

1 **Coaching, Talent Identification and Talent Development in Parasport: Developing the**  
2 **Field**

3  
4 Robert Townsend<sup>a</sup> and Olivia Clare<sup>a</sup>

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6 <sup>a</sup>*Te Huataki Waiora* School of Health, University of Waikato, New Zealand.  
7 [robert.townsend@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:robert.townsend@waikato.ac.nz)

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10 Dr Robert Townsend is a Senior Lecturer in Sport Coaching and Pedagogy at the University  
11 of Waikato, New Zealand. Rob's research is interdisciplinary, bridging qualitative research,  
12 social science and disability studies, with a specific focus on disability sport and sport  
13 coaching.

14  
15 Olivia Clare is a Summer Scholar researcher in disability sport with *Te Huataki Waiora* School  
16 of Health, University of Waikato. Olivia has five years coaching experience and has research  
17 interests in disability sport coaching and coach development. She is part of Sport New  
18 Zealand's Graduate Program.

19  
20 Robert Townsend ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7343-5329.

21 Olivia Clare ORCID ID: 0000-0001-9673-2289

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34 **Abstract**

35 This chapter provides an overview of the role of the coach in talent identification and  
36 development environments in para sport. While interest in para sport continues to grow,  
37 particularly in coaching, we know very little about the role, function and practices of coaching  
38 in talent identification and development in para programmes. In this chapter we carefully  
39 examine coaching and talent identification through a disability lens, highlighting how coaches  
40 are implicated in ‘access work’, and questioning how coaches reconcile cultural understandings  
41 of disability with sport-specific conceptions of ‘talent’. In so doing we draw connections  
42 between coaching and disability studies, questioning the extent to which ableism may influence  
43 talent identification. Furthermore, we discuss coach and athlete development, illustrating the  
44 limits of ‘normative’ models of athlete development applied to para sport and the implications  
45 for coach education and development. Finally, we outline some key considerations for  
46 researchers and outline some productive lines of inquiry to develop the field.

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## 59 **Introduction**

60 Interest in Para sport – from both scholars and practitioners - continues to gain considerable  
61 momentum. The result of this heightened attention to para sport is the 'hypervisibility' of  
62 disability in elite sport (Pullen et al., 2018) and the increased focus on the athletic potential  
63 and performances of para athletes<sup>1</sup> (Townsend et al., 2018). Against this background, there  
64 has been a clear shift towards the development of national sports policies and the distribution  
65 of funds, resources and support are targeted at providing accessible and progressive  
66 opportunities for disabled people to participate, compete and perform in sport. Naturally  
67 accompanying the rise of the profile and popularity of elite disability sport is a critical focus  
68 on developing high quality coaches in these contexts (Douglas, 2020).

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70 Coaching was outlined over thirty years ago by DePauw (1986) alongside a number of research  
71 priorities for para sport. However, relative to the literature on coaching in able-bodied or  
72 'mainstream' contexts, research on coaching in para sport is underdeveloped (Townsend et al.,  
73 2016). This is an important oversight, as coaches are positioned as crucial to athlete  
74 development, and evidence suggests that coaching para athletes places demands on the skills  
75 and knowledge of coaches beyond that usually outlined in able-bodied contexts (Burkett, 2013;  
76 Townsend et al., 2016; Douglas, 2020). Furthermore, coaches are considered one of the main  
77 stakeholders of the para-athletes' pathways, from the beginning to the end of their careers  
78 (Patatas et al., 2020). Yet, the types of coach development support for coaches operating in  
79 para sport is highly variable, with disability often absent from national governing body coach  
80 development provision, or 'added on' as short-term, episodic training programmes (Townsend

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<sup>1</sup>Given our focus on disability sport with a high performance or performance development objective, for clarity, we will use 'para sport' and 'para athletes' throughout. However, we align fundamentally with the social model of disability, where we acknowledge that disability is an accumulation of oppressive practices and discourses that marginalise and exclude people with impairments. At the same time, we acknowledge and support the preference by some for person-first terms.

