

**Presentation Transcript**

Topic: Nuances of developing coaches to work with disabilities

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Good afternoon, my name is Peggy Ewald. I'm an education and coach consultant for US Paralympic swimming. I've been with Team USA for going on four quads now. And it's my pleasure to bring to you and share with you some of the nuances of developing your coaches to work with different disabilities throughout all levels of development of athletes. I'd like to share with you first an overview of what the entire system could look like for any sport, it's a template that will allow you to apply to all the different sports that you're trying to develop.

As we investigate the impact of our ability to grow and develop coaches, and our athletes, we need to focus our attention on what the key areas of influence and impact will be. The center of integration and development of both coaches and athletes, persons with disabilities lies in building a strong foundation, with the root of that foundation in the traditional models of coach and education development. We view coaches as teachers. And so we can follow some of the same models that we use in developing and educating those people to work with all people. Alongside those models of development progressions used to advance all teachers or students, or people also apply to when we're working with a disabled person. From the position of foundation, we need to focus our attention on integrating specific disability knowledge in general, that includes sports specific information and knowledge as well.

We want to use adaptive equipment, we want to provide a structured and an unstructured environment for learning, experimentation, and training opportunities. From there, the major focus for all of us as educators, as coaches as programme administrators, is to develop and implement performance outcomes for the coach and for the athlete to progress. So through that progression, today, we want to take a look at the learning objectives.

We want to identify our key stakeholders; we want to be able to create some common goal systems of all those stakeholders in the development of coaches and in our educators that will work with our disabled body. We want to integrate those systems across all sports. And we want to be able to apply sports specific information or nuances as we're calling them today to create some performance progressions that will allow full development and sustainable impact across all the different stakeholders at whatever level they're working towards inclusion. A sample of that progress and process for the sport of swimming will be more in depth looked at as we move through this presentation today. So our session is going to cover all of those things. And that overview is something to keep in mind is a template that can be applied to all sports.

So, who are key stakeholders? We need to identify who they are, we need to identify what specific population are they currently serving. And we want to take a look at the services that they are offering that particular population and how do they implement their service across their population? Where are they located in proximity to the target population? Because proximity is crucial.

When do they offer their services? And what are their key objectives intended to impact the population. When we grow and foster any part of this process, it requires making certain that we have all the stakeholders identified. So we need to ask these questions, not just at the beginning of our process, we need to ask it periodically as we re-evaluate and assess the progress of the programmes.

Some of the shared responsibilities of all stakeholders will lie in the development of grassroots education, it will lie in coach education and it will lie in athlete development, progressing from one system to the next. And we can take a little deeper look into each one of these three categories. By looking at a collective mindset that we want to achieve, sharing and the responsibility of making certain that each level of these three steps is integrating and growing continuously. If we look at grassroots education that can take the form of collaborating our key stakeholders, sitting down in the same room breaking down, throwing out all different components and aspects so that we can brainstorm how we're going to develop that grassroots integration. We can take a look at the common foundational progressions of each one of those stakeholders. And then we can start developing clinics for in person or virtual that hits some of those target populations with specific resources such as providing website access to information, having fliers or handouts that clinics are a great opportunity to bring people together and start developing an educational process to mass educate people to what it is each key stakeholder brings to the table. When we take a look at the next element, the coach education process, we want to make certain that we're developing coaching curriculum in general. And then we want to make sure that that curriculum includes some sports specific content, and development for integrating athletes with disabilities. We want to be very certain that we're integrating sports specific nuances such as rules, adaptations of equipment, we want to make sure that we're making connections with the key people that can impact those athletes at that point, we want to be able to provide in person clinics, and we want to be able to provide virtual for those that are not in a proximity to gain that information in person. You can develop coach certification, curriculum and a progression for advancement at this point, and make certain that that is a template to begin with, that will apply to all your sports, but then make it very specific to the sports that you have the biggest impact in.

