

**Book Title** – Handbook on Sport Coaching Research

**Editors** – Bettina Callary, Gordon A. Bloom, Steven B. Rynne, and Brian T. Gearity

## **Chapter X**

### **Understanding dis/ableism in sport coaching**

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January 2024

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## Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of the rapidly evolving field of coaching in disability and para sport. In adopting a critical position, we argue that coaching in disability sport is more than adapting practice—it requires a critical understanding of the social and cultural factors shaping disabled athletes' experiences in sport, and the role coaching plays in either resisting or reinforcing dominant narratives of disability. In this chapter we provide readers with the theoretical language to interrogate the intersections of disability, sport and coaching, drawing from Critical Disability Studies (CDS) to introduce the concepts of *disablism* and *ableism*, and how these are implicated in coaching discourse, practice and in coach education. In providing researchers and practitioners with a sensitising framework drawn from critical disability studies, we argue for more participatory and inclusive approaches to coaching research – ensuring that the field collectively moves beyond accommodation and toward transformation.

*Keywords: ableism; able-bodied privilege; disablism; participatory research*

**Abstract Word Count: 147/150**

**Rest of Manuscript Word Count: 5718/6000**

## 72    **Introduction**

73    A central assumption in the study of disability is that people with physical, sensory, intellectual  
 74    or neurodevelopmental impairments typically experience heightened forms of exclusion,  
 75    discrimination, and marginalisation as a resulting of a disabling society (DePauw, 1997). Sport  
 76    reflects and reinforces the dominant norms of society and culture (DePauw, 1997), including  
 77    the norm that sport is largely built for and shaped around non-disabled preferences and values  
 78    reinforcing non-disabled power, privilege, and dominance over disabled people (Hardin, 2007).  
 79    Disabled people therefore often faced reduced opportunities for, or are actively excluded from,  
 80    participation in sport from community levels all the way through to high performance or para-  
 81    sport.

82            However, sport is often positioned in popular discourse as a non-disabling site or a  
 83    platform for disability empowerment and transformation (Silva & Howe, 2012). This is a  
 84    position embodied by the Paralympic movement, in which sport is considered as a powerful  
 85    tool for advancing global attitudes toward disability; reducing stigma and discrimination and  
 86    promoting positive and empowering narratives about disabled people (Goodwin and Peers,  
 87    2011). Disability sport, thus, is a context of social significance in which the active participation  
 88    of disabled people remains a challenge; that is, the dominant conceptions of ability that  
 89    underpin sport are positioned as antithetical to the cultural meanings that society ascribes to  
 90    disability, and these work to shape coaches' knowledge-practices (Townsend and Cushion,  
 91    2022).

92            At a practical level, the barriers to sport for disabled people have been well-documented  
 93    (e.g., Smith & Sparkes, 2019). Barriers include inaccessible physical environments such as a  
 94    lack of available transport to green spaces, doorways that are too narrow for wheelchair access,  
 95    and inaccessible bathrooms or changing rooms, unsuitable equipment (e.g., no pool chair or

arm cycles) and cost. Other barriers are more relational or individualised, such as over-protective others, personal concerns about safety, limited social support, lack of motivation, limited feelings of welcomeness and belonging, and negative societal attitudes or a lack of knowledge about disability from those in positions of power and influence (e.g., coaches). Together, these barriers illustrate the difficulty in transforming the field of sport that values and celebrates sets of bodily norms and standards that continue to position disabled people as marginal and other.

However, the rights of disabled people – at least in policy – to participate and compete in sport on an equal basis with non-disabled people are well-established. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) outlines disabled peoples’ right to participation – to the fullest extent possible – in ‘mainstream’<sup>1</sup> sporting activities at all levels, as well as the opportunity to develop, lead, and participate in disability-specific sporting and recreational activities. Not only does this signal the need to integrate disabled people across the sporting pathway where possible, but to provide disability-specific pathways (including impairment-specific, disability sport, and pan-disability settings) for participation and competition. Thus, in arguing for the expansion of sport pathways to include and provide targeted opportunities for disabled people, it is necessary to examine the conditions and actors that either support or inhibit such efforts, such as access to appropriate instruction and training (CRPD, United Nations, 2006, 30.5b). Therefore, a focus on coaches is, or should be, central to the study of disability sport.