81 *et al.*, 2021). This lack of coach education is compounded by limited research insight into the  
82 landscape of para sport coaching informing new and innovative methods of supporting coaches.  
83 Therefore, considering the growth in Para sport and the corresponding awareness of the need  
84 to build performance pathways for para athletes (Douglas, 2020) it is necessary to carefully  
85 examine the role, practice and function of coaches in talent identification and development  
86 pathways. This serves a dual purpose. First, exploring coaching in TID pathways can contribute  
87 to the expansion and clarification of evidence-based models of para sport athlete development  
88 – something that is desperately needed (Baker et al., 2017; Patatas et al., 2020a). Second, these  
89 insights are useful for sports organisations wishing to increase the levels of support and training  
90 for the para sport coaching workforce, an issue that researchers continue to highlight (see  
91 Townsend *et al.*, 2021).

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93 The purpose of this chapter is to provide some brief insight and stimulate critical discussion  
94 of the contribution of coaches and coaching to talent identification and development  
95 (henceforth TID) in Para sport. While it is generally agreed that coaches are involved and  
96 highly influential in talent identification it is rarely their primary responsibility, with the task  
97 of identifying talent devolved to ‘talent scouts’ or their equivalents within different sports.  
98 Particularly within high performance domains, coaches’ roles are primarily focused on the  
99 development of athletes already identified and selected into performance programmes (Lyle  
100 and Cushion, 2017), what might be termed talent ‘confirmation’. With this in mind, there is a  
101 paucity of research looking at the role, practice and function of coaches in TID in Para sport,  
102 where talent pathways are often less well-established and therefore there may be some  
103 ‘blurring’ of roles across talent identification and talent confirmation. This chapter is a modest  
104 attempt to consider 'where we are at'; that is, highlight the key gaps in research with a view to  
105 establishing some productive lines of inquiry for coaching researchers interested in talent

106 identification and development. Before we turn our attention to the role and function of  
107 coaches, however, it is worth situating coaches within the para sport TID context.

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### 109 **The Para sport TID landscape**

110 Understanding the developmental pathways of athletes is of paramount importance to ensuring  
111 coaches are able to effectively apply their knowledge and practice to bring about positive  
112 athlete outcomes. The identifying features of successful TID pathways in able-bodied sport are  
113 well established relative to para sport contexts. Research has highlighted that sustained  
114 financial support for athletes, the development of specialist facilities, the provision of sports  
115 science and medicine services, a large pool of athletes, well-developed competition structures,  
116 and access to high-quality coaching (cf. Green and Houlihan, 2005) are key characteristics of  
117 elite sport performance pathways. In para sport, however, these features tend to be noticeably  
118 absent (Taylor, Werthner & Culver, 2014). As such, it may be assumed that there is no universal  
119 model for para athlete development and it can be best understood as ‘non-linear’ and ‘fluid’  
120 (Patatas *et al.*, 2020a, 2020b). The developmental journey can be thus divided into six  
121 intersecting phases: (1) Attraction; (2) Retention; (3) Competition; (4) Talent Identification and  
122 Talent Development; (5) Elite; and (6) (voluntary and involuntary) Retirement. A key point of  
123 difference between para sport and able-bodied sport is that the establishment of para sport  
124 ‘pathways’ has followed a somewhat unique and fragmented trajectory (DePauw and Gavron,  
125 2005), with organised disability sports programmes having been historically provided by  
126 separate disability sport organisations. Often, these organisations are heavily dependent on  
127 government or state funding, and as such are more interested in addressing issues of social  
128 inclusion, physical (in)activity and community participation, rather than elite sport  
129 development (Houlihan and Chapman, 2017).

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131 However, as the growth in profile and exposure of para sport increases, a trajectory towards  
132 elitism necessitates some organisations adopting elite development strategies and establishing  
133 clear performance pathways for para athletes, either in a decentralised programme under the  
134 umbrella of a sports governing body (Wareham, Burkett, Innes and Lovell, 2017) or in a  
135 separate disability sport organisation. As such, some sports are heavily reliant on resource  
136 sharing as part of a broader mainstreaming or integration agenda with sports governing bodies  
137 (Thomas and Smith, 2009; Kitchin and Howe, 2014; Houlihan and Chapman, 2017). As part  
138 of this resource sharing, research has identified considerable potential for coaches in able-  
139 bodied and para sport contexts to develop knowledge sharing communities (e.g. Duarte et al.,  
140 2020). With this in mind, it is worth outlining the unique features of coaches' practices within  
141 para sport in order to better 'bridge the gap' between coaching in able-bodied and para sport  
142 performance pathways. Doing so can go some way to ensuring TID environments better reflect  
143 the demands of para sport while retaining a high performance or performance development  
144 objective.

