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Coach Autonomy Support, Basic Need Satisfaction, and Intrinsic Motivation of Paralympic Athletes

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The purpose of the present study, grounded in self-determination theory, was to explore the relationship between Paralympic athletes' perceptions of autonomy-supportive coach behavior, basic psychological needs, and intrinsic motivation to know, accomplish, and experience stimulation. One hundred thirteen Canadian Paralympic athletes completed an online survey, consisting of measures of coach autonomy support; of perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness; and of intrinsic motivation. Perceived coach autonomy support was a predictor of athletes' perceptions of autonomy and relatedness. Perceived competence was a significant predictor of all three forms of intrinsic motivation, while perceived autonomy was a significant predictor of intrinsic motivation to accomplish and experience stimulation. The results highlight the important relationship between coach behavior and athlete motivation in disability sport.

Key words: athletes with a disability, coaching, self-determination theory

The Paralympic Games are the largest multisport event in the world for elite athletes with a physical disability (Canadian Paralympic Committee, 2006). Since its inception in 1960, the number of athletes participating in the Paralympics has increased 10-fold, from 400 athletes representing 23 countries at the first Paralympic Games in Rome to approximately 4,000 athletes from 146 countries at the 2008 Summer Paralympic Games in Beijing (International Paralympic Committee, 2009). While the Paralympic Games are growing in size and popularity, there is limited research focused on Paralympic sport, despite calls for more research in this area (Crocker, 1993; DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Hanrahan, 2004; Reid & Prupas, 1998). For example, in 1986, the United States Olympic Committee formed the Committee on Sport for the Disabled (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Reid & Prupas, 1998). The committee identified seven research priority areas, including coaching. Despite this, there has been little growth in the field, and there is still a need for empirical theory-driven research about coaches of athletes with a disability.

The field of coaching science has expanded steadily throughout the past three decades, but most of the research has focused on coaching able-bodied athletes. While there are differences between coaching Paralympic athletes and able-bodied athletes, there are also some similarities (DePauw & Gavron, 2005). For example, coaches of athletes with a disability have used the same autonomy supportive strategies (i.e., providing athletes with choice, opportunities for initiative-taking, constructive feedback) as coaches of able-bodied athletes to improve athletes' technical skills as well as their quality of life (Cregan, Bloom, & Reid, 2007; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). In contrast, coaches of elite athletes with a disability often