

## Career Evolution and Knowledge of Elite Coaches of Swimmers With a Physical Disability

Kerry Cregan, Gordon A. Bloom, and Greg Reid

*In the last decade there has been an increase in empirical research on coaches of elite able-bodied athletes, while coaches of athletes with a disability have generally been overlooked. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to address this oversight by examining the career evolution and knowledge of these coaches. Six elite coaches of swimmers with a physical disability were interviewed using an unstructured, open-ended interview format. Results revealed information pertaining to the coaches' backgrounds, career evolution, and knowledge in training and competition. As well, all coaches stressed the importance of coaching their athletes as an elite swimmer as opposed to coaching a swimmer with a disability.*

*Key words:* coaching expertise, disability sport, qualitative research

In the last decade there has been an increase in empirical research pertaining to coaching science and education (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). Much of this research has focused on elite-level coaches of able-bodied athletes, most commonly at the university or Olympic level (e.g., Bloom, Crumpton, & Anderson, 1999; Bloom, Durand-Bush, & Salmela, 1997; Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria, & Russell, 1995; d'Arripe-Longueville, Fournier, & Dubois, 1998; Gilbert & Trudel, 2000; Vallée & Bloom, 2005). Despite this, there is a paucity of empirical research on coaches of athletes with physical disabilities; in fact, literature pertaining to their expertise is almost nonexistent (DePauw & Gavron, 1991). However, the need for empirical-based research on these coaches is undisputed, especially with the recent increase in sporting events and opportunities for athletes with a physical disability (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Reid & Prupas, 1998). For example, the Paralympics have grown from 400 athletes in its 1960 debut, to ap-

proximately 4,000 athletes from 130 countries at the 2004 Athens Paralympics (International Paralympic Committee, n.d.).

Within able-bodied sport in Canada, empirically based research on elite coaches' knowledge has primarily been conceptualized using the Coaching Model (CM) of Côté et al. (1995). The CM is a theoretical framework for establishing connections between the accumulated knowledge on how and why coaches perform as they do. The CM suggests that coaches begin by constructing a mental model of their athlete's or team's potential. This mental model dictates how the coach applies the primary components of organization, training, and competition to their athletes. This model is influenced by three peripheral components: coach's personal characteristics, athlete characteristics, and contextual factors. Coaches integrate these into their operational strategies to determine which of the three primary components must be used to maximize the athlete's and team's development. Creating a successful environment often requires adaptations to multiple contextual factors, such as training facilities and conditions, parents, financial resources, and administrative responsibilities (Côté et al., 1995; Davies, Bloom, & Salmela, 2005). The CM has been applied to research in individual (Côté et al., 1995), team (Vallée & Bloom, 2005; Gilbert & Trudel, 2000), and combative sport settings (Morales & Salmela, 2001) of elite coaches of able-bodied athletes.

While the CM has never been applied to disability sport research, there is reason to believe it would be

*Submitted: March 17, 2006*

*Accepted: November 22, 2006*

*Kerry Cregan, Gordon A. Bloom, and Greg Reid are with the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at McGill University.*