#### 145 *'The same but different': coaching in para sport*

146 Research continues to position coaches and coaching as crucial to the delivery of Para sport  
147 performance programmes (Allan et al., Côté, 2019; DePauw & Gavron, 1991; Townsend et al.,  
148 2016; Townsend et al., 2018). Indeed, research interest in para sport coaching has a long  
149 history, but more recently has gained significant momentum. For example, research has  
150 explored the role and characteristics of coaches in this context (e.g. DePauw & Gavron, 1991;  
151 Tawse et al., 2012), the development of coaches' knowledge (e.g., Douglas et al., 2016;  
152 Douglas & Hardin, 2014; Duarte & Culver, 2014; MacDonald et al., 2015; McMaster et al.,  
153 2012; Taylor et al., 2014, 2015), and athletes' perceptions of effective coaching practices (e.g.  
154 Culver & Werthner, 2018; Alexander et al., 2020). These developments have provided much  
155 needed insight into the para sport coaching context, highlighting areas of commonality (e.g.

156 Douglas, 2020) with able-bodied contexts, while illustrating the unique features of coaches'  
157 practices within para sport. Research has further highlighted an entrenched 'fear of the  
158 unknown' – characterised by a hesitancy or a lack of confidence to work with para athletes  
159 (Townsend *et al.*, 2017; Wareham et al. 2017) a situation that underlines the necessity for coach  
160 education to better prepare coaches to work with para athletes (e.g. Townsend, Huntley,  
161 Cushion and Culver, 2021). In this context, however, coaching and TID is relatively  
162 underdeveloped in existing research, meaning that the evidence base for organisations and  
163 practitioners to draw upon to better support athletes in their trajectories through para sport is  
164 limited.

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### 166 **Coaching and Talent Identification: Through a Disability Lens**

167 Coaches are generally assumed to have a level of influence and power in TID settings (see  
168 Christensen and Henriksen, 2013; Rynne, Crudgington, Dickinson and Mallett, 2017). Existing  
169 research has highlighted how in many Para sport pathways coaches exert significant influence  
170 on the development of TID initiatives; recruiting athletes into performance programmes  
171 through personal networks, outlining performance benchmarks and standards and developing  
172 para-specific resources and guidelines for coaches (Radtke and Doll-Tepper, 2014). Indeed, at  
173 all levels of disability sport, coaches are well placed to provide individualised, personal support  
174 to enhance athletes' opportunities for, access to, and participation in, sport (Townsend *et al.*,  
175 2021). However, research consistently points to limited investment, training and support for  
176 coaches working with para athletes (Townsend *et al.*, 2018, 2021). This is particularly the case  
177 for coaches working at the 'lower' end of the coaching pathway, for example in community  
178 sports programmes and clubs.

179

180 So, while coaching and talent identification in para sport is an emerging area of research  
181 (Radtke and Doll-Tepper, 2014), in contrast there is a significant body of literature in talent  
182 identification in able-bodied contexts (see, for example, Collins and Bailey, 2013). Given that  
183 in para sport contexts, coaches tend to operate according to principles, theories and concepts  
184 developed through experience in able-bodied sport (see Townsend et al., 2018) it is necessary  
185 to consider critically the contextual nuances of para sport that can influence coaches  
186 knowledge-practices in TID settings. Furthermore, this may help to avoid the simplistic transfer  
187 of able-bodied TID principles to para sport contexts (Baker et al., 2017; Dehghansai et al.,  
188 2020b).

