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The tail is wagging the dog: body culture, classification and the paralympic movement

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The Tail is Wagging the Dog: Body Culture, Classification and the Paralympic Movement

For consideration for the special issue of *Ethnography* on physical culture

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Abstract.

The rules and regulations regarding the classification process through which athletes must be vetted to determine eligibility for Paralympic competition have been transformed drastically over the last two decades. A complex classification system initially developed by the International Organizations of Sport for the Disabled (IOSD) has been the distinctive feature of the Paralympic movement over this period. Key consideration must be given to the equitable nature of any classification system imposed by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) in order to comply with the ideology of Paralympism. Paralympism is manifest in the dictum of the Paralympic movement '*empower, inspire and achieve*'. Using ethnographic data obtained while a Paralympic athlete this paper explores recent debates within the sport of athletics surrounding classification. This is achieved by highlighting the process of classification and how as a result of this process some bodies are celebrated and others are not within a sporting culture established as a ghetto for imperfection.

KEY WORDS: Paralympism, ethics, classification, athletics, habitus

This paper highlights the importance of body culture in the transforming of the Paralympic movement by examining data collected ethnographically by an anthropologist who was both athlete and administrator within elite sporting practice for the disabled¹. Adopting the concept of body culture (Brownell 1995) as the nexus between the physical embodiment of athletes with a disability and the structures imposed upon them in light of the development of institutions which govern Paralympic sport. In particular this paper will suggest that those working within Paralympic athletics, and their control over the structure of competition, namely classification, are remiss, in allowing for the empowerment of athletes with a disability that is fundamental to Paralympism.

Classification is simply a structure for competition similar to the systems used in the sport of judo and boxing where competitors perform in distinctive weight categories. Within sport for the disabled competitors are classified by their body's degree of function and therefore it is important that the classification process is robust and achieves equity across the Paralympic sporting practice and enables athletes to compete on a 'level playing field' (Sherrill, 1999). The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) currently organises and administers both the Paralympic Games and the quadrennial World Championships for individual Paralympic sports such as athletics, using athletes who have been through a process of classification. Using the resources of the International Organisations of Sport for the Disabled (IOSD)² (including athletes, volunteer administrators, and classification systems) the IPC has arguably turned the Paralympic Games into the most recognisable and possibly most influential vehicle for the promotion of sport for the disabled. The Paralympics is well organised with a relatively high profile that attracts significant media coverage and commercial sponsorship like many other modern sporting spectacles. Athletes from one hundred and thirty-six nations competed in the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens making the Paralympic Games unquestionably the main international sporting forum for athletes with varying degrees of impairment.

In this paper, I undertake a critical examination of the process and application of the classification regulations within the sport of athletics as practiced throughout the Paralympic Movement. In order to do so I draw on Morgan's (1994) notion of "practice community" to characterise elite disabled athletes as actors central to the Paralympic movement. It is the conceptualisation of the practice community, as articulated by Morgan (1994, 2002; see Howe and Jones, 2006), that provides the conceptual framework for an ethical exploration of the role of classification within Paralympic sport. Morgan makes the distinction between the institution, in this case the IPC, and the practice community which comprises those who are actively involved with the practice the athletes, coaches and officials of the IOSDs.

I also use Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) conceptualisation of habitus to situate the individual athletes bodies within the ethical environment of the practice community. Habitus can be understood as habitual, embodied practices that collectively comprise and define a culture. In other words habitus is the nexus between the decisions individuals make and the structured environment in which they are a part. Within the field of sport for the disabled key elements of this particular habitus are the charitable mandate for International Organisations of Sport for the Disabled (IOSD) and the systems adopted for the organisation of the sporting practice, commonly referred to as classification. The main aim of the practice community in this context is facilitating the empowerment of athletes with a disability through the encouragement of a good ethical decisions regarding the direction the process of classification is heading within the Paralympic movement.

This paper may be seen as a sandwich where the bread is made up of two diachronic ethnographic vignettes with analysis and reflection as the fillings. The first vignette is a personal account of my body undergoing the process of classification. Following this there will be a discussion regarding the control of Paralympic bodies before exploring the habitus of IPC Athletics and how this relates to classification. Before concluding the second vignette highlights an episode that I characterise as the 'coming of age' of the Paralympic Games in order to illuminate the importance given to certain disabled bodies in the media which ultimately leads to the further marginalisation of those who are unable to meet this redefined norm.