Compared with the broader study of sports coaching, research on coaching in disability and para sport is still in its infancy (Bentzen *et al.*, 2021). This is concerning as nearly forty

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Mainstream’ is a historically loaded term and not one that we use lightly. With its roots in educational discourse, ‘mainstreaming’ refers to the practice of integrating disabled people into the practices and power structures that exclude them in the first place.

years ago DePauw (1986) identified coaching as a critical research priority in the study of disability sport, with particular emphasis on the selection and training of coaches and coaches' trajectories into disability sport (see Reid & Prupas, 1998). Since then, there has been some research on coaches in disability sport; for example, understanding the relational aspects of community disability sport (Cronin *et al.*, 2018); coaching disabled children (e.g., Spencer-Cavaliere *et al.*, 2017; Townsend, 2022); talent identification and development (Dehghansai, Pinder and Baker, 2021; Townsend, Clare, & Maw, 2022); coaches' learning and development (McMaster *et al.*, 2012; Taylor *et al.*, 2014; Douglas, Falcão and Bloom, 2018) and high-performance disability sport (e.g., Townsend, Huntley, Cushion & Fitzgerald, 2018). However, the study of the intersections between disability, sport, and coaching has historically been theoretically starved and impoverished (e.g., Martin and Whalen, 2013). Recently, a theoretically cohesive corpus of literature has started to draw on the field of Critical Disability Studies (CDS) and models of disability to examine coaching in disability sport (e.g., Alexander, Duncan and Bloom, 2022; Allan *et al.*, 2020; Culver and Werthner, 2018; Hardwick *et al.*, 2024; Townsend, Smith and Cushion, 2016), paying particular attention to the construction and circulation of ideas about disability, and how these are embedded in and reinforced through coaching culture. It is in this space that this chapter sits. Moreover, we will provide a critical assessment of 'where we are at'; outlining some important areas of focus, as well as exploring the key issues for a robust and critical sociological understanding of coaching in disability sport. Finally, we provide some methodological considerations for those wishing to further engage in disability sport coaching research.

### **Review of literature: Coaching in Disability Sport**

There has been increased interest on coaching in disability sport in the last decade, largely as a response to media campaigns such as the London 2012 Paralympics, celebrating the 'superhuman' achievements of disabled athletes (Silva & Howe, 2012). Changes to the profile

of, and public exposure to, disability sport are also mirrored in the last two releases of the International Paralympic Committee's strategic plan concerning the growth of para sport and increasing global awareness of disability (IPC, 2019 & 2023). As a result, many countries (e.g. Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom) now have clear and targeted policies to support disability sport provision as well as dedicated funding and resources for para sport pathways. In building para sport pathways, there is an associated need to also cultivate para sport-specific expertise, and thus a need to focus on the education, training and development of a skilled and confident coaching workforce (Hammond *et al.* 2019; Huntley *et al.*, 2019).

Building disability-specific expertise is important. Coaching is a practice in which beliefs about disability are often implicitly embedded and work to shape coaches' approaches, practices and principles (Townsend *et al.*, 2018; Townsend & Cushion, 2022). While research has shown that both mainstream and disability sports coaches – obviously - share some qualities or principles of coaching effectiveness (Douglas *et al.*, 2016), there is a need to understand the nuance of the disability sport context. Coaches often draw on some components of professional, intrapersonal, and interpersonal knowledge (Allan *et al.*, 2020; Bentzen *et al.*, 2021) to work with a range of athletes, however the assumptions that coaches hold towards disabled people influence and even structure those components of knowledge. So, we have a situation in which often coaches rely on adapting principles and practices from able-bodied sporting contexts (Douglas *et al.*, 2016), which are often seen as 'positive' – promoting independence, athlete-first ideals, mastery, autonomy, and 'empowerment' for disabled people (see for example, Allan *et al.*, 2020). On the face of it, such ideals are considered progressive. However, from a more critical perspective, coaching reflects the unequal relations of power through which disability is produced and experienced, placing disabled athletes as passive recipients of coaches' values, preferences, and judgements (Townsend & Cushion, 2022) and

reducing opportunities for disabled athletes who do not easily ‘fit’ with the able-bodied norms of sport (Hammond *et al.*, 2019).

