

# Why sport must be (re)imagined in ways that make it more accessible for all disabled athletes

August 29 2024, by Jennifer Mooradian and Dawn Trussell

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Credit: Yusuf Miah from Pexels

The [increased media coverage of the Paralympic Games](#) makes Paralympic sport seem "inclusive." But, the continued reliance on segregated sport and narrowly defined [classification categories](#) suggests [ableism](#) remains. For example, some [intellectually and cognitively](#)

disabled athletes are excluded. This implies that elite competition and inclusive sport may be incompatible.

Intellectual impairment is one of the [Paralympics' 10 classifications](#) of eligible impairment types. But not all cognitive and [intellectual disabilities](#) are the same. While some may result in a lower IQ, others can affect both the body and mind.

For example, athletes with Down syndrome may cross multiple classifications. They can be described as having an intellectual and cognitive disability and also have physical impacts such as [reaction time](#), [muscle strength and function](#), [heart rate](#), and [adaptions to heat](#). Some Down syndrome athletes may also have an IQ too high to qualify for the Paralympics' intellectual impairment category, [one of the criteria for which is IQ of 75 or below](#).

As researchers in Sport Management at Brock University, we are currently exploring diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in Canadian sport. Many sport organizations state they are inclusive and welcome athletes of all abilities. Preliminary findings of our research show a relative absence of diversity in sport despite good intentions. Sport has many benefits to offer, but some disabled athletes are still missing out.

In mid-August, Jennifer Mooradian, one of the authors of this story, spent the day with her daughter at her first athletics competition with the [Special Olympics](#). Her performance at the meet was exceptional, but left Jennifer wondering how sport fits in her daughter's life. [One in five Canadians has a disability](#), making sport difficult to access due to barriers [such as travel](#), [increased cost](#), [suitable programming](#) and [coaches lacking disability-specific knowledge](#).

This is the reality she is reminded of as the Paris 2024 Olympics end and

the opening ceremonies to the Paralympics begin.

## The value of inclusive sport

[What it means to compete at elite levels](#) in sport is not well defined. If [elite athletes are athletes who outperform their peers](#), then disabled athletes—physically, intellectually or cognitively—should be able to compete at elite levels. Elite, though, tends to be thought of in connection with only able-bodied athletes.

The Olympics and Paralympics are multi-sport major games events. Their international appeal offers the ideal opportunity to further social justice efforts through sport. The Olympic movement seeks to create a better world through sport practiced "without discrimination of any kind."

Similarly, [Paris 2024](#) insists "there's a place for everyone in sport," lauding a new national sport initiative called "All Disabilities, All Sports." This initiative seeks to expand sports opportunities for athletes with disabilities.

Fueled by a desire to improve inclusivity in sport, [Paris 2024](#) states, "we want to harness the Games to show that sport boosts inclusivity in ways that benefit society." But, the classification process is flawed, and athletes with Down syndrome are only one example of a group of athletes still experiencing a lack of inclusion. There is a clear difference between what sport says and what sport does.

Inclusive sport affects us all. It acts as common ground for people from different backgrounds, helping to build trust, [community](#) and a [sense of belonging](#). Most people [will experience a disability at some point in their lives](#). Sports organizations that offer inclusive sport improve the sustainability of their clubs through expanded membership opportunities,

increasing community connection and [breaking down stigma](#) by embracing diverse skills and knowledge.

## **Sport as a human right**

The [United Nations situates sport as a human right](#). Sport organizations, including the International Olympic Committee, are working toward sport as a human right through DEI initiatives that intend to make sport more accessible and inclusive to diverse groups of people. But for sport to act as a path to inclusion, we need to think differently about what sport is and who sport is for.

Thinking differently about sport benefits everyone by changing sport from a space for only specific kinds of bodies ([white, male, cis, hetero, able, young and elite](#)) to sport for all bodies. If sport is for everyone, sport must be (re)imagined in ways that make it more accessible.

## **Sport for all abilities: A pathway to inclusion**

Too often, the easy answer is that sport cannot be both competitive and inclusive. Sport with improved classification for cognitively and intellectually disabled athletes can happen along with the Paralympics. Sport can also be done in other ways that bring competition and inclusivity together.

Mixed ability sport is one way that sport is re-imagined. Mixed ability sport organizations, such as [International Mixed Ability Sports](#), show how sport can be changed by changing our minds about how sport is done. [Ringette Canada](#) and [Rugby Ontario](#) are two examples of how sports organizations in Canada are changing by offering mixed ability sport opportunities that include athletes of all abilities.

We all, whether researchers, coaches, managers, administrators or athletes, have an ethical responsibility to change sport to make it meaningfully inclusive for all.

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