The Classification of a Body

Seoul - September 1988

After two days of travelling and very little sleep I am still unable to rest. The weather outside is very humid and the waiting area is far too small and cramped. To make matters worse there is limited seating. The nature of my impairment (mild cerebral palsy) means that I have suffered less from the travel than some of my fellow participants. Many athletes that use wheelchairs for mobility were confined to their seats for over fifteen hours. I should be delighted to be in Asia for the first time. The Paralympic Games in Seoul Korea have been the focus of my attention – sporting and otherwise for the last three years. In order to get clearance to compete in Seoul I am waiting in no-mans-land at the edge of the Paralympic village where I must go through the process of classification. Several weeks from now I will pit my wits (body and soul) against the best athletes in the world that are classified as cerebral palsy seven (CP 7). This is the presumed outcome of the classification process as I have been competing within the category for the past three years and my body is a textbook example of hemiplegia, the impairment that is at the heart of CP 7. In spite of this I must wait my turn to go through the classification drills. It is the waiting and uncertainty that bother me with

regards to classification. From time to time the classification process has been engaged in too close to my races but at least this time we are a couple of weeks away from my first competition.

Being pigeon holed as a particular type of 'body' is an odd experience. It determines many things within sport for the disabled for example with whom I am allocated a shared room within the athletes village and whether or not I am considered an elite athlete³. Why should the impaired body that I possess influence living arrangements and my status as an athlete? I am well trained regularly running 100 miles a week. Can others not see beyond my CP and see that I am as committed as any middle or long distance runner regardless of my impaired state?

Here we go! It is my turn text after four hours in this sterile room The wait is over. My classification begins. To date I have undergone the process of classification three times. It is an alienating experience as each time a different team of individuals determines whether your body fits into the textbook of carnal typology that is acceptable to those who govern the element of Paralympic sport that the athletes wish to be a part.

My body is poked and prodded. It is measured. I am asked to walk, run and jump in a room that is really not suitable for any physical activity whatsoever. Too small to build up a head of steam while running and lacking ventilation so that I am grateful that I cannot run. This is unfortunate because my impairment means that I have trouble controlling my muscles and stopping running is as tricky as starting it. This is a result of spasticity brought on by my cerebral palsy. In essence I am a spaz as the public might refer to my physical state.

The classifiers see me as a difficult character. On several occasions I am told to simply 'do as they ask' and not to bother them with 'trivial' questions. What strikes me as odd is how questions regarding the medical state of my body can be seen as trivial in light of the fact that the process of classification will enable me to compete in the Paralympic Games. Later in the Paralympic village I hear stories of athletes who try to cheat the system. That is they try to make their bodies appear more impaired than they actually are so that they are classed with a more impaired group. The result of such fraudulent activity means that they will have a better chance of winning but it most certainly is antithetical to the ethics of the practice community.

The team of classifiers look like they have been working all night long and I wonder whether this will lead to an inaccurate diagnosis. Will any of the athletes I race against have beaten the system? It seems rather robust but rumours of cheating abound. Each team comprises a medical doctor, a physiotherapist and a sports technical expert⁴. The technical expert one assumes would be different if I had been attempting to compete in swimming rather than athletics. It transpires that the sport technical person on the classification team is normally someone training in physical education or kinesiology and therefore has an understanding of 'movement and sport' in a general sense. None of these individuals are particularly friendly, in part due to the drawn out nature of the process but they also appear to have treated me as a specimen pickled in paraldehyde and placed on a shelf in a biology classroom. My body has been processed – classified – as an object of medical science where my disembodied identity does not seem matter.

I was 'successful' in classification as expected. I will be competing in the CP 7 class. Unsurprisingly it turns out my roommate is also a CP 7 athlete though while my impairment

is congenital his is the result of a head injury. The manner in which an impairment is acquired can have an impact on the physical potential of an athlete. Cerebral palsy acquired through a head injury can lead to an altered and sometimes unstable mental state. A head injury can also leave an athlete with muscle memory which means that physically these athletes have a 'head start' in terms of the way their muscles are developed. Other than the degree of cerebral palsy and the spasticity it creates when fatigued (a regular occurrence for athletes with CP) we have little in common. I was concerned as to whether I would be able to 'live' with someone I have little in common with, other than an impaired embodiment, for the next three and a half weeks. How will these living arrangements impact upon my performances on the track? Is the process of classification simply a way of controlling the bodies that contest the Paralympic Games?

