

# HOW TO INCREASE SPORTS PARTICIPATION FOR ATHLETES WITH DISABILITIES

by Shawn Maloney

The Aspen Institute's Project Play recently published the [Children's Bill of Rights in Sports](#), which highlights play as a fundamental human right. Central to this document is the assertion that all children have the right to play sports. Unfortunately, many youth with disabilities continue to be sidelined from scholastic and community-based sport programs. One reason is that many youth sport leaders are confused by disability inclusion policies and how to best implement solutions at the community level.

## ACCOMMODATE OR CREATE

So, what's the policy? In 2013, the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights [issued a letter](#) clarifying that school districts must provide an equal opportunity for students with disabilities to participate in extracurricular sports. At a minimum, schools must make an effort to determine if modifications or adaptations would allow an individual student to participate alongside their peers without disabilities. Examples of this include using a visual aid to assist a d/Deaf runner at the start of a race or allowing a swimmer with one arm an exception to the common "two-hand touch" rule.

Importantly, these guidelines do NOT require organizations to change essential elements of the sport, give students with disabilities an unfair advantage, or compromise safety in any way. Students with disabilities still need to qualify and compete with everyone else in order to earn their place on a team. The end goal is inclusion, not charity.

In some cases, students with certain disabilities may not be safely included in existing sport programs. If reasonable accommodations cannot be made, the Office for Civil Rights urges school districts to create additional opportunities specifically for disabled students. For example, students with certain developmental disabilities may benefit from a [Special Olympics program like Unified Sports](#), which pairs disabled and non-disabled students together on the same teams. Regional programs such as a district- or county-wide wheelchair basketball league could also be established if there are not enough disabled athletes at a single school.

## EXPLORE APPROPRIATE FORMATS

Adaptive sports (also commonly referred to as "adapted" or "para" sports) are sports designed specifically for athletes with disabilities. These sports are often extremely similar to their "mainstream" counterparts, with slight adjustments to the space, rules, or equipment which allow more people to play.

Adaptive sports are often organized around broad disability categories, which include physical disabilities, intellectual and developmental disabilities, and sensory disabilities. Coaches and



administrators may benefit from understanding the overall philosophy, inclusion criteria, and common sport options within each format. Keep in mind that unnecessarily separate or inadequate sport programming is discriminatory, and many disabled athletes can participate in mainstream sports alongside their non-disabled peers. Again, the ultimate goal is inclusion through a wide array of opportunities.

### **Physical Disabilities**

Athletes with physical disabilities often compete in adaptive sports such as Wheelchair Basketball, Wheelchair Rugby, Athletics (track and field), Table Tennis, Boccia, and many others. The Paralympic Games are the pinnacle of this format and welcome athletes from several distinct disability categories. Some adaptive sports allow both disabled and non-disabled participants, but all athletes who compete in the Paralympics must have a documented disability and meet elite qualifying standards.

### **Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**

Athletes with intellectual and developmental disabilities may compete in mainstream, adaptive, or Special Olympic sport programs. The Special Olympics were created specifically for athletes with intellectual and developmental disabilities, such as Down Syndrome or Autism Spectrum Disorder, and offer over 30 individual and team sport options for all ability levels. Many Special Olympics programs emphasize participation over elite competition, and therefore do not exclude any athlete based on qualifying scores or disability categories.

### **Sensory Disabilities**

Athletes with sensory disabilities, such as vision or hearing impairments, also have several options for mainstream and adaptive sports. Blind or visually impaired athletes often compete in individual sports like Alpine Skiing, Athletics, or Kayaking with the assistance of a guide. Several team sports, such as 5-a-side Football and [Goal Ball](#), have also been created specifically for athletes who are blind. Athletes who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing also have a long history of excelling at many different sports. The [Deaflympics](#), founded in 1924, are one of the longest running international sporting competitions in the world and are a celebration of Deaf culture and language.

## **CONNECT, CONTRIBUTE, AND COLLABORATE**

Now that you are interested in adaptive sports, how do you get started? Luckily, researchers from the Steadward Centre at the University of Alberta have created [Becoming Para Ready](#) — an introductory guide designed to help community sport leaders become more proactive when creating opportunities for athletes with disabilities.

One helpful tool within this resource is the “Para Ready Continuum”. This framework offers a pathway for organizations to progress toward full inclusion while building their capacity to serve athletes with disabilities. The three levels of readiness are described as “Connectors”, “Contributors”, and “Collaborators”.



## Connectors

At a bare minimum, community-based sport organizations should have a plan for how to respond when athletes with disabilities inquire about their programming. “Connectors” are sport organizations which currently do not have the capacity, knowledge, or expertise to serve disabled athletes but can readily connect them to other programs that do. So, Step 1 in the Para Ready Continuum is to research local adaptive sport programs, establish a relationship, and develop a referral system. Start by exploring chapter locations with [Move United](#) and [Challenged Athletes Foundation](#).

## Contributors

“Contributors” are sport organizations which can offer resources such as facilities, equipment, and volunteers to support other organizations that regularly serve athletes with disabilities. Funding for adaptive sport programs is often extremely limited. So, a local college, high school, or community-based sport organization might offer resources to an adaptive organization in order to chip away at common infrastructure and accessibility barriers.

## Collaborators

Organizations which progress along the Para Ready Continuum will often create meaningful relationships with disabled athletes and regularly engage the expertise of the disability community. “Collaborators” are organizations that have established a formal relationship with an adaptive sport organization and are now ready to include athletes with disabilities in their programming. These collaborations are often essential for gaining the trust of the disability community by removing barriers of communication, infrastructure, and capacity.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [Becoming Para Ready: A Resource to Help Club and School Athletics Programs Support More Effective Integration](#)
- [Coaching to Support Inclusion of Young Athletes with Disabilities](#)

## A CASE STUDY IN WHEELCHAIR LACROSSE

Last summer, I had the opportunity to facilitate a wheelchair lacrosse coach development clinic in New Hampshire. Our goal was to help local leaders gain the knowledge and confidence to start their own wheelchair lacrosse team.

We embraced collaboration as a solution to the dual challenges of (a) educating the disability community about lacrosse, and (b) educating the lacrosse community about disability.

First, we identified the typical barriers to fielding a sustainable program — equipment, facilities, athletes, etc. — and made an intentional and proactive effort to collaborate with various



stakeholders in the community. We decided to partner with a local adaptive sport organization which offers other competitive sports like wheelchair rugby, sled hockey, and power soccer.

This was important because the local organization already had access to sport wheelchairs, an accessible playing venue, and a community of potential athletes with disabilities. We then invited youth and high school lacrosse coaches, therapeutic recreation providers, and some sled hockey athletes to attend the training as well. Between coaches and athletes, roughly half of the attendees self-identified as disabled.

Coaches from Wheelchair Lacrosse USA were on-hand to provide technical expertise, but the real magic was creating a local connection between the adaptive sport coaches, lacrosse coaches, and disabled athletes who attended the clinic. We left space in the training for the various groups to network, share experiences, and discuss strategies with each other.

As the governing body of wheelchair lacrosse in the United States, WLUSA provided the “formal” education, but the “informal” education that happened organically between sessions was just as valuable.

Adaptive sports show us that each athlete — disabled or non-disabled — is truly one-of-a-kind. There is no correct way to accomplish a skill since every athlete has unique abilities and therefore a slightly different approach.

Over time, I’ve found that the most important strategy for increasing participation in sport for disabled athletes is fairly straightforward: collaborate with, listen to, and learn directly from people with disabilities themselves.

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