A Comprehensive Examination of the Development of Parasport Athletes

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Background: The rapid growth of the Paralympic Games has led to increased media exposure, funding and grassroots participation; however, there remains a considerable gap in our understanding of Parasport athletes’ development (Houlihan & Chapman, 2016). Countries with advanced sport science support have adopted pathway models that provide developmental recommendations across an athlete’s career (e.g., Canada’s Long-Term Athlete Development from Balyi, Way, & Higgs, 2013). However, there are numerous issues associated with current Parasport models, such as the ‘neat and tidy’ concept and its compatibility to the complex and intertwined development of Parasport athletes.

Objective: The scope of this project is to develop a better understanding of Parasport athletes’ development in order to create appropriate pathways that suit athletes’ needs at various points in their development, sustain long-term participation and enhance athletes’ experiences.

Methods: For the purpose of this project, four phases have been structured. First, a modified theoretical framework based on Newell’s constraints model (1986, 1991) is presented and situated within the existing Parasport literature. The next three projects use a mixed-methods approach to investigate Canadian and Australian athletes’ sporting careers and current pathway structures to better understand athletes’ experiences negotiating throughout their respective careers.

Significance: This project has a wide range of benefits for the scientific and sporting communities. We provide a theoretical framework that fits with the paradigms of Parasport and athlete development. It is a comprehensive, holistic framework that considers the dynamic complexity of Parasport and athletes’ developmental trajectories. In addition, the findings of this project will help better understand the various pathways to expertise and identify the key factors that are important to maintaining participation.