Controlling Paralympic Bodies

The Classification process highlighted above is continually evolving in an effort to ensure equitable and fair competition. As Sherrill suggests,

A basic goal of classification is to ensure that winning or losing an event depends on talent, training, skill, fitness, and motivation rather than unevenness among competitors on disability-related variables (e.g., spasticity, paralysis, absence of limb segments). (Sherrill, 1999, p. 210)

The habituation of classification as a process that bodies must go through in order to be involved in Paralympic sport is not dissimilar to the weighing of boxers before they fight. Both, provide an equitable environment for the practice of a sport. In the case of a boxer's weight it determines the category in which they fight and is presumed to be appropriate as it delimits the risk associated with getting in the ring with a much larger opponent (Wacquant 2004: 138). Judo is contested by visually impaired athletes using weight classes as well as the classification required for their impairment.

Processes of classification within sport for the disabled make distinctions between the physical potential of athletes and attempt to achieve an equitable environment whereby after competition the successful athletes in each class will have an equal chance of accumulating physical capital (Jones and Howe, 2005). In reality however there are a number of factors that impact upon the accumulation of capital (both physical and cultural) in various classifications. The first factor is the number of athletes within a particular event. If there are only a handful then the amount of capital that can be accumulated in most cases is limited. In some classes there may only be six athletes from four countries (the IPC minimum for eligible events) which means winners are less likely to receive the same kudos as an athlete who defeats twenty athletes. Another important factor in terms of whether winners ultimately gain capital from their involvement in sport is the nature and degree of their impairment. A component of the habitus of elite sport for the disabled illuminates a hierarchy of 'acceptable' impairment within the community of athletes (Sherrill and Williams, 1996) as well as mainstream society (Schell and Rodriguez 2001).

Another element of this particular habitus is the charitable mandate of the IOSDs and latterly the IPC. It was the IOSDs and their predecessors that helped to organise the Paralympic Games from 1960 through to 1988. The fact that these Games were staged at all is a testament to the commitment of those involved with the IOSDs. Official sponsors and suppliers were in short supply and my own personal involvement and that of all athletes

required us to raise funds to attend the Paralympic Games in 1988. Those who could not raise the funds were replaced by athletes who were less proficient but better fundraisers. Athletes as well as officials went cap-in hand to charitable organizations in order to fund their involvement in the Games. Early Paralympic Games as a result placed less emphasis on high performance and more on the opportunity for international participation. This is not to say that elite athletes were not involved but that participation was the main imperative.

The charitable ethos of the IOSD led the Paralympic movement to celebrate participation over performance, and as such is still a central component of Paralympic Athletics habitus. Key to the debate regarding performance and participation models of sport within the IPC is the classification systems. A complex classification system is the result of the historical development of sport for the disabled (Steadward, 1996; Vanlandewijck and Chappel, 1996; Daly and Vanlandewijck, 1999) that segments a small population into sometimes even nonexistent competition classes. As a result the classification system is considered incompatible with high performance by most within the IPC (Howe and Jones 2006).

The IOSDs established a system where athletes with a disability were able to enjoy equitable sporting competition and to claim a part of the Paralympic practice community. Central to concept of a practice community is that the institutional grip on practices should be loosened. Morgan believes that we should ‘wrest control of such practices from bureaucratic types and turn them over to the practice community where they belong (1994: 208).’ This act of “revolution” is key if individuals with impairment are to be empowered through the sport. In fact Morgan goes further, issuing the following edict ‘I propose that all substantive policy matters regarding the conduct and reform of sport be turned over to practice communities (Morgan 1994: 237).’ In other words the rational deliberations of the members of the practice community, primarily but not exclusively the athletes, ought to drive policy and the proper conduct of the practice. The focus of my argument, therefore, is not that athletes with a disability ought to be emancipated from the shackles of the powerful bourgeoisie controllers and administrators because of inequality, alienation or exploitation but rather that the institution’s (in this case the IPC) powerful and corrupting influence over the practice ought to be tempered.

A complex disability specific classification system made it initially difficult for the IPC to attract the desired media attention. Since the establishment of the IPC there has been constant pressure to remove the IOSDs from decisions about classification in order to streamline Paralympic programmes. The IOSDs were on the front line offering expertise, in 1989, when the IPC was established. Many of the first officials of the IPC had previously held posts within these founding federations. Consequently, there was initially carte blanche acceptance of the IOSD’s classification systems in the early days of the Paralympic movement. According to Steadward “the potential benefit of decreasing classes by using a functional integrated classification system is that it may simplify the integration into the rest of the sports world” (1996, p. 36). Such a functional integrated classification system was developed in some sports such as swimming and downhill skiing. In this system athletes are classified according to what they can and cannot achieve physically rather than by the severity of their disability, as is the case with the disability specific classification system. The use of the functional integrated classification system reduces the number of classes for a group of athletes by focusing upon functional ability rather than disability and ultimately leads to an increase in the number of viable events at major championships (Vanlandewijck & Chappel, 1996, p. 70-1). This system is akin to performance banding where athletes are grouped together based on results they have achieved rather than by the results they could achieve.

