

# Canadian researcher works to make paralympic games safer

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In an effort to gain a competitive edge, some athletes at the Paralympic Games have taken to a risky and banned form of performance enhancement.

While not as widely publicized as during the [Olympic Games](#), performance enhancement is an issue among disabled [athletes](#) who compete in the Paralympics. However, the practice of performance enhancement is often taken to extremes by disabled athletes who are trying to give themselves a competitive edge.

Many athletes who participate in the Paralympics have [spinal cord injuries](#) that limit their ability to regulate their heart rate and blood pressure. For top-level athletes, this can be a huge competitive disadvantage. An increased heart rate and elevated blood pressure gives athletes the energy and [stamina](#) they need to compete in strenuous sports. Some athletes go to extreme lengths to spike their blood pressure ahead of a competition – going so far as to break a toe or hold their urine. Known as "Paralympic boosting," this is a dangerous practice that can lead to [heart damage](#), stroke, even death.

"As a clinician, I can understand the motivation for athletes to boost their blood pressure. They are suffering from a condition that has a real effect on their ability to compete." said Dr. Krassioukov, a clinician and leading researcher on [spinal cord](#) injuries at the University of British Columbia (UBC) who is working with Paralympic officials to educate athletes about the risks involved in this practice.

Dr. Krassioukov, who has received funding from the Canada Foundation for Innovation, has been asked by the International Paralympic Committee to find a process for assessing and classifying athletes based on their [cardiovascular function](#) – ensuring that they compete on a level playing field and making the need to boost their [blood pressure](#) irrelevant. He says the end goal is to establish fair competition by ensuring that athletes are competing against people who have the same ability and level of function.

The cardiovascular classification system that Dr. Krassioukov is working on would group disabled athletes in ways similar to weight classes for boxers. Dr. Krassioukov began his research in this area in 2008 with Paralympic athletes competing in Beijing, continued it at the 2010 Vancouver Games, and is now headed to London to present his findings, as well as monitor and educate athletes on the dangers of Paralympic boosting.

Dr. Krassioukov conducts research into spinal cord issues at ICORD, a leading health research centre that is supported by the UBC Faculty of Medicine and the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority.

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