Thus, we have a situation in which coaching in disability sport is largely shaped by able-bodied ideals and disability represents somewhat of a ‘challenge’ to the norms and structures of coaching, thus problematising and necessitating differential application of coaches’ knowledge and skills. As such, it is common in disability sport that the coaching environment and culture are treated as unproblematic - people with impairments are instead viewed as disadvantaged by their own bodies (Townsend *et al.*, 2017) and the coach’s role is focused on ‘adaption’ through strategies and frameworks for ‘inclusive’ coaching practice. However, coaching in disability contexts requires more than a narrow ‘lens of adaptability’ (Taylor *et al.*, 2014). For example, Allan *et al.* (2020) suggested that coaches in disability sports required specialized knowledge of disabilities (read: impairment) and an understanding of how these factors impact on training, recovery and performance. Furthermore, the structural constraints of disability sport impact on the day-to-day work of coaches. Examples of the unique considerations that disability challenges and poses for coaches include limited resource, lack of funding (Douglas *et al.*, 2016), limited athlete pool to select from (Tawse *et al.*, 2012), and a lack of accessible transport and facilities (Pomerleau-Fontaine, Bloom and Alexander, 2023). Coach-specific challenges include a lack of disability knowledge and communication-related difficulties, and a lack of depth of coaching expertise within sport programmes and initiatives (Townsend *et al.*, 2022). Attitudes and assumptions from sports coaches can also be a limitation for disabled athletes (Wareham *et al.*, 2018; Hammond *et al.*, 2019), particularly when they have no previous experience of disability or when their understanding of disability is shaped by institutionalisation, segregation, or disability stigma (see Townsend *et al.*, 2017).

Compounding the issues highlighted above is the fact that disability sport coaches have a lack of access to, and availability of, disability-specific professional development and training

opportunities, with most coaches having no disability-specific education (Townsend *et al.*, 2022). McMaster *et al.* (2012) suggested that coaches predominantly receive “decontextualized education experiences that were rudimentary and often focused on able-bodied sport settings” (p. 238). This finding is unanimously echoed across a range of literature (e.g., Alexander *et al.*, 2022; Culver & Werthner, 2018; Hardwick *et al.*, 2024; Taylor *et al.*, 2014; Townsend, Cushion & Smith, 2017) that acknowledges a need for more formalised, disability-specific education structures for coaches.

### ***Coach education***

How to educate coaches about disability – and thus ‘inclusion’ in its myriad forms - remains an enduring problem. As noted above, coaches face a range of challenges and difficulties accessing disability-specific training (e.g. Cregan, Bloom and Reid, 2011) due to a lack of formalised provision. At a structural level, recent research has argued that disability is often viewed as an ‘add on’ to existing coach development pathways or overlooked entirely in both sport-specific coach education pathways (see Townsend *et al.*, 2022) and in tertiary coach development programmes (see Huntley *et al.*, 2019). With limited training and educational opportunities, coaches in disability sport report learning through trial and error (Taylor *et al.*, 2014), often characterised by being “dropped in at the deep end” (Townsend *et al.*, 2017, p. 351) without much support.

Furthermore, it is not uncommon for coaches to ‘seek out’ more experienced coaches as mentors (see Fairhurst, Bloom and Harvey, 2017) to gain exposure to the unique aspects of coaching in disability sport. These interactions, however, tend to be “highly unstructured” (Fairhurst *et al.*, 2017, p. 246), reflective of the unsystematic or nonlinear nature of coaching in disability sport. It is unsurprising, therefore, that research has continued to illustrate difficulties recruiting coaches into disability coaching roles due to a commonly cited ‘fear of

the unknown' (Wareham *et al.*, 2018). What little coach education provision *is* available requires critical scrutiny, as different coach education and training programmes reflect different orientations towards, and understandings of, disability (Townsend *et al.*, 2016). For example, in their analysis of disability coach education, Townsend *et al.*, (2022) argued that approaches to educating coaches can be loosely categorised as either *categorical* or *inclusion*. *Categorical* approaches to coach education focus on the transmission of impairment-specific knowledge and – if not carefully delivered and understood - can reproduce harmful and limiting stereotypes about disability (see Townsend *et al.*, 2017).

