Practical Considerations when Working with Athletes with Disabilities

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What is your Purpose?

• What are you trying to achieve when you work with athletes?
• What are you trying to achieve when you work with athletes who are short?
• What are you trying to achieve when you work with athletes with disabilities?
Focus on Ability

- Don’t ignore the disability if it influences what you are doing, but it should not be the main focus
- Use athletes as a source of information
- Don’t be a protector from failure
Amputees

- Challenge
Amputees

- Muscle imbalances
- Overstressing of single limbs
- Possible rule differences
Blind
Blind

- Identify yourself
- Never leave a conversation without saying so
- Provide accurate and specific instructions and directions
- Avoid background noise
- Speak directly to the person, maintain eye contact
Blind

- Provide verbal feedback to make up for lack of visual feedback
- Avoid rearranging furniture
- Consider Braille or large font handouts, or CDs/cassettes
Cerebral Palsy

- A variety of neuromuscular conditions caused by damage to the part of the brain that controls and coordinates muscle tone, reflexes, and action
- Range of classifications
- Challenge
Cerebral Palsy

- If speech is affected, don’t assume intellectual disability
- Speak directly to the athlete
- Exercise may increase spasticity
Intellectual Disabilities

- Inability to think in abstract terms
- Poor decision making ability
- Poor short term memory
- Learning difficulties
- Limited literacy/numeracy skills
- Inconsistent concentration spans
Intellectual Disabilities

- Keep sessions fun and enjoyable
- Keep practice time on specific activities short
- Keep instructions simple – break down skills
- Seek understanding
- Be specific in praise, criticism, and encouragement
Intellectual Disabilities

- Be aware of needing to teach things we may take for granted.
Wheelchair Athletes

Challenge
Wheelchair Athletes

- Accessibility issues
- Get on their level
- Wheelchair is part of personal space
- Dealing with heat and cold
- Unique rules
- Harness all even partially usable muscles
Abdominal Breathing/Centering

* Self-talk (blind)
* Quadriplegics
Physical Relaxation

- Tension phase of PMR (CP)
- PMR – entire body or just parts?
Controlling Arousal/Activation

- Loss of sympathetic drive to the heart limits increases in heart rate for quadriplegics
Goal Setting

- ID – able but takes time
- Recording instead of writing (CP, blind, ID)
Body Awareness

- Prostheses, chairs, crutches – part of the athlete’s body?
- Which muscles can/cannot be controlled (CP/WC)
- Phantom limb experiences – where does the limb end?
Imagery

* Visual images are possible for the blind (congenital or acquired)
* To wear or not to wear a prosthesis
* Importance of scripts (ID and others)
Attention/Concentration

- Balance
- Broadening attention – visual or aural
Self-Confidence

- Individuals with disabilities may not be taught a competitive orientation to life and therefore may not develop the personal dispositions and skills, such as competitiveness and coping strategies, to maintain self-confidence in competitive situations
- A skill!
Pre-Competition Preparation

- Music (blind)
- Familiarization with venue (blind)

- CONTROL THE CONTROLLABLE
Conclusion

- Rule alterations and communication issues may need to be taken into account.
- Chances are good that working with athletes with disabilities will enhance your professional effectiveness, no matter with whom you end up working.