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When we look at the third component of athlete development through the systems, we want to make sure that the performance development plans are very specific to each key stakeholder's progression within the development of athletes. We want to have that very sports specific and very driven from foundational skill level all the way up to what you project as your national team, elite level performance athletes. We want to have that system to be parallel for the coach as well as for the athlete, so as you progress your coaches, you're also progressing the athletes along similar path so that you can have the highest level of sport development and performance possible.

Two main questions to ask when doing this process is, what is the same whether you're working in the disability area of a sport, or the non-disabled athlete in that sport? Are there biomechanical development progression models that are the same at what point would it need to deviate? Are the physiological training development progression models the same and at what point do those need to change? And then what are our expectations of those athletes?

Are they the same? Are we expecting something different? And are we pushing them to be a high level and reach their full potential? So what after adaptations do we need to consider? On the biomechanical side, we need to be certain that what we're doing is adjusting to what they have to work with. We have to experiment, we have to have structure progressions but at this point, we really need to be able to go unstructured and experiment and find what will work with that particular individual's specific impairment. The physiological training progressions then apply to what we can do and then we have to figure out what do we need to adjust in order to allow for that impairment to continue to work and be supported. So we need to find out what are their strengths, and what are their weak links, what don't they have to work with and then we need to compensate for that. We need to keep our expectations the same, we need to ask them to give us their best at all times. We need to adjust to what is their best according to their disability. When we consider those three areas, in any sport, I think we are hitting the main areas that impact the development of any progression of performance, it also impacts our coaches ability to move an athlete through the system.

Let's look at how that's done in the sport of swimming specifically, for those with the disability. We train in the weight room, we train in the pool. And for us in the United States, we're able to train at what is called our Olympic and Paralympic Training Centre, which has adapted to include our para-athletes and give them the same equal opportunities as our Olympic athletes.

So, let's take a look at the physical impairments. Knowledge of major disabilities is one of the first steps of including the nuances of development. In the sport of swimming, we have three main sport impairment disability, sport classes, they are the physical which are referred to as PI. And these pictures depict several of the different areas of physical disabilities that we commonly see. I'm sure that you're all seeing those. The second area of impairment in the sport of swimming is the visually impaired athlete.

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Not all blind swimmers look like they're blind. But they're all legally blind if they've been sport class in through para swimming, but they may have enough vision to be able to navigate common area. And they can have the assistance of a dog or a cane. Or you may see them without those assistance, but that's an adaptation for helping them be mobile, and helping them move about their environment.

Our next class and our final class in the sport of swimming is the intellectual impairment athlete. And these athletes look very similar to any person that doesn't necessarily have an intellectual disability. But the nuances of working with this group can be very specific to the particular athlete just as the physical and the visual are. So this next slide shows you those three sport class assignments for the sport of swimming.

And our sport classes with physical impairments go from sport class one through 10. 1 being the most impaired, and 10 being the highest or least impaired. The visual impairment level, the VIs, have sport classes 11 through 13 and 11 is the most impaired to 13 being our least visually impaired. The third class is our intellectual impairment class, and they are given a sport class of 14. And again, the nuances of each one of these particular groups is very important to incorporate into your progressions of development and teaching your coaches to work within each of those classes with the different blanket nuances that might be specific to that group, and then individualising it according to the disability of each of those athletes.

When we look at the aquatic therapy arena, we look at some specific benefits and considerations. Always keeping the athlete as the center of attention. We need to look at water temperature, we need to look at the fact that it is an unstable medium, and we need to look at buoyancy factors. So, another aspect or nuance for all disabled athletes or persons is that the water is an equaliser, it helps maintain the ability to work against an unstable medium of resistance. If they can't do that in a weight room, the water can serve as a resistive measure to help them ease into the next level progression of being able to do maybe some strength training on land then. The natural buoyancy factors take weight off their body, it allows them to do activity without the weight of their entire body being born by them. So it's a good therapy or a good introduction to any sport or mobility or activity level. Water temperatures are always a concern for certain sport classes, certain disabilities, if they're warm or cold-sensitive, that's something that you need to make sure that you're taking into account.