189

190 There are two assumptions that underpin the process of talent identification in able-bodied  
191 performance pathways. It is worth considering these assumptions and their relevance in para  
192 sport. The first is that that coaches need to deliberately reduce the number of athletes they work  
193 with and limit it to 'the best' of a particular pool of athletes, typically during developmental or  
194 adolescent stages (cf. Rynne et al., 2017). One main factor that influences talent identification  
195 is that the 'pipeline' of athletes in disability sport is often much smaller, with athletes with  
196 impairments engaging in sport at various developmental stages and for whom access to sport  
197 is restricted by complex and multifaceted barriers to participation, which, by default, narrow  
198 the talent pool (Smith and Perrier, 2014). Furthermore, research continues to highlight the  
199 constraints associated with coaching in para sport contexts, including limited financial support  
200 resulting in fewer coaching and support staff, as well as a lack of coaching and training  
201 resources and equipment which may further reduce the capacity of a para sport program (e.g.  
202 Tawse et al. 2012; Taylor et al., 2014).

203

204 Arguably, existing research has limited itself to the pragmatic features of talent identification  
205 in para sport (e.g. Baker et al., 2017), that – while providing valuable insight – neglect the  
206 social and cultural factors that influence these processes, and in particular overlooking the issue  
207 of power (Christensen and Henriksen, 2013). Coaches exert significant power and influence in  
208 para sport, and talent identification involves a process of inclusion and exclusion (Christensen  
209 and Henriksen, 2013) with heavily displaced power relations between coaches and athletes.  
210 Importantly this process of TID serves to structure the field of para sport, providing  
211 opportunities for some, but not all. As such, for para athletes the process of talent identification  
212 in para sport is closely linked to notions of access and equity, where the recognition of talented  
213 athletes is constrained by a number of factors, what Thomas (1999) referred to as the *imposed*  
214 social restrictions constituting disability. These might include a lack of willing coaches (e.g.  
215 Wareham et al., 2017) placing active restrictions on the number of athletes that have the  
216 opportunity to participate and compete. Another important consideration is how coaches  
217 understand disability, and how they are able to reconcile notions of 'talent' with culturally  
218 embedded, often negative, ideas about disability. Further, factors related to access heavily  
219 influence talent identification, such as the accessibility of facilities, the visibility of  
220 programmes and competitive pathways, individuals' ability to sustain participation, and  
221 individual impairment effects (e.g. pain, fatigue when competing). Finally, there are factors  
222 embedded within the organisational structure of performance sport, including key decision-  
223 making considerations such as classification and eligibility, as well as secondary concerns such  
224 as how many athletes the organisation can afford to support. Thus, coaches can act as  
225 interpersonal mediators, or more simply as 'gatekeepers' to elite sport and by inference TID  
226 pathways. How coaches are implicated in 'access work' then, is of prime importance to the  
227 study of TID in para sport.

228

229 The second assumption from the broader TID research is that coaches draw on sets of  
230 principles, constructs or practice theories that they apply – implicitly and explicitly – to talent  
231 identification, and which inform their judgements about 'talented' athletes and their potential  
232 (Collins and Bailey, 2013; Roberts *et al.*, 2019). These concepts are often influenced heavily  
233 by the disciplines of psychology, physiology and skill acquisition, providing a level of  
234 perceived instrumentalism to talent identification (cf. Collins and Bailey, 2013) and  
235 foregrounding coaches' expert application of knowledge. When we consider that coaches tend  
236 to draw often implicitly on culturally embedded ideas about disability in their practices  
237 (Townsend *et al.*, 2018), it is necessary to examine closely the principles of differentiation that  
238 coaches use to identify talented athletes. The socialisation of athletes into para sport begins  
239 with the introduction into and acquisition of accepted norms, values and discourses framing  
240 performance sport. So too with coaches, where cultural discourses about disability circulate  
241 and become embedded within elite sport environments, directing coaches' values and  
242 preferences within a particular coaching sub-culture. As such, exploring the principles and  
243 discourses used to construct 'talent' in para sport is an important addition to the para coaching  
244 literature, in particular, how coaches reconcile notions of 'talent' with culturally-embedded  
245 notions of disability.

