

Reflections on the career of Brazilian Paralympic athletes

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Abstract *The proximity of the Paralympic Games Rio 2016 opens the discussion about the possibility of building a career in Paralympic sport. This study aims to present the characteristics and challenges present in the sporting career of the Brazilian Paralympic athlete. The study was structured under three main guiding topics: the different moments of Paralympic Sport, the career characteristics of paralympians and the consequences of sports results for their careers. Currently, Paralympic sports has its focus on high performance, as the constant necessity for good results is an ever present reality. The characteristics and challenges of sporting careers reveal the current situation for Brazilian Paralympic sports in all of its stages (pre-transition, transition and post-transition). Upon reflecting on the career of the Brazilian paralympic athlete a debate opens up concerning future perspectives and particularly on an understanding of the existing challenges for consolidation. Structural problems such as venues for training, lack of awareness on the part of the private sector and the non-renewal of human resources, seem to be the main obstacles for the consolidation of paralympic careers in Brazil.*

Key words *People with disabilities, Athletes, Financial support, Sports performance*

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Introduction

Brazilian paralympic sports is going through momentous times reaping great sporting results based on recent gains such as: seventh place in the general medals ranking at the London 2012 Paralympic Games and three times consecutive leader in the medal ranking in the Pan-American Games (2007, 2011 and 2015) which is the main athletics competition covering North, Central and South America as well as the Caribbean. This promising and positive scenario has placed Brazil as a major contender in the international paralympic movement. The term Paralympic was adopted by the Brazilian Paralympic Committees 2011 in order to conform with the International Paralympic Committee (IPC). However it is not included in the Orthographic Vocabulary of the Portuguese Language and therefore it should not be adopted by Social Communications Secretary (Secom). The term Paralympic can be used when it is a part of a proper name (Brazilian Paralympic Committee or Paralympic Games)¹.

With the fast approaching Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, the opportunity to discuss the possibility of pursuing a career as paralympian, has come to the fore. The current Brazilian sporting policy permits the paralympian athletes to dedicate themselves exclusively to their training regime. This has only become possible due to the following: the widening of financial incentives (public and private), the development of training structures in the country and the growing visibility that paralympic sports has been obtaining in the media. Based on these changes Paralympic sport has become professional which has thus made it possible to have full time disabled athletes.

The transformation promoted in the lives of these athletes where emphasis is placed on their potential and not that which limits them^{2,3}, has broadened the discussion on the need for good results in national and international competitions in order to obtain resources that will provide support for the development of sports.

Based on the above, the aim of this study is to present the characteristics and the present challenges in the sporting careers of Brazilian paralympians. In order to do the aforementioned, we structured our study around three guiding topics: the different moments of Paralympic Sport, the career characteristics of Paralympians and the consequences of sports results for their careers.

The different moments in the paralympic movement

Sports have important inherent qualities that permit social, psychological and physical developments in an individual (such as improvements in self-esteem, independence to carry out daily tasks, the chance to build new relationships and meet new people, develop one's potential and to stimulate the development of new skills)^{4,5}.

It is at this moment that sports promote a series of changes in the lives of paralympic athletes. These changes will be described and explored throughout the following moments: 1) therapeutic/educational, 2) rehabilitation, 3) social, 4) health and 5) high income moments.

The first moment is centered on the therapeutic and educational questions where emphasis is placed on the movement of the body beyond what is considered normal for the period and there is a need to transform people that have been excluded in society to productive and active individuals. This was done through the creation of the first schools for the education of the deaf and blind, which in turn saw the creation of the Braille System and Sign Languages. Aside from this, what followed were the first sports to be formally practiced such as baseball for deaf people (1871) and the creation of the first sporting club also for the deaf (1888)^{6,7}.

The second moment focused on rehabilitation with the perspective of alleviating the trauma caused to ex-soldiers in the following years of war: 1914-1918 and 1939-1945. Sporting practices came about with a view to running alongside the process of rehabilitation. This saw the use of sports such as: golf, shooting, archery and wheelchair basketball. The implementation of these sporting programs increased the life expectancy of the patients who had been newly-injured and who would not have been able to survive for more than three years^{8,9}.