Classifier as Gatekeeper

Classifiers working within the Paralympic movement are more often than not 'able'. The sport of athletics appears to be 'policed' by the 'able' or AB as the other athletes refer to them. As a result individuals who work on classification teams may be seen as agents of social control (Wu et al, 2000). In recent years the external goods or financial benefits associated with the Paralympic Games have increased. This, I would argue, is a direct reason of changes to the classification process and regulation within the movement. Changes to classification systems have been about packaging the most attractive and commercially viable product that will be sold to the highest bidder. By transforming classification where an equitable chance of achieving success is lost for the price of media interest the practice community is altered.

The practice community in sport for the disabled is made up of both primary and secondary agents (Howe and Jones 2006). Athletes are primary agents because in a traditional view of sporting practice they are considered of greatest importance. In other words they are the reason for a sport. Secondary agents on the other hand consist of medical staff, coaches, game officials, volunteer administrators, spectators, and journalists who organise, regulate and maintain sporting practice. Many secondary agents have been involved with the practice community and then have moved into leading roles within the IPC that as an institution is still in its infancy. The flexible boundaries between institution and the practice community make it difficult to establish who is sincerely concerned with the cultural practice of high performance sport for the disabled.

As a result the distinction between primary and secondary agents within practice communities is important but it can be difficult to sustain and, moreover, fails to adequately address the heterogeneous nature of these groups. An athlete for example, may have been born with a disability or may have acquired it from some form of trauma later in life. Athletes can also be distinguished as members of sub-groupings by their race, ethnicity, class and gender both inside and outside of a given practice community and their identity is not simply tied to their impairment. In addition, athletes may vary in the degree to which they value internal and external goods. As primary agents within the practice community athletes are interested in the internal goods of the their chosen sport (Morgan, 1994). Internal goods are peculiar to the practice, such as the skills required to perform in a given sport such as athletics. Athletes may, however, become tempted by the external goods or economic capital acquired by institutions such as the IPC and may begin to feel that their labours need rewarding.

The shift in focus from internal goods to external goods is something that can also readily befall secondary agents, particularly those eager to gain or establish their position within the structure of the IPC. Secondary agents are primarily able-bodied persons who may have been involved in sport themselves, but usually not in sport for the disabled. Able-bodied sports facilitators may be aware of the internal goods of a particular sport but their experience is different from disabled athletes because they are not disabled themselves. In order to situate this analysis in the cultural environment surrounding the Paralympic sport it is important now to turn to a discussion of the habitus of IPC Athletics and the role it plays within the classification process.

Classification in IPC Athletics

Despite the adoption of an integrated functional classification system within swimming, political pressure from the IOSDs, and disagreements within the sport, the disability specific classification systems have been retained in the sport of athletics. The habitus of the sport of Paralympic athletics means that the IOSDs developed systems that provide an equitable playing field on which athletes within a disability group can compete against one another. The federations have attempted to structure competition so that only similarly affected athletes compete against one another. An amputee athlete does not compete against an athlete with cerebral palsy for example. They use functionally specific guidelines to place the athlete in a suitable competitive class. The process of classification is normally undertaken when individuals first become involved in sport for the disabled and often confirmed when they attend their first major international competition such as the Paralympic Games. Given the number and complexity of the classification systems within each disability group, the organisation of competitions is logistically complicated. There were fifteen 100m final races⁵ for men and eleven for women in the sport of athletics in the 2000 Paralympic Games compared with one final race per sex for the 100m at the Olympic Games.