246

247 A number of scholars (e.g., Vrljic & Mallett, 2008; Christensen, 2009; Christensen &  
248 Henriksen, 2013) have raised questions about the social construction of the "coach's eye", a  
249 metaphor designed to challenge the assumption that talent identification is solely "based on  
250 rational or objective processes" (Rynne *et al.*, 2017, p. 288). While the more systematic  
251 processes underpinning TID in disability sport are well developed (see, for example  
252 Dehghansai *et al.*, 2020 for an excellent overview), the "experience-based judgements" of  
253 coaches which characterise talent identification (Christensen, 2009, p. 367) are less well

254 understood. This is important when we consider that disability itself is constructed through  
255 culture, attitudes and relationships (Smith et al., 2016) and it is worth asking critical questions  
256 about the knowledge that coaches draw upon in identifying 'talented' athletes. This is  
257 particularly the case when the dominant frame of reference for understanding disability in  
258 domains such as medicine, education and indeed sport is the medical model (Townsend et al.,  
259 2015).

260

261 The implication of the dominance of the medical model in TID is that the recognition of talent  
262 is primarily based on the measurement of psychological, physical and physiological attributes  
263 (Dehghansai et al., 2021), particularly when those attributes are likely to translate into a  
264 favourable classification (Radtke & Doll-Tepper, 2014; Patatas et al., 2020) thus placing the  
265 athlete in contention to medal or succeed at elite competition (e.g. Dehghansai et al., 2021).  
266 Classification is a complex and problematic practice embedded within para sport. A key  
267 function of the coach in para sport pathways is to identify athletes that are classifiable, and thus  
268 eligible for elite competition (Patatas *et al.*, 2020). While classification is a necessary taxonomy  
269 for organisation competition and ensuring – inasmuch as it is possible – fairness (Howe, 2008),  
270 *eligibility for* and the *process of* classification itself places limits on who can participate in  
271 disability sport, on what basis, and which other athletes can participate (Howe, 2008;  
272 Hammond *et al.*, 2019). Thus, classification "plays an essential role in all phases of para-  
273 athletes' pathways" (Patatas *et al.*, 2020, p. 945) and coaches require a working knowledge of  
274 classification as poor judgement of classification potential can result in the omission or  
275 deselection of athletes into funded programmes (Radtke & Doll-Tepper, 2014).

276

277 The extent to which coaches are supported to navigate classification is inconsistent, with  
278 Radtke and Doll-Tepper (2014) illustrating how coaches working in 'grassroots' sport often

279 lacked expertise in classifying athletes. More concerning, recent research has highlighted  
280 how an athlete's classification directly influences how prepared coaches are to include athletes  
281 in their programmes (see Hammond et al., 2019). Disability (and impairment) therefore are  
282 central to conversations related to TID in disability sport (Dehghansai et al., 2021), particularly  
283 when coaches' decision-making centres on allocating time and limited resources to athletes  
284 whose performance (and medal) potential cannot be assumed (Christensen and Henriksen,  
285 2013). As such, there is a dominant knowledge system in para sport that ensures coaches  
286 identify athletes that are 'hyper-able' (Lowry et al., 2021) where an athlete's impairment is a  
287 primary indicator of athletic performance, 'talent' and, thus, their 'medal potential'. Considering  
288 the broader IPC rhetoric about driving cultural shifts in how disability is understood in wider  
289 culture, it is worth questioning the extent that coaches' TID practices simply reproduce the  
290 'hyper-able' para athlete. On the other hand, while it has been argued recently that there are  
291 lower levels of representation of athletes from lower classifications or those with higher support  
292 needs in performance pathways (Lowry *et al.*, 2021), if impairment and function is considered  
293 a primary determinant of medal potential there is a need to understand instances of coaches  
294 deliberately targeting athletes from lower classification. In this case, medal potential may be  
295 easier to guarantee where the competition pool is significantly reduced.

296

297 A primary driver of medical model practices in TID is the concept of ableism. Ableism  
298 contends that there is a tendency for coaches to adopt notions of 'able-bodiedness' as the frame  
299 of reference against which to assess ability and – by extension – which athletes are talented.  
300 This perspective is accentuated through coaching discourses and practices that are based  
301 uncritically on able-bodied elite sport (Townsend et al., 2018) and are designed to render  
302 disability 'invisible' (DePauw, 1997) through the proliferation of athlete first discourses  
303 (Townsend & Cushion, 2021). While seemingly progressive, ableism provides an ideological

304 framework for coaches in which athletes and their performances are assessed by how closely  
305 their performances approximate to able-bodied athletes, and where athletes are judged on how  
306 closely they 'fit in' to existing TID structures (Hammond et al., 2019).