The third moment materialized in social protests and struggles for the rights of disabled people such as: the Declaration of the Rights of the Disabled (1975), the International Year of the Disabled (1981), the inclusion of disabled people in the Universal Declaration of Human Right (1985) and the celebration of the International Day of the Disabled (1992)¹⁰. All of the above served to put disability issues on the United Nations (UN) priority list. The receiving of greater attention on disability issues coupled with the struggle for the rights of the disabled worked together to build more constructive actions in this

area as well as to raise awareness of the disabled in society as a whole. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Disabled that was adopted in 2006 and was put in practice in 2008, is now being used in a large proportion of the member countries of the UN. Their participation in sporting events has become a strategy used to improve physical movements as well as providing a form of recognition of their capabilities and their potential. Social inclusion through sport has opened the way for clubs, universities and sporting projects to have the possibility of providing opportunities for disabled and non-disabled athletes to cohabit together^{10,11}.

The fourth moment came about as a result of the world's fear and concerns over health issues, with the idea being that practicing sport is a tool to combat sedentarism, obesity and related risk factors. Sport's inherent preventative nature against illnesses and the general recognition of the benefits of sports, saw the medical field advocate sports as a means to improve the lives of those with a disability^{12,13}. Before this change, in relation to disabilities focus was placed on the injury/limitation. This changed to where emphasis is placed on movements and functioning. Importance is placed on the disabled person's potential and what he/she is able to do. The International Classification for Functioning, Disability and Health from the World Health Organization, ratified this understanding of disability allowing these ideas to permeate and be applied not just to sports but in other areas of society (the insurance sector, society, security, employment, education, economics, social policies, and the development of general legislation). It was used as an adequate instrument for the development of national and international legislation on Human Rights¹⁴.

The fifth moment was based on sporting achievements where dedication, training and the search for excellence to overcome an adversary as well as constantly improving upon one's own performance, are necessary. The following directly influence the sporting performance of a paralympian: exclusive dedication to training and the constant use of technological innovation (principally in the areas of materials, equipment and training strategies)¹⁵. Upon increasing the chances for obtaining financial resources (public and private) through sporting performances, this has led to more professionalism in paralympic sports¹⁶. The sporting career of a paralympian has now become directly related to the obtaining and maintenance of results that elevate requirements and the technical level of the athletes showing the

high level of standards that paralympian are able to achieve.

Characteristics of the paralympian career

Attention has been drawn to the career of the Brazilian paralympian due to the fast approaching Rio 2016 Olympic Games. These athletes have professionalized their sport and have improved their sporting development. Also individual paralympians have become sources of inspiration for a new generation of athletes. Sports has transcended its initial role of just being a means of rehabilitation and is now considered a type of work/employment activity. This reality has made it so that families and athletes strive to use sport as a determinant to transform their lives.

According to Wheeler et al.¹⁷, this sporting path is divided into 3 phases known as: 1) pre-transition, 2) transition and 3) post-transition.

The pre-transition phase is related to the start of informal and formal sports as well as the development of a competitive experience. It is at this first moment in their career that the athletes start to commit themselves to competitive practices and start to reap the benefits in their personal competences such as: personally identifying with sport, self-esteem, corporal image and the widening of their social relations. This process still presents obstacles that need to be addressed for these athletes to develop.

The transition phase has as its central point in the process of removal from the competitive environment and its consequences for the emotional aspects. It is at this point that the athlete must deal with losses in their career. The difficulties in maintaining their results and the interference of chronic injuries are considered worrying which can cause lasting emotional impacts that are associated with the feeling of insecurity and uncertainty on whether to continue in their career as a professional athlete.

