

New research re-introduces athletes with learning difficulties into the Paralympic Games

August 22 2012

As a result of extensive research and a robust new classification system conducted by academics at Canterbury Christ Church University, athletes are now eligible to compete again in the London 2012 Paralympics.

For the first time since the disqualification of the Spanish Basketball team at the Sydney Games, athletes with [intellectual disabilities](#) will be allowed to compete on the international stage at the Paralympics in London.

The Spanish basketball team, who won gold, were found to be cheating as they had deliberately recruited ten out of their 12 members without learning disabilities. This resulted in this classification group being excluded by the Paralympic Association until a way to more robustly measure the disability and its impact on the sport.

Professor Jan Burns, Joint [Clinical Psychology](#) Programme Director and member of an International Paralympic Committee sponsored international research group, has conducted research which has directly influenced the re-inclusion of athletes with learning disabilities back in the Paralympic Games for London 2012.

Professor Burns explains: “A system of classification is necessary not only to recognise if the athlete is intellectually impaired, but how that

disability impacts on their particular sport. For instance, with a physical disability if you are a left-handed amputee entering a pistol shooting event and are right-handed, then your disability is not interfering with your sport. But if you are a swimmer, not having a left hand would make a difference. It is the same disability with a different impact.

“We have measured the types of intelligence needed for various sports. For example, to compete in the 100 meter sprint, you just need to know that when the gun fires, you must run in a straight line as fast as you can. For more complicated sports, such as basketball, you need to be able to recognise patterns and be able to anticipate and recognise feigns. We have isolated some of these cognitive skills and are able to measure them. This has allowed a limited return of this group of people back into the Paralympics, participating in swimming, athletics and table tennis. They have to qualify the same way as all Paralympians, by taking part in national and international competitions.”

Professor Burns continued: “London 2012 will be the largest ever showcase for Paralympic sport in the UK and this will put people with learning [disabilities](#) back on the same platform with elite sports competitors. It will also ensure the development of sports for their group and change the public’s perception of them.”

Inas, the International Federation for sport for para-athletes with an intellectual disability, and the International Paralympic Committee funded the international research group to devise the new robust [classification system](#), implemented for [London 2012](#).

Provided by Canterbury Christ Church University

Citation: New research re-introduces athletes with learning difficulties into the Paralympic Games (2012, August 22) retrieved 3 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-08-re-introduces-athletes-difficulties-paralympic-games.html>

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