The many classes eligible for participation in the Paralympics programme lead the IPC to implement a rule in 1992 that required an event to have at least six competitors from four nations to make it viable within the Games. While such a rule would be unlikely to have significance in mainstream sport, it has had a profound impact on the viability of some sports within the Paralympic programme. Within athletics this rule ignited the debate about the type of classification system to be used in the sport. Disagreement in athletics over the equity of different systems of classification and the best way to achieve fairness in competition was central to this debate. To date the debate has resulted in a stale mate and the disability specific classification system within athletics continues to be used. This has meant that many athletic events for the more severely impaired and women have been cancelled or combined in recent years on IPC athletics programmes. Due to the importance placed upon equitable competition, the disability specific classification systems may create competitive pools that produce insufficient numbers of competitors to meet the IPC regulations for viable competition. In addition, the IPC Athletics committee has recently ruled that an event must have at least ten athletes on its official ranking list for it to be considered for the Paralympic or world championship programme. Events with a small number of competitors have been placed under considerable strain as a result. The problem of low numbers of competitors is exacerbated by the onset of injury in an already small number of athletes (Howe, 2004). The practice community is being compelled by the IPC to adhere to a policy that in no way resembles the key principle of Paralympism, the empowerment of athletes with a disability.

The specification of a minimum numbers of athletes within an event has significantly influenced the organisation of Paralympic athletics. The cancellation of an event altogether or, in some cases, the movement of competitors to a less impaired class in order to make the event viable, has an impact on future programmes. A competitor who is moved to a less impaired class is not competing on a level playing field and is unlikely to win. Although winning is not central to Paralympism as formulated by the IPC, it is a major consideration for National Paralympic Committees when making team selection. National Paralympic Committees emphasize winning since they receive greater publicity and increased funding based upon their position in the medal table. Individual nations therefore are not concerned whether events are removed from the programme unless they have athletes that were potential medallists. Events disappear from the Paralympic programme and from future programmes because of the apparent disinterest by those in the relevant classification grouping when in

fact it is not solely athletes making the decision but their National Paralympic Committee in conjunction with the IPC.

There are a number of ways that the sport of athletics has tried to rectify this issue of low number of entries within constituent events in the sport. For example, IPC Athletics has considered combining wheelchair classes in track events. Both the Cerebral Palsy-International Sport and Recreation Association (CP-ISRA) and the International Wheelchair and Amputee Sport Association (IWAS) have athletes who compete from a sitting position in a wheelchair. At the current time elite male wheelchair CP-ISRA athletes are in limited supply. Although the classes would meet the IPC criteria of six athletes from four countries for Paralympic eligibility, IPC Athletics has suggested that they would not be competitive enough. Consequently it has removed the last remaining men's cerebral palsy wheelchair classes from the Paralympic programme. In a bid to improve the quality of racing and to ensure that a small number of competitors does not become an issue in the future for the small number of CP-ISRA male athletes, IPC Athletics has combined two impairment classifications of male wheelchair racers. Rather than trying to establish an equitable system where existing classes from both federations are the starting point for a new system, administrators have merged classes of cerebral palsy athletes into the IWAS classification system. The IPC wanted to establish an official rule for a combined system for athletics competitors in wheelchairs before the 2006 World Championships after testing it at the 2002 World Championships and the 2004 Paralympic Games. While such a rule has not been formalised in practice it was used in 2006 at the World Championships and it is just a matter of time before it is made official, with little resistance in spite of the problems with establishing a consensus about what is fair for all competitors.. In addition, from 2006 the practice community (IOSDs) no longer has membership in the IPC Athletics Committee.

Many difficulties exist in attempting to combine all athletic competitors in wheelchairs. For example, the location of the lesion on the spine influences the degree of power that can be generated by those with a spinal injury impairment. Meanwhile, athletes with cerebral palsy who race in a wheelchair cope with issues of motor control (Richter, 1999). Combining all users of wheelchairs in athletics is problematic, as it becomes an issue of giving points to athletes involved in the classification process based on two distinct components; power and control. In fact no point system for the ratio between power and control has yet been established as part of the International Wheelchair and Amputee Sport Association classification system. Since power and control are distinct elements in managing embodied performance it would be inappropriate for those involved in classification of wheelchair track athletes not to establish a relationship between these two components of movement. Class three and four cerebral palsy athletes are currently placed in classes two and three of the International Wheelchair and Amputee Sport Association system because world best performances for these athletes were similar to average performances in their respective International Wheelchair and Amputee Sport Association class.

During the 2002 IPC World Championship three male athletes with cerebral palsy were competitive enough to qualify into their new class. All were world record holding athletes in their respective cerebral palsy classes but struggled to get out of their heats when competing against their "equals" from the International Wheelchair and Amputee Sport Association. So the question remains how this system can be considered equitable when it collapses two distinct forms of impairment into one class and those with one form consistently achieve superior competitive results across the board. Only two men made the grade for the 2004 Athens Paralympics while the other retired disenchanted with the sport. Using performance as

a premise for classification in the context of sport for the disabled appears to contradict the principle of equity on which systems of classification should be based (Richter, 1999). Fortunately Cerebral Palsy-International Sport and Recreation Association women's wheelchair events are still a viable part of the Paralympic programme⁶. At other IPC international events the combining of the male wheelchair classes has brought about the demise of elite male wheelchair racing for athletes with cerebral palsy even though it continues to attract high-level performances at the Cerebral Palsy-International Sport and Recreation Association world championships.