*Inclusion* approaches refer to short term, 'workshop' style training opportunities in which inclusion discourse is reduced to a superficial trend of providing coaches with 'models' or frameworks – typically drawn from physical education – that encourage activity differentiation and task modification (see Townsend, 2023). Examples of these include the United Kingdom's 'STEP' model, and the Australian Sports Commission's 'TREE' acronym. Both 'models' emphasise changing one or more conditions of practice, whether that be the rules and regulations of the sport, modifying the space in which activity occurs, group size, or the use of various types of equipment. These models occupy a central place in disability coaching discourse and are based on the special educational discourse of the *Least Restrictive Environment*. However, this approach to coach education implies accommodation or integration, rather than inclusion, into the existing structure of coaching practice. While allowing for some opportunity to participate, such approaches do not challenge or alter the existing exclusionary power structure of coaching (DePauw 1997; Townsend, 2023) and further masks the ways in which coaching and coach education marginalises disabled people.

There are some positive developments with regards to disability-specific approaches to coach education. For example, Duarte, Culver and Paquette (2020a, 2020b, 2021) developed a series of studies evidencing the value of using social learning theory, and specifically

Landscapes of Practice (LoPs) with para sport coaches. Such approaches recognise the complexity and multi-disciplinarity of coaching and learning in para sport, but are yet to gain much traction in para coach development, likely due to the difficulties operationalising and framing social learning interventions in practice. Furthermore, echoing the call of those in the field of adapted physical activity, Townsend *et al.* (2022) have argued for the re-centring of disability into coach education as part of an *infusion* approach – in which disability knowledge is weaved into all aspects of coaches’ professional training pathways. Again, as with any large-scale institutional change, the development of these coach education pathways takes time and are largely reliant on the adoption of participatory or inclusive research approaches to inform coach development (Randrup *et al.*, 2023).

To be clear, while efforts to include and provide opportunities for disabled people are positive and to be welcomed, it is important to problematise the broader discursive space in which disability sits. Existing research over the last decade has continually reinforced that disability-specific coach education and training provision is largely optional for coaches. If this continues, the extent to which we are preparing coaches with a shared commitment to disability is questionable at best, and risks further reproducing a dominant culture in which able-bodied norms predominate and disabled people are continually required to be integrated, adapted to, or risk missing out entirely. Here, research holds a critical role in exposing how disability is constructed, (re)produced, institutionalised, and enacted within and through sport coaching. One avenue for this is through engagement with CDS, and particularly the study of ableism.

## **Advancing the Field**

In this section, we explore how using models of disability and ideas drawn from critical disability studies (CDS) can provide researchers, students, and practitioners with a shared language to approach and examine coaching in disability sport. In its simplest form, CDS is a

body of scholarship that draws on a range of theories and concepts to consider how institutions and social relations ‘*disable*’ people with impairments, as well as interrogating the lived experience of disablement. The purpose of introducing these ideas is to highlight how disability has historically been understood and constructed within society, as a means of tracing how ideas about disability can become embedded within and circulate throughout sporting cultures, creating and maintaining barriers to full inclusion.

### *Foundations of Disability Theory: Models of Disability and Disablism*

Models of disability are theoretically and politically-informed conceptual frameworks, developed to both capture and challenge how disability is understood in society. In coaching, it is important to engage with models of disability as the socialisation of a coach to a particular model has implications for their understanding of disability and, in turn, their coaching practice. The models of disability also help to expose the organising principles within the disability sport field; thus, it is necessary to explain their origins and meanings as they are drawn on by coaches to inform practice and scholars to explain coaches’ practices (Townsend *et al.*, 2015).

Historically, disability is typically understood or conceptualised in two contrasting ways. With its roots in medical and rehabilitative discourse, the *medical model* of disability locates the cause of disability within the individual. The medical model positions disability as something that requires ‘fixing’ or ‘changing’ so that disabled people can meet societal expectations of normality (DePauw, 2000) - a situation observable in sports coaching. In individualising disability, the medical model overlooks the broader social, political, cultural, and personal dimensions of disability (Thomas, 2004). Knowingly or unknowingly, coaches tend to hold medical model assumptions about disabled athletes, as the medical model is the basis for segregating disability sport from ‘mainstream’ sports pathways, perpetuating a series

of binaries that structure coaches' knowledge; normal-abnormal, ability-disability and sport-disability sport. As such, the medical model is implicit in the 'adaptive' discourse that permeates much disability sports coaching in which sport is adapted for those who are not considered to 'fit in' to the 'normal' structure and delivery of sport.