307

308 In connecting with concepts such as ableism, researchers are better positioned to question the  
309 practices and conditions that frame coaching in TID pathways, and in particular to challenge  
310 its assumed coherency and rationality. More research therefore is required to shed light on  
311 talent identification in para sport, in particular research that unpacks coaches' beliefs about  
312 talent, examining how 'talented athlete' ideals are reconciled with cultural notions of disability  
313 that are framed by ableism. As such, this may provide a fruitful line of scholarship while  
314 providing some valuable insight for practitioners embedded within para sport performance  
315 pathways (Dehghansai et al., 2021), as well as having clear implications for the education and  
316 support of coaches in these domains.

317

### 318 **Coach and athlete development: A brief look around**

319 There is an emerging body of research pertaining to the development of para athletes (e.g.  
320 Dehghansai et al., 2020a, 2020b; Patatas et al., 2020a, 2020b). This research has been  
321 extremely valuable in distinguishing para athletes' developmental trajectories apart from able-  
322 bodied models of athlete development, highlighting the uniqueness and complexity of para  
323 sport. As such, it is worth briefly reflecting on the existing research in para athlete development  
324 in order to signal potential ways forward for coaching research.

325

326 Without wishing to reiterate the point too much, it is generally assumed that it is essential to  
327 match talented athletes with talented coaches to optimise athlete development (Baker et al.,  
328 2017). However in para sport both coaching and athlete development research has, arguably,

329 progressed in relative isolation. In existing athlete development research coaches and their  
330 knowledge, practice and function are subsumed within athlete development models - where  
331 their efficacy is assumed rather than evidenced. In practice, however, athlete development is  
332 interwoven in the daily knowledge-practices of coaches. Coaches' learning in para sport has  
333 been shown to be anchored entirely in their day-to-day experiences – a process of 'trial and  
334 error', cherry picking coaching approaches and practice frameworks based on a self-referential  
335 process of 'what works' in able-bodied contexts (Pinder and Renshaw 2019; Townsend et al.,  
336 2021). Surprisingly little research has actively sought to understand the formation and  
337 application of coaches' knowledge or the impact of coaching practice on athlete development.  
338 Perhaps due to the (relative) lack of research on para athlete development providing direction  
339 for coaches, a common situation is that coaches in para sport tend to adapt existing models and  
340 ideas from able-bodied sports contexts and apply them to para sport contexts (Baker *et al.*,  
341 2017). The application and transfer of athlete development principles by coaches then is a  
342 concern, where it may be assumed that the developmental trajectories are the same for both  
343 able-bodied and para athletes. This is problematic, considering the nature and impact of  
344 impairment on an athlete's physical maturation, function, movement patterns, body  
345 composition, and responsiveness to training (Baker et al., 2017). Furthermore, there are  
346 additional considerations when providing 'wrap around' support and care for para-athletes, as  
347 para athletes may experience different social, emotional, and cognitive developmental patterns  
348 to able-bodied athletes. More critically, this suggests a degree of ableism underpinning athlete  
349 development principles in para sport which has implications for athlete welfare (Lowry et al.,  
350 2021).

351

352 Related to the process of athlete development is the notion of 'talent transfer'. Drawn from  
353 research in able-bodied sport (e.g. McNamara and Collins, 2015), talent transfer involves the

354 targeted transfer and 'fast tracking' of an athlete from one sports programme to another to  
355 increase the chances of success. In talent transfer initiatives, coaches have been positioned as  
356 crucial to their success, in particular developing individualised programmes (MacNamara and  
357 Collins, 2015) to enable successful transfer between disciplines. As such, this aspect of talent  
358 development in para sport warrants further attention, particularly due to the lower numbers of  
359 participants in talent pathways. For example, talent transfer can either be athlete-initiated  
360 whereby athletes may be looking for a new challenge, or coach-led, through the 'shoulder-  
361 tapping' of para-athletes from another sports programme. This transfer between sports may  
362 increase chances of success by achieving a favourable classification or through maximising the  
363 developmental investment made in current athletes. Talent transfer may also be achieved  
364 through the ethically dubious targeting of rehabilitation facilities for athletes following  
365 traumatic injury or illness (Radtke and Doll-Tepper, 2014) – particularly those with a  
366 background in sport – and raising awareness of sports opportunities available (Patatas *et al.*,  
367 2020).