The post-transition phase brings with it concerns on the new role away from the sporting environment which is associated with new challenges in the course of their lives (new activity, family, etc). It is at this point that the athlete must deal with the new situation and seek a new occupation. Many athletes tend to fill management positions in sporting institutions that work with the disabled in order to keep their connection with sports.

Based on Figure 1, the career of the paralympian is now seen as the path to be taken by ath-

letes, that is full of obstacles, where support can be obtained for them throughout their competitive career so that they can maintain the longevity of their sporting trajectory.

The following are the barriers that the athletes encounter throughout their sporting experience: barriers related to environmental conditions (accessibility and urban mobility), structural obstacles (places to train at, financial incentives, multidisciplinary team) and emotional barriers (motivation, self-esteem, relations with trainer, family support). All of the above serve to facilitate improvements in sporting achievements.

The search for exemplary results seems to be an initial worry for both the athletes and the trainers. Also at this initial moment obstacles start to appear which end up being the main problems namely: entering paralympic sport and maintaining a career. Teodoro¹⁸ highlights the financial resources and the training structure as the principal barriers faced by the athletes at the start of their careers and which can disrupt the obtaining of good results in the initial phase.

The financial question is one of the deciding factors for constructing a career in sport¹⁹. There is a need for regulation in the area of promoting the development of sport be it at municipal, state or federal levels. They are determinants for progression in the long term.

The law Agnelo/Piva n° 10.264/2001 was brought in with the above in mind in that it permits, through the transfer of a percentage of the total amount raised from federal lotteries, the development of sports in obtaining excellent results

at school and university levels through financially supporting the Brazilian Olympic Committee (COB) and the Brazilian Paralympic Committee (CPB)²⁰. In recent years this piece of legislation has been changed in relation to the percentage to be given (2% to 2.7%). Also the distribution of the financial transferences has changed for COB (85% to 62.96%) and CPB (15% to 37.04%). This alteration occurred with the passing of the Brazilian Inclusion of Disabled People Law n° 13.146/2015 (the Disabled persons statute) that allows for CPB to receive investments in the order of R\$130 million²¹.

Based on the application of these financial resources in sport, the Ministry of Sport implemented the Bolsa-Atleta Program (2004) to aid athletes to achieve their full potential covering municipal, state and federal levels (base athletes, student athletes, national, international, Olympics/paralympics and Podium athlete). This would allow the athletes to dedicate themselves full time to their training regime as well as having better sporting conditions for the paralympic calendar²².

But financial resources are not the only determining factor for obtaining good results¹⁹. Actions centered on improving training conditions, be it through addressing structural issues (training places, human resources and multidisciplinary team), or through the use of innovative technology (which is becoming ever more present in paralympic sport) has come in. It is also necessary to address emotional issues (family support and the relational with the coach). All of the aforementioned are crucial in understanding the process of structure and mapping out the athletes career.

In spite of the athletes sporting career being explored by the scientific community²³⁻²⁵, not much has been mentioned on the Brazilian paralympic athletes. Discussion on a career in sport often takes a back seat to issues concerning social themes such as inclusion and overcoming barriers. Brazuna e Castro²⁶ set out the sporting trajectory of paralympic athletes highlighting the benefits of having a better quality of life as well as involvement in personal aspects and the limitations in this process. They also cover controversial issues such as sporting injuries, doping, stress and negative motivational aspects.

One alternative for widening the theme, according to Marques et al.²⁷ is greater coverage of paralympic sports. This is a necessary strategy for presenting paralympic values which are: courage, determination, inspiration and equality²⁸. Great-

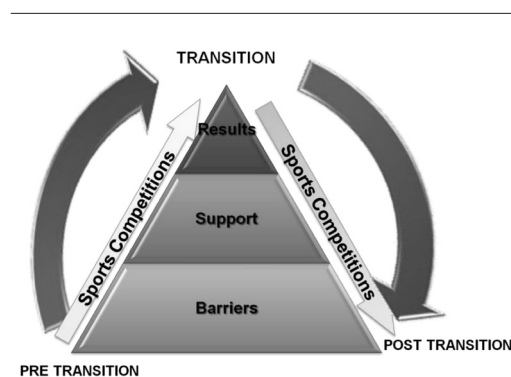


Figure 1. The career structure of a paralympic athlete.

