

The role of coaches of wheelchair rugby in the development of athletes with a spinal cord injury

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Wheelchair rugby allows individuals living with quadriplegia to compete in an elite-level sport. It is currently one of the fastest-growing disability sports in the world and is the only full contact sport played by athletes with a disability. The purpose of this study was to explore the personal experiences of wheelchair rugby coaches in the development of their athletes who had entered their sport after acquiring a spinal cord injury. Four elite wheelchair rugby coaches were interviewed using a semi-structured guide. Data collection and analyses followed an interpretative phenomenological approach. Participants discussed the myriad of roles they carried out as wheelchair rugby coaches and the diverse range of their coaching responsibilities. They also alluded to their philosophies in both the personal and athletic development of their athletes and the unique strategies they utilised with them. The results highlight the important role of a coach in facilitating athlete development in disability sport.

Keywords: coaching; paralympics; wheelchair rugby

On the request of the British Government in 1944, Sir Ludwig Guttmann introduced sport as a rehabilitation tool for persons with a spinal cord injury (SCI) at Stoke Mandeville Hospital (Schültke 2001). This hospital later became the site of the first international multi-sport games for persons with an SCI (Anderson 2003) which led to the present Paralympic Games (International Paralympic Committee 2009). The Paralympic movement has expanded over the past few decades from 400 athletes representing 23 countries at the inaugural Paralympic Games in Rome in 1960 to approximately 4000 athletes from 146 countries at the 2008 Summer Paralympic Games in Beijing (International Paralympic Committee 2009).

Despite the growing size and heightened popularity, research within Paralympic sport has been limited to predominantly physiological and biomechanical factors (e.g. Goosey-Tolfrey *et al.* 2006). While the scope of psychological research is still limited to elite athletes who have a physical disability, a related and growing body of research has investigated the psychological implications of able-bodied athletes' return to sport following serious injury (Gould *et al.* 1997, Taylor and Taylor 1997, Bianco 2001, Podlog and Eklund 2006). A common theme from these studies was the difficulty in the transitioning process for returning athletes. Athletes who returned to sport following a serious injury experienced fear of re-injury (Kvist