368

369 Finally, there is an emerging research area that suggests that some para athletes experience an  
370 accelerated and variable developmental trajectory (e.g. Dehghansai *et al.* 2020b) compared to  
371 able bodied athletes. This can refer to instances whereby their 'talent transfer' between  
372 participation (e.g. clubs, schools) and performance domains is faster than usual. While this is  
373 an interesting area for future inquiry it is worth also considering the impact of such trajectories  
374 on the learning and development of coaches. With a lack of visible and coherent developmental  
375 pathways for coaches in para sport, it is not uncommon for para-athletes to work with 'personal'  
376 coaches that stay with them as they move through the performance pathway (Radtke and Doll-  
377 Tepper, 2014). These coaches generally are not employed by the sports governing body or  
378 federation, but may receive remuneration as long as the governing body of the sport is satisfied

379 with their performance, or are paid by the athletes who are funded by the governing body. As  
380 Townsend *et al.* (2021) argue, as coaches switch between domains, greater demands are placed  
381 on their skills, knowledge and expertise, particularly where coaching domains exacerbate  
382 differences in athlete development (e.g. inexperienced coaches working in high performance  
383 domains). Further research is required to understand the longitudinal impact of coaches'  
384 accelerated journeys through para sport.

385

386 Coach education is an emerging topic in para sport. It has been argued elsewhere that coach  
387 education requires a major shift to accommodate knowledge about disability (see Townsend *et*  
388 *al.*, 2021), and understandably, for sports governing bodies there is an immediate question of  
389 'what to do' to support the development of para coaches. Existing coach development models  
390 tend to rely heavily on the integration of psychological and bio-scientific discourses as a  
391 principle means of informing coaching practice (Townsend *et al.*, 2021). These approaches  
392 emphasise a technical language and specialised body of knowledge specific to impairment  
393 driving practice. The logic underpinning this approach holds that if coaches can be exposed to  
394 the processes and features of impairment, they are better equipped to develop specific  
395 interventions (Townsend *et al.*, 2017). While we know that impairment presents a direct  
396 consideration for coaches in practice, there is a danger in coach education to prescribe coaching  
397 approaches based solely on impairment-specific information.

398

399 At this stage there are no 'clear cut' answers for improving the level of support for coaches'  
400 learning in para sport, particularly because delivering optimal coach education programmes  
401 incorporates a level of complexity not currently observed in para coaching. For example, there  
402 is a need to base coach education on evidence-based approaches to professional learning  
403 combined with a framework for understanding disability that centralises the reflective focus on

404 the knowledge, practice and skills of coaches, as well as an understanding of impairment that  
405 recognises its impact on athletes' developmental trajectories, while not being the dominating  
406 feature. While a social relational model has been proposed elsewhere (see Townsend et al.,  
407 2021), one productive line of inquiry established due to the lack of consensus on optimal  
408 frameworks for athlete and coach development in para sport is the utilisation of Newell's (1986)  
409 constraints-based framework as both a *model of* athlete development and *model for* coaches to  
410 consider (see Baker et al., 2017; Pinder and Renshaw, 2019; Dehghansai et al., 2020b). This  
411 model emphasises the need for coaches to optimise athletes' functional ability rather than  
412 manage their lack of function and is considered a useful tool in informing coaches' decision-  
413 making. The evidence base is emerging, and so there remain questions about the translation of  
414 this model into existing coach education structures as well as its reception and application by  
415 coaches in talent development contexts. Indeed, researchers may wish to explore, combine and  
416 extend both the social relational model and a constraints-based framework in a grounded  
417 exploration of coaching in TID pathways as a means of extending scholarship in para sport and  
418 informing coach development.