Source: authors.

er exposure of the image of the athletes coupled with an increase in media coverage, are actions that are being taken by the CPB as part of its strategic planning for 2010-2016²⁹. Since the 2000 Games, this entity has invested in communication as a tool to draw attention to the paralympic movement in the country and to allow for the consolidation of paralympians careers.

Consequences of the results of a sporting career

Upon identifying oneself with a sport and assuming the identity of an athlete, new opportunities arise and the feeling of incapacity makes way for a feeling of belonging. The possibility of obtaining fulfillment through sport brings with it a new sense of limitation due to the disability. But what should be done with those who do not make the grade in obtaining the necessary results to live off their sporting earnings? Because at the end of the day, not all those that are disabled (about 24% of the Brazilian population)³⁰ are highly skilled in sport, have access to a support network and have the motivation to dedicate themselves to sport as a way to make a living.

This is the challenge for Brazilian paralympic sport where the competition is high and an athletes results are the determinants for whether or not the person will be chosen to be sponsored

through programs that provide financial incentives and better training conditions. This system that is based on meritocracy brings with it consequences not only for their sporting career but also for their life after sport³¹. Problems with injuries, psychological pressures and the values that are based on obtaining results at any cost, often take athletes to search for illicit means (banned) to improve their sporting prowess which often involves using illegal drugs³².

Different forms of doping have started to feature in paralympic competitions. The search for improvements in results at any cost³¹ has led to: the manipulation of the composition of biochemicals³³, the use of different technologies (equipment, prostheses, sporting material)^{34,35} and the use of genetics³⁶. In some cases the manipulation of someones health³⁷ in order to become eligible for or to improve in a sport, makes the athletes put to one side their ethics and morals. Also the concept of fair play can be threatened in paralympic sports.

The career of the paralympic athlete suffers constant oscillations starting from their entrance into the sport until they leave. Figure 2 shows the life moments that paralympic athletes go through upon entering the competitive universe.

The different career moments are numbered below: 1. Initial process for obtaining results, 2. Expressive results and support received, 3. Loss

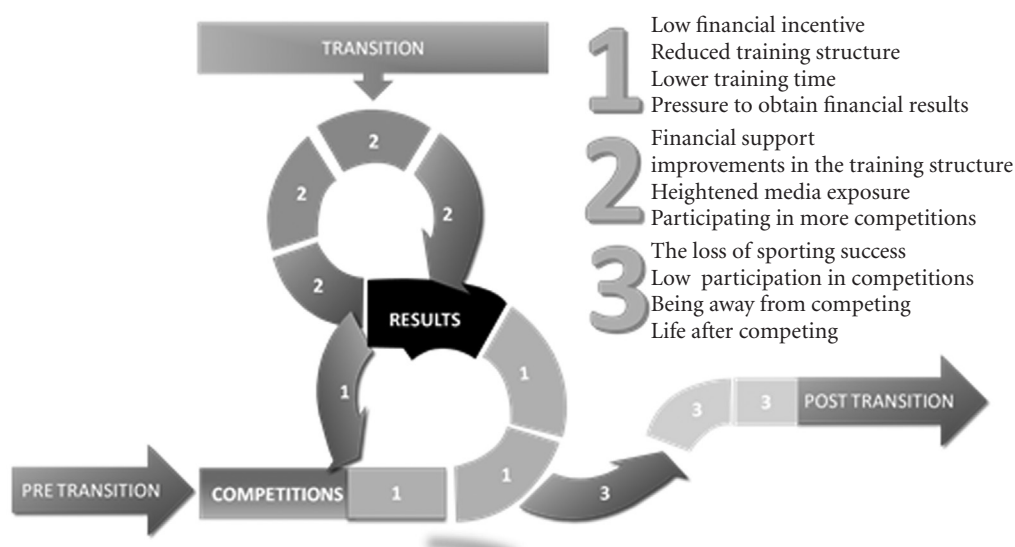


Figure 2. Moments in the career of a paralympic athlete.

