ‘athlete-centred’ coaching (Townsend and Cushion, 2018).
23 Another important step in this process is the development of coach education and development.

24
25 **Coach education, issues and ways ahead**

1 As Townsend and Cushion (2018) argue, whilst coach education is a crucial feature of coach
2 development, coaches are generally not trained in the specific circumstances of many disability
3 contexts (Bush & Silk 2012, Tawse *et al.*, 2012). More often than not, disability coach
4 education provision tends to occupy a separate and distinct ‘space’ from ‘mainstream’ coach
5 education (Bush & Silk 2012) reflecting the ‘highly fragmented’ nature of disability sport
6 (Thomas and Guett 2014, p. 390). This means that the ongoing professionalisation of the
7 disability coaching pathway is inhibited as coaches face a lack of structured, disability-specific
8 coach education opportunities (McMaster *et al.* 2012, Taylor *et al.* 2015). Therefore, coaching
9 knowledge and practices are often derived from informal and non-formal sources and coaches
10 are left to self-medicate by taking knowledge generated outside of disability contexts and
11 grounding their understanding in material and experiential conditions in disability sport.
12 Furthermore, research investigating disability coach education has shown how the process of
13 coach development in disability sport often focuses overly on impairment, to such an extent
14 that coach education positions athletes as ‘problems’ for coaches and coaching to overcome.
15 Such a perspective is reinforced when coach education reduces disability to ‘adaptations’ or
16 ‘modifications’ designed to increase coaches’ ‘confidence’ to work with disabled people
17 (Townsend *et al.*, 2017), thus perpetuating exclusion in coaching despite inclusive lexicon.

18 In disability sport, the training of coaches is considered one of the most pressing matters
19 in sustaining and improving the quality of sports provision for disabled people (Townsend, *et*
20 *al.*, 2017). The success of disability sport in realising wider social inclusion objectives is
21 predicated on a high-quality, inclusive and appropriately trained coaching providing quality
22 opportunities for disabled people. Currently disability specific coach education opportunities
23 play only a minor role in coach development in disability sport meaning that coaches are often
24 ‘dropped in at the deep end’ of disability sport (Townsend *et al.*, 2017) and have to negotiate

1 a learning process characterised by ‘trial and error’, through a largely self-referential practice
2 of reflection (Taylor, et al., 2015).

3 There is a critical need then to understand and outline some ways forward for disability
4 coach education. As discussed, the current system in which coaches are ‘educated’ about
5 disability is largely ‘compartmentalised’, meaning that disability coach education is often
6 separate from mainstream coach education pathways (Townsend et al., 2017). This structural
7 situation results in a proliferation of courses and workshops focusing on inclusion, adaptations
8 to coaching practice and impairment-specific workshops that are delivered as reactions to the
9 lack of disability content in formal coach education (cf. DePauw & Goc Karp, 1994). These
10 ‘additive’, passive learning episodes focus on exposure to disability content, and have been
11 criticised for perpetuating generalised stereotypes about impairment and providing an illusion
12 of ‘best practice’ for coaches (Townsend et al., 2017). Such approaches are characterised by
13 separatist thinking and practices reflective of the medical model of disability. Such an
14 educational system necessarily isolates components of a complex coaching process and
15 collapses the distinction between disability and impairment. The result, understandably, is that
16 many coaches highlight a ‘fear of the unknown’ in working with disabled athletes, thus limiting
17 the opportunities for participation in competitive sporting structures and impacting on coaches’
18 ability to provide the conditions for full inclusion.

19 In considering participation in sport and physical activity as a human right (Townsend
20 *et al.*, 2017), coach education directly contributes to a form of disablism. Conversely, educating
21 coaches about the political, social and cultural conditions that impact on disabled peoples’ lives
22 enables coaches to better consider sport as a vehicle for challenging the conditions of disablism
23 and an ableist culture (Haslett and Smith, 2019). However, as Townsend et al. (2017, p. 359)
24 argue, “as long as coach education positions disabled people as ‘different’ to the degree that

1 separate structures are required to educate coaches, inclusive sports coaching remains elusive”
2 (Townsend et al., 2017, p. 359).

3 In addressing this, first and foremost, the dominance of disability discourses in
4 producing and sustaining many conceptions of coaching requires exposure, challenge and
5 reflection as they can often become embedded in coaching consciousness. At a practical level,
6 the lack of disability-specific coach education and development is an area for both concern and
7 possibility, and further developments are required to bring the process of socialisation into
8 coaching under critical control (Eraut, 1994). Furthermore, while it has been suggested that
9 sport provides a context that can challenge and influence the social understanding of disability
10 (DePauw, 1986), as this chapter has illustrated coaching rhetoric is often structured by binary
11 understandings or tensions between ‘coaching the athlete’ and ‘coaching the disability’. As
12 such, coach education needs to display a better understanding of the production of disability in
13 different coaching environments, to build working principles that coaches can utilise in
14 practice. Connecting theory to practice (i.e. understanding models of disability) is invaluable
15 in developing a much-needed transformative agenda in disability sport coaching.

16 The following reflective points provided by Townsend and Cushion (2018) suggest
17 some guidance for coaches wishing to engage in disability sport, though as with all coaching
18 approaches, should not be read as a prescriptive ‘how to’ guide, but are mediated by the
19 sporting context, level of performance and individual coaches and athletes:

- 20 • Work *with* athletes, not *on* them.
- 21 • Recognise and accept impairment and adapt practice accordingly.
- 22 • Create coaching sessions that challenge and support in equal measure.
- 23 • Draw on multiple, integrated sources of knowledge to understand the athletes.
- 24 • Continually reflect on your beliefs and assumptions about coaching disabled athletes
- 25
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