419

#### 420 *Key Questions and Considerations*

421 A cursory assessment of the emerging body of research in para sport reveals a range of  
422 theoretical perspectives and insights into talent identification and athlete development, as well  
423 as a number of opportunities for research. Within para sport performance pathways coaches  
424 are positioned as a major stakeholder, applying considerable influence over talent identification  
425 and athlete development. Despite this, an in-depth understanding of the coaching process –  
426 inclusive of talent identification and development – in para sport is lacking. As such, it is  
427 difficult to build shared consensus or provide direction for coaches and practitioners in these  
428 contexts. Consequently, TID practices are often based on the application and translation of

429 able-bodied principles or coaches are left to operate without reference to a framework or model  
430 for best practice. Understandably, this has led researchers - predominantly housed in the  
431 discipline of skill acquisition – to promote a framework based on ecological dynamics to  
432 enhance coaching practice in TID. While a useful conceptual development in para sport,  
433 arguably we do not know enough about coaching generally, nor in para sport environments, to  
434 prescribe coaching approaches. This can risk oversimplifying a phenomenon, which can limit  
435 the conceptual development of coaching and reproduce certain understandings of coaching in  
436 para sport that align with a dominant psychological paradigm.

437

438 A targeted research agenda, developed in partnership with organisations responsible for TID  
439 in para sport then seems a reasonable area for future development. In particular, we encourage  
440 understandings of coaching to be grounded *in context*, and as such require connections to  
441 broader ideas in the study of disability. For example, in this chapter we have highlighted  
442 potential connections between talent identification practices and notions of access and equity.  
443 This is a significant conceptual development, because *recognition of talent* is predicated on the  
444 assumption that talented athletes have navigated a series of exclusionary barriers to participate  
445 in sport. The role of the coach in facilitating access and opportunity requires further research.  
446 Furthermore, we have highlighted the need to understand the constructed nature of the  
447 principles that coaches draw upon to recognise 'talent' as it intersects with disability.

448

449 Finally, the training of coaches is considered one of the most pressing matters in sustaining and  
450 improving the quality of sports provision for para athletes (Townsend *et al.*, 2017; Townsend  
451 *et al.*, 2021). The extent to which coaches are supported within TID environments is not clear,  
452 but a broader assessment of the coach development literature suggests an absence of disability-  
453 specific content in formalised coach education programmes and inconsistency in the

454 availability and impact of disability-specific coach education provision. As such, with recent  
455 moves toward integration in para sport there is an opportunity to seek alternatives to 'standard',  
456 formalised coach education programmes as sources of professional development (e.g. Duarte  
457 et al., 2020) for coaches. In particular, approaches in which disability is infused throughout the  
458 routines and curricula may be of particular benefit for coaches in para sport performance  
459 pathways (Townsend et al., 2021). Researchers also have a crucial role to play in reforming  
460 coach education, where disabled people must be included in a partnership model that  
461 centralises and values disability-specific knowledge to inform the development of educational  
462 programmes, resources and content for coaches. Currently, it is possible that practice is moving  
463 faster in para sport than research, and so partnership models between practitioners and  
464 researchers is required to ensure innovation is empirically-grounded and evidence-led.

465

## 466 **Conclusion**

467 This chapter has given insight into the current 'lay of the land' in Para sport TID focusing in  
468 particular on the role of coaches. It has highlighted the lack of research situated in para sport  
469 contexts and, therefore, the over-reliance on research in able-bodied sport to bridge the gap.  
470 Translation from able-bodied sport practices results in practices influenced by ableism that do  
471 not acknowledge the unique context in which para sport unfolds. Para athletes face an array of  
472 barriers that differ considerably from those faced by able-bodied athletes as well as differing  
473 needs, and TID practices must reflect this. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for community-  
474 based coaches to find themselves suddenly (and sometimes unexpectedly) coaching a  
475 Paralympic athlete and the lack of clear, coherent development pathways for coaches alongside  
476 a scarcity of best practice frameworks to draw on may limit athlete development. The  
477 conceptual development of para sport scholarship is crucial to inform practice, where targeted  
478 research agendas across coach and athlete development is needed to inform organisations

479 responsible for para sport performance pathways. Developing guiding principles for coaches  
480 and effective coach development pathways from these insights is necessary to ensure para  
481 athletes have the best chance of progressing successfully along performance pathways.

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