In contrast to the historically dominant medical model, the social model locates the cause of disability within society. The social model differentiates impairment from disability in that people with impairments are disabled by society's norms and practices, therefore, disability is a social construct (Brighton *et al.*, 2021). The social model offers a reflective lens to question how society privileges a particular (i.e., non-disabled) knowledge and value system. It is particularly useful in coach education for helping coaches to reflect on the barriers to inclusion for disabled people and for positioning coaches' knowledge and skills as open to change and transformation.

The social model is the 'big idea' – a heuristic device to aid understanding - that has driven much change in both disability scholarship and in society, evidenced by its presence in international policy and legislation (e.g. the UN CRPD) as well as informing national policies in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Canada (Barnes, 2012). However, it has been criticised for its dismissal of the very real effects of impairment, homogenising the oppression experienced by people with impairments and creating an unrealistic assumption that social change will unequivocally lead to better outcomes for disabled people (Brighton *et al.*, 2021).

In response to the criticism that the social model depoliticises the experience of impairment, the Social Relational Model (SRM) was developed (Thomas, 2004). Building on the language from the social model regarding the causality of disability, the SRM also recognises the bio-social nature of impairment. The social-relational model of disability

encompasses four interrelated concepts to explain the experience of disability, each of which has relevance for coaches (cf. Allan et al. 2019). First, *impairment effects* – the direct physical (e.g., pain, fatigue) and social impacts that impairment has on an individual’s social functioning. Second, relational practices that constitute disability, such as the social behaviours that are enacted between coaches and athletes in sport (cf. Thomas 2004). This focuses specifically on how the personal, relational, and institutional practices that disadvantage disabled people can manifest in subtle and nuanced ways. For instance, coaches who demonstrate an aversion to disabled people, manifested through a ‘fear of the unknown’, directly impact the opportunities available in sport. Third, recognition of structural barriers, such as inaccessible facilities or the lack of available coaching and leadership opportunities. Fourth, the model has a *psycho-emotional dimension*, recognising that these social factors and behaviours can and do have a direct impact on an individual’s psycho-social wellbeing, engendering negative feelings of self-worth or a lack of confidence to participate.

Engaging with models of disability provides us with a shared language to understand how disabled people are subject to forms of “social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional wellbeing” (Thomas, 2004, p. 73). This shift is important in repositioning disability as both a product and producer of *disablism* (Thomas, 1999). Thomas (1999) describes *disablism* as the exclusionary and avoidable restrictions or barriers that are placed upon people with impairments. Understanding *disablism* is an essential first step in reconsidering the aims and consequences of ‘inclusive’ sports provision; recognising and responding to the diverse needs of disabled athletes; and challenging the wide-ranging forms of exclusion that sport, and coaching, is implicated in. *Disablism* – while widespread in sport – can be considered as a practical manifestation of a broader system of power and privilege. The

challenge, according to Campbell (2008), is to shift our gaze and concentrate on what the study of disability tells us about the systematic operation and maintenance of *ableism*.

### *Understanding Ableism*

Ableism is so deeply interwoven into our ways of perceiving and being that it remains for the most part, invisible [to people] (Silva, 2022, p.158).

Ableism is a system of beliefs and knowledge that privileges normalcy and able-bodiedness (Campbell, 2009). In short, ableism is the naturalisation of a non-disabled way of seeing and relating to the world, the self, and others (Wolbring, 2008). There are myriad definitions attached to ableism due to its political origins in the disability rights movement, and its oppressive likeness to other ‘isms’, such as racism, or sexism. Ableism focuses on the “production of the ability” and the natural, taken-for-granted assumption of non-disabled embodiment in society. Campbell (2001) argued that ableism comprises a “network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body” (p. 44); the ‘normate’ subject which signals a non-disabled state of embodiment (see Garland-Thompson, 2002).