Source: authors.

of income. All of the moments have the central point in searching for results. These results need to be good where the athlete gets to at least tenth position, depending on the modality^{18,23}.

The sporting longevity and the impact on their lives outside of sport is still a major challenge. The lack of a program that guides athletes in preparing them to go through all of the career phases, reflects the insecurity that exists concerning the future both in sport and in their personal lives. The closing of projects and programs designed to train and educate athletes, create a constant migration to major sporting centers that are located in the south east region (the Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo axis). This is evidence by the fact of their being an elevated concentration of medalist in the London 2012 Paralympic Games of who 64% of them were trained in the city of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro³⁸.

The life of an athlete after competitive activities brings back the feeling of limitation which was all to present at the time that the person was disabled. As a result these athletes seek out opportunities to be near activities and roles related to sport as a way of keeping active³¹. However, in relation to these role (management, administration, training) there is a requirement that the individual has the minimum qualifications to do job, which can turn out to be positive allowing them to make a living in the long term.

Therefore planning this moment in their sporting career (post-transition) is important if the person wants to embark on a new professional career. The opportunity to undertake professional training in accordance with the market needs coupled with a lot of accumulated sporting experience (resilience and focus) can be determinants for better adaption to this new phase in life.

Final Considerations

The daring and challenging goal of the CPB is to figure amongst the five paralympic countries in the medals ranking at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, brings with it an enormous sense of insecurity in relation to the pressure to obtain good results.

The characteristics of a sporting career as a paralympic athlete coupled with the existing challenges, reveals a scenario that is still replete with structural problems. These problems principally relate to the maintenance of policies for providing incentives for athletes in all of the

forementioned phases (pre-transition, transition and post-transition). The need to keep on achieving good results becomes a requirement that comes up against the existing sporting structure in the country. The construction of the Paralympic Sporting and Training Center in São Paulo has created some expectations for many athletes. But how can we unlock the great potential of the other athletes that have not taken advantage of the excellent sporting structure?

An immense amount of support from the private sector coupled with partnerships with Higher Education Institutions and Military Institutions, have widen the positive perspective for the future principally in relation to structural conditions for training in different regions in the country. This puts an end to the migratory process of athletes who go in search of better training conditions.

The carrying out of a major sporting event presents an important role in widening the discussions on disability in the country. According to Legg and Gilbert³⁹ the legacy from these mega events bring reflections concerning themes such as: accessibility and the facility to practice sports, the development of infrastructure and sporting entities, changes in the attitudes of the population in relation to disability, and broadening the general opportunities for the population with disabilities and debates on problems that were not known about by the population.

The Rio 2016 Paralympics will bring promising perspectives for the consolidation of the disabled athletes sporting careers in the country. Continuous investment in sporting infrastructure (the acquisition of equipment and materials), the creation of new educational training sport centers and the maintenance and widening of athletic programs to produce quality athletes (covering public and private sectors) can allow Brazilian paralympians to have a career. It will also allow the country to maintain its position amongst the major powers in the world of paralympics.

As having concerns in this area is a necessary evil, this also brings with it the need to develop strategies that make it possible to build national sporting policies that are structured around the concept of being representative and which have a view to widening the country's educational base. The 321 medals won throughout the last 40 years in which Brazil has participated in the Paralympic Games, ought to serve as a reference for more and more athletes to be inspired on the previous results with a view to achieving a better future.

Collaborations

MC Haiachi and VD Cardoso participated in the following: the collection and table of the information, holding discussions concerning the data and drafting and correcting this paper. AR Reppold Filho participated in: coordinating and guiding the development of this paper and well as revising the final article. ACA Gaya participated in coordinating and guiding the development of this paper and well as collecting information, holding discussions on the data and revising the final paper.

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