In contrast to track events, IPC athletics has adopted a distinct approach to organising field events when there are insufficient competitors in one class to stage a viable competition. Classes are combined across the IOSD system using decathlon style tables facilitating viable competition from low athlete numbers across numerous classes. Each individual sporting performance is assigned points based on existing tables, established for each class. The winner is determined not by the furthest distance thrown or length/height of jump but by the number of points each effort is worth. In principle this system of tables could be used in track events but the nature of athletics means that it has a first past-the-post approach to competition. In track events the winner is selected by running in direct competition with other athletes over standardised distances whereas in the field competitors are arguably competing against themselves⁷. The first past the post principle means that a carte blanche adoption of tables for track events as well as the field would be considered undesirable by the IPC since it would "ruin" the spectacle. Many spectators would be disappointed after watching a nail biting finish to a race only to find out the athlete in fifth actually won.

Within the body culture of which the practice of athletics is a part the need to develop an equitable system of classification is problematic. The classification of my body highlighted at the outset of the paper occurred directly after the Olympic Games, in Seoul. If my body were classified today the result would be the same. My classification has not changed but the landscape of sport for the disabled has. There has been a decrease in the number of classes that are considered viable in the context of the Paralympic Games, as a result of low numbers of athletes. Elsewhere it has been argued (Howe 2006) that a register of injured Paralympians should be taken so that events are not cancelled prematurely. As Paralympians train harder their bodies will breakdown from time to time like all high performance athletes. However, since Seoul in 1988, there has been a marked decline in the number of severely disabled athletes participating in the Paralympic Athletics program. In many respects this helped to legitimate elite sport for the disabled. In other words – some bodies are worth watching and others are not. Under the supervision of the IPC there has been a move toward the commercialisation of sport for the disabled that has been managed in partnership with increased media coverage of flagship events (Schantz & Gilbert, 2001; Schell & Rodriguez, 2001; Smith & Thomas, 2005).

Events in Sydney 2000 marked the zenith of the Paralympic movement as the games benefited tremendously from sharing the same organisational structure of the preceding Olympics at the behest of the sports 'mad' Australian public. The organisation of the games was on a par with the Olympics and the performances within the various sporting arena were of the highest quality – none more so than the women's T54⁸ 800m wheelchair race that captured the attention of the international media. What follows is a novella extract from a field diary started during the 2000 Paralympic Games.

Paralympic Athletics Comes of Age:

Sydney, Australia - October 22, 2000: This evening there was a classic confrontation on the track at Stadium Australia. Just weeks after the media frenzy that mark the Olympic Games the Paralympics are producing their own drama. Unlike twenty years ago a large collection of the world's press are present and tonight one of the blue ribbon events of the athletics programme the women's T54 800m wheelchair final was taking place. The 800m for women wheelchair (and for that matter the men's 1500m wheelchair) race have a special place in the history and development of high performance sport for the disabled. Since 1984 these event have held demonstration status at the Olympic games. By 1993 the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) also included these events as demonstrations as in their bi-annual world championships. These two wheelchair races have done a great deal to showcase the ability of Paralympians. Performances produced by the athletes involved are superior in terms of time achieved for the distance in comparison to ambulant Olympian. For the public this may be the only opportunity they get to see Paralympic athletes in action as the demonstration events are slotted into the regular Olympic program.

For the first time the Olympic and Paralympic Games were marketed to the world as a single entity. The enthusiasm for the Paralympics by the sport 'mad' Australian public has been great with over a million tickets sold across all venues. This evening the Australian Paralympic teams answer to Cathy Freeman, Louise Sauvage, is racing over 800m and as with Freeman Australia expects! Sauvage has been so dominant in women's wheelchair racing that since 1993 she has won every IAAF and Olympic demonstration event. The event today was destined to be another reaffirmation of her physical superiority over the other elite women. Having won the Olympic demonstration weeks earlier in Sydney the Paralympic outing would be a 'wheel' in the park.

