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Research paper

The learning and mentoring experiences of Paralympic coaches

Katherine E. Fairhurst, M.A.^a, Gordon A. Bloom, Ph.D.^{b,*}, William J. Harvey, Ph.D.^b^a College of Physical Activity and Sport Sciences, West Virginia University, 375 Birch Street, Morgantown, WV, 26505-6116, USA^b Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education, McGill University, 475 Pine Avenue West, Montreal, Quebec, H2W 1S4, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Background: Participation in the Paralympic Games has grown substantially, yet the same growth and development has not occurred with empirical literature for coaching in disability sport.

Objective: The purpose of the current study was to explore Paralympic coaches' perceptions of their learning and educational experiences, including their formal and informal mentoring opportunities.

Methods: Six highly successful and experienced Paralympic coaches were individually interviewed in this qualitative study. The interview data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's guidelines for thematic analysis.

Results: Results demonstrated that Paralympic coaches faced several challenges to acquire disability specific coaching knowledge and skills. These challenges led the participants to utilize an array of informal learning situations, such as actively seeking mentoring relationships when they first entered the field. After becoming expert coaches, they gave back to their sport by making mentoring opportunities available for aspiring coaches.

Conclusion: The results of the current study address the value and importance of mentoring as a structured source of education and career development for aspiring Paralympic coaches.

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Despite the rapid increase of participants in the Paralympic Games,¹ the same growth and development has not occurred with empirical literature for coaching in disability sport.^{2–5} A major consequence of limited research in disability sport is the lack of available coaching resources. Disability sport coaches have noted there is a lack of specificity in coach education programs for disability sport, resulting in decontextualized sources of information.⁶ Thus, there are only a few current empirical sources on the knowledge of disability sport coaches.^{6–10} For example, McMaster and colleagues found that disability sport coaches developed a highly personal relationship with their athletes that, in turn, assisted in the acquisition of knowledge and effective coaching practices. Similarly, Duarte and Culver⁸ used a life-story methodology to explore the life and career progression of a single sailing coach becoming an adapted sailing coach. Relationships with colleagues, athletes, and mentors throughout her career helped her advance from a recreational para-swimming instructor to a developmental adapted sailing coach. Cregan and colleagues⁷ investigated the career evolution and knowledge of elite coaches of

swimmers with a disability. All of the study's participants started by coaching able-bodied swimmers. They began coaching swimmers with a disability when these swimmers arrived at their facility, forcing them to independently acquire disability-specific knowledge because no formal training was available. In summary, there does not appear to be clear learning paths for coaches of athletes with a disability. Furthermore, there appears to be few formal coach learning resources readily available for this specialized group of sport coaches.

Reviews investigating disability sport research over the last 20 years^{3,4} have established a need for empirical research that studies coaches of athletes with a disability. From psychological and pedagogical perspectives, coaching athletes with a disability requires many of the same skills as coaching able-bodied athletes, such as helping athletes to set realistic goals, develop realistic skill progression, provide consistent and appropriate feedback, and build team cohesion.^{2,9} Despite these similarities, the athletes' physical disabilities often place different demands on their coaches and require coaches to acquire disability-specific knowledge.¹⁰ Coaches require both knowledge of contextual factors, such as understanding the nature of the athlete's disability, and knowledge of necessary biomechanical adaptations.⁷ They must also be aware of their athletes' living accommodations, transportation needs, and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: gordon.bloom@mcgill.ca (G.A. Bloom).