Research into ableism in sport is in its infancy. Although the concept of ableism lacks specificity, ableism can manifest itself across layers of interactions and layers of society, and indeed sport. For example, ableism can be *institutionalised*, particularly in coach development structures (see Townsend, Bennie and Russell, 2024), where coaching is dominated by a ‘paradigm of normativity’ (Fitzgerald, 2005, p. 54) in which it appears that there is an ‘unstated expectation’ that individuals with impairments do not become coaches or coach developers. The invisibility of disabled people in coaching and coach development can be further exacerbated by a lack of representation in course workbooks, teaching and promotional materials, or targeted campaigns to improve community participation. The effects of which

leave disabled people as marginal and ‘other’ in coaching discourse and creates the sentiment that sport is ‘not for them.’

Furthermore, ableism can also manifest at an *interpersonal* level through hostile, aversive, ambivalent, and paternalistic attitudes and interactions towards disabled people (Nario-Redmond, 2019) as well as uncritical or distorted understandings of disability (Broderick and Lalvani, 2017). Disability can further provoke feelings of compassion, inspiration, and *benevolence* (Nario-Redmond, 2019) due to lowered expectations of disabled people. Furthermore, recent research has drawn on the notion of *enlightened* ableism (see Lyons, 2013) to examine how disability is positioned in sport policy discourse, arguing that the adoption of inclusionary policy rhetoric is often inhibited by a lack of support, training and education for coaches (e.g., McBean, Townsend and Petrie, 2022).

It is important for coaching researchers to attempt to illustrate that ableism is much more than a unitary, negative attitude towards disability or a series of material barriers to participation. As Townsend et al. (2016) insisted to researchers and practitioners, “it is our moral responsibility to grapple with difficult, yet important ideas expressed in other fields” (p. 91). Thinking with and through ableism then is important to provide critical insight into the complex production of coaching discourse regarding disability – in its individualised, medicalised or adaptive forms. This is especially so if we want to play a part in working with disabled people so that exclusion is challenged and their experiences within coaching and sport are enhanced.

### **Changing relationships, informing practice: Approaches to sport coaching research**

A central tenet of CDS is the need to move beyond *thinking about* disabled people to *engaging with* disabled people (cf. Brighton *et al.*, 2021). This movement in methodological thinking is particularly acute in the context of coaching and coach education research. If we consider that coach education has been identified as crucial to support the inclusion of disabled people in

sport contexts there is a need to ensure that research informing coach education centralises disabled people's voices and experiences (Randrup *et al.*, 2023).

However, forms of research which adopt inclusive or emancipatory approaches are not common in the field of sport coaching. The use of a participatory research approach recognises historical inequities within both research and service provision and attempts to create a dispersal of power between researchers, service users, practitioners, and policymakers. This lack of participatory research is both significant and concerning as it is recognised that disability research should, at a minimum, be driven by inclusive principles (Macbeth, 2010).

As experts in their own lived experiences, disabled people are the most significant stakeholder within disability sport and are instrumental to informing coach education programmes that are responsive to disability inclusion. Instead, largely transactive research processes still exist within disability sport coaching research, where disabled people are researched *on* as participants, rather than *with* as colleagues. This is of course despite some notable exceptions which centralise athlete voice (see Alexander *et al.*, 2020; Allan *et al.*, 2020; Culver & Werthner, 2018; Ferguson & Spencer, 2021). However, there is a tendency to limit disability insights to those with particular (i.e., physical) impairments and thus limiting the explanatory power of coaching research. Research that centralises the *diverse* perspectives and voices of disabled people as co-researchers, as a means of altering dominant knowledge systems that inform coaching are critically needed.

## **Conclusion**

The starting point for any (critical) study of disability is that disability is something that is culturally constructed and imposed on people with impairments. Importantly, disability encompasses sets of negative cultural meanings that contribute to the structuring of social relationships. This means that ableist attitudes towards disability are held and acted upon (often

unconsciously) by sports coaches resulting in the reproduction of medicalised or superficial ‘adaptive’ approaches to coaching. Therefore, sport coaching is a site in which the critical study of disability is urgently required to interrogate the deeply ingrained knowledge and value systems that privilege non-disabled perspectives. Further research is needed to examine and reshape existing coaching pedagogy, discourse and coach education systems as they relate to disability. Without further research, the field risks reproducing a politics of knowledge that continues to marginalise disabled athletes rather than fostering truly inclusive sporting pathways.

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