The most captivating quality of sport is its ability to surprise. In the 800m, this evening, eight of the world's most talented women's wheelchair racers compete in a keenly contested final. Powerful torsos draped in the latest Lycra racing gear in a luscious rainbow of national colours. From the waist up these athletes are as chiselled as any on the planet. This is definitely not an event for the light- hearted. Rivalry here is as vicious as anywhere in sport. On the first lap there was some jostling, as can be expected in all 800m races, and this is one of the reasons that the IPC stipulates that wheelchairs races that are not run in lanes (800m – marathon) require all athletes to wear a helmet. The physical nature of this race was not, therefore, unexpected.

Down the back straight there was an accident that occurred behind the leading athletes including Sauvage. There was another surprise for the partisan crowd. Canadian Chantel Petitclerc soundly defeated Sauvage. Petitclerc, while a vastly experienced athlete, had seldom managed to get the better of Sauvage and never until this point on the world stage. Sauvage had finished second. The look of despair on her face was evidence of how much the defeat hurt. In contrast the celebration of Petitclerc conveyed a delight at realising a dream. In tomorrow's paper Petitclerc will be quoted as saying 'I dream about Louise more than I do my boyfriend'⁹, a clear indication of how much this victory meant to her.

The drama did not stop there. The host nation was not happy. Australia file a protest to have the race re-run because one of their athletes Holly Ladmore had been involved in the crash. Race referees disqualified Ireland's Patrice Dockery for leaving her lane before the break in the back straight and the race is set to be re-run in a few days time. Outraged Canadian official appealed the decision knowing full well that the Australian protested more because Sauvage had lost the race. Canada appealed sighting the fact that the crash had occurred

behind the chief protagonists. A long and frustrating debate ensued into the small hours of the next morning. Canada's appeal was ultimately upheld and the result was confirmed as official.

The result of the women's T54 800m at the Sydney Paralympic Games can be seen as a watershed for several reasons. It is the first time that rivalries were so openly centre stage at the Paralympics which is often seen as a hallmark of professional sport that is worthy of public consumption (Whannel, 1992; Smart, 2005). As a rivalry Petitclerc and Sauvage fit into the classic athletics mould made famous in middle distance terms by Englishmen Sebastian Coe and Steve Ovett most notably in the lead up and at the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Petitclerc, small and graceful not unlike Coe, and Sauvage, a powerhouse with immense physical talent, one of the chief ingredients attributed to the success of Ovett. The victory in this event and the controversy surrounding it brought Petitclerc to a much wider audience and numerous sponsorship deals followed.

After the surprise victory by Petitclerc, Sauvage continued to have success on the IAAF stage, winning demonstration events in both 2001 and 2003, Petitclerc proved to herself and her fans at the 2002 Commonwealth Games that her victory over Sauvage, in Sydney two years earlier was not a 'flash in the pan'. The Manchester Commonwealth games marked another crucial development in Paralympic sport. Petitclerc, Sauvage, and others in the women's wheelchair 800m for the first time at a mainstream athletics event were competing in an event that had full medal status. After the second victory over Sauvage, Petitclerc was clear that it was the status of the race that was the real achievement "It is a very special medal. No matter who might have won this gold medal, it would have been an historic occasion" (Kalbfuss, 2002). Without question this victory in Manchester was a personal achievement for Petitclerc but the historical importance of the recognition of the elite status of wheelchair athletes is perhaps more significant.

Since the 2000 Paralympic Games Petitclerc has been treated as a heroine by the Canadian Press and applauded as a role model for high performance athletes across the country. In relation to other Paralympic champions she is in part the acceptable face of sport for the disabled – photogenic, charismatic, high functioning and a winner. By its very nature however some athletes who are world and Paralympic Champions are excluded from the media spotlight often filled by the likes of Petitclerc. Petitclerc is a very able user of a wheelchair and while she is one of the best within her classification there are other athlete's who are also great champions that compete in different classes who do not get the same degree of attention and as a result issues and debates surrounding classification continue to be of concern (Wu and Williams, 1999). The lack of equity of treatment of champions is just one issue facing Paralympic Athletics.

The classification system that is blamed for a lack of equity in the treatment of athletes with disabilities is the result of a body culture that celebrates superior movement as long as the body that achieves it is 'normal'. The public in part because of the inclusion of demonstration events for wheelchair racers in the Olympic Games since 1984 are willing to accept a chiselled torso that needs to use a wheelchair to move. The wheelchairs T54 athletes use allow them to move around the track at distances from 800m – 10,000m at a much faster pace than able bodied runner. As a result the ability is obvious. It is these bodies that are the most celebrated within sport for the disabled. Data from my involvement in the Paralympic movement suggests that an increase in the severity of the disability is directly linked to the

marginality they feel within the sporting practice. In other words the greater the impairment the less acceptance a sportsperson can expect to receive. The Paralympic athletes that receive the greatest exposure are in fact the most 'able', that is, the least impaired.

Conclusion

Decisions regarding the viability of sports competition may not necessarily be congruent with decisions about the interest of athletes with a disability in particular and disabled people in general. The provision of competitive categories or classes that maximise participation may satisfy the inclusive aims of the IOSDs but may undermine the IPC's desire of providing contests for highly motivated and skilled elite athletes. In addition, the talent pool may be spread too thinly across too many events. With heterogeneity so evident within the practice community there appears to be a need for open and frank discussions in order to establish the best way forward. The danger is that the IPC is in such a powerful position, with support from many quarters including the IOC, that the IOSDs may have missed an important opportunity to shape sport for the disabled in an athlete friendly manner.

For the Paralympic Movement lurks the danger of becoming top-heavy, of concentrating ever more energies and financial resources on fewer rather than on the equally deserving majority. The sensible chord of overall social responsibility and accountability should thus continue to be the guiding light of the Paralympic Movement. This does not always appear to be the case as concerns the ever-resource-hungry-elite-high-performance-sporting-system (Landry 1995, 14)

Success of athletes like Chantel Petitclerc have gone a long way to eliminating many stereotypes about the elite athlete with a disability. The high performance 'able' wheelchair racer is now a part of contemporary sporting [body] culture. However, it is only this very able – disabled image that is recognised. For those whose bodies are more impaired the stigma still remains.

Explicitly, the IPC's dictum *Empower, Inspire and Achieve* suggests the Paralympic movement is concerned with empowering its athletes in hope that their performances will inspire others to great achievements. It is these tenets that form the foundation of the ideological movement of Paralympism. The difficulty with this is that few athletes are empowered by a practice that was established for them. As such in the practice of sport for the disabled the ideology of Paralympism is as far removed from reality as that of its cousin Olympism is from the Olympic Games. The body culture associated with the Paralympic movement needs to address the concerns of the athletes first and foremost if Paralympism is ever to be put into practice

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Notes

¹ It has been widely accepted within disability studies circles that a person first approach should be adopted when addressing athletes with a disability. In this paper I have stuck to this convention except when referring to sport as an institution. I use the term 'sport for the disabled' instead of disability sport because through my research it is clear that sporting provision for the disabled is part of what might be labelled a 'disability industry' (Albrecht 2000; Campbell & Oliver 1996).

² The federations, namely the Cerebral Palsy International Sport and Recreation Association (CP-ISRA), International Blind Sport Association (IBSA), International Sports Federation for Persons with Intellectual Disability (INAS-FID), and, the International Wheelchair and Amputee Sport Association (IWAS). This is a federation that was launched in September 2004 at the Athens Paralympic Games. It is the result of a merger of two federations, the International Stoke Mandeville Wheelchair Sports Federation (ISMWSF) and the International Sport Organisation for the Disabled (ISOD), that have been part of the Paralympic movement since its inception.

³ There is a tendency in mainstream sport to 'award' elite status to those who achieve the most in terms of physical performance. This is also to some degree the case within sport for the disabled where certain types of disability lead to the assumption of non-elite status. As far as I was concerned my status as an elite athlete was related to the commitment in training my body in the pursuit of excellence. In this way by comparing the quality and quantity of training an athlete has undergone to achieve their best performance is a reasonable barometer on 'elite' status can be illuminated.

⁴ In some federations the classification team is different. The Cerebral Palsy International Sport Recreation Association (CP-ISRA) requires a medical doctor, a sports technical official and a physiotherapist where as the International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA) only requires the services of certified ophthalmologist.

⁵ Most of these also required the timetabling of heats within the stadium.

⁶ The rules on competitiveness that eliminated the cerebral palsy male wheelchair racers from the Paralympic programme are not as rigorously followed when it comes to female competitors. This tolerance is part of an attempt to actively recruit more women to the sport for the disabled. Thus men and women compete under different rules.

⁷ It could be argued that tactics in the high jump, which is a Paralympic event for the visually impaired and amputee competitors, come into play in the count back rituals – where the athlete who has missed the least attempts has an advantage. Other than in this situation field events require competition against oneself as the format is not head-to-head.

⁸ T54 is an event classification. The 'T' says that this is a track event. The '5' says that it is an event for a wheelchair athlete and the '4' means that the athlete is a highly mobile user of a wheelchair.

⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 23, 2000.