Tools of the trade. I can't encourage you enough to be creative and think out of the box on what you can utilise to help support enough reach to increase their ability to do more. We commonly use in the pull buoys, paddles, fists gloves, weight belts, medicine balls, feet socks, shoes, hand mitts, kickboards, tethers and a lot of different leisure pool toys such as a noodle. All of those can be incorporated into the training and development and progression of an athlete whether they're going into swimming, or going into another sport, it's a good place to start getting people into movement.

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Strength and Conditioning then of course, in the sport of swimming is progress. Especially during this COVID year, many of our athletes did not have access to pools, and so they moved out onto land activities a lot more. I know that a lot of mobility and development of just being more active and having a more active lifestyle can take place on land as well. And so, you need to be creative incorporating that adjusting things for each of the person's disabilities.

So, let's look at a couple scenarios. In these pictures, we're looking at a bilateral leg amputee, those are above the knee on all of these.

The first picture on the left is just slightly past the kneecap. But again, all three of these athletes have the double leg amputee. So, what modifications might be necessary to consider in land activities, aquatic activities, and then balanced exercises? How are they dealing with those balance inequities if they have them? Post-surgery considerations are always an adaptation or modification that has to be looked at. Quite often, these athletes will have infections that develop in their stubs so they'll have further surgeries where they'll change a prosthetic that can cause irritation. So, you always have to keep those things in mind and make modifications accordingly.

What modifications are needed if an athlete also has a congenital problem or disability or amputation below the elbow? In addition to the double bilateral amputation of the legs. Again, you go back to the balance issues, what are the things that are the same? What are the things that need to be modified, and you just continue to look at what their body has to work with. And you focus on that as a strength, and you minimise the things that they don't have and compensate for those.

This is a video of a bilateral amputee swimming. It just gives you an idea of some modifications that this athlete has been able to make along with their coaches, supervision and the progression of the athlete's development.

Our second scenario to look at is our dwarfism athlete because some of the major considerations for this group and for this population is, how do you strength train a short statured person when they can't reach the bars, or the bars are too long in comparison to their body. A lot of things need to be adapted or extended. Maybe a certain extension to a bar or to a piece of equipment that has to be added on, or a bench has to allow them a certain amount of height increase, in order to get up and onto a bar. What are the different things that we need to consider in the pool for a short statured athlete? What happens when they have some hip and leg surgeries because those are very common.

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In this in this group, they have a lot of things that need to be adjusted as they go through maturity and their body grows. One of our most decorated Paralympian, Erin Popovich, who is a dwarf and has short stature as her impairment. But she's been able to compete at the college level in multiple games and is in our Hall of Fame. A lot of that has come through her mindset, and I think that we need to support our disabled athletes from a level that there is more out there for them, and we need to encourage that participation.

Our fourth scenario to look at are our visually impaired athletes, there are three different real safety considerations that we have to keep in mind. What do you think those are? We use them commonly to help them move on land, and then what are those considerations that we take into the aquatic arena? So, we use tappers in the aquatic arena, canes, dogs, sometimes they'll be led by another person. But we need to make sure that we're clearing deck areas, we're making sure that access to things is not crowded with things that they might fall over, that they might not see in their path, if they have any vision at all. If they have none, then we also have to help that poles that might be in the middle of a deck area. Again, all those obstacles that might be in the way of someone who can't see them, we need to be concerned about those safety issues.

Again, in summary, I just want to circle you back to what the overview was, as well. The diagram gives you, the foundation is the centre. That's the grounding point for all development of coaches, and athletes, and being able to use a traditional model of progression is the starting point that gives you your foundation. From there, you're going to move back up and integrate disability knowledge in general. And then make it more sports specific. Bring that knowledge into play in developing them. Use adapted equipment, be creative, sometimes you have to build certain things yourself or cut off a fin or adaptive paddle for one arm amp. Again, being creative is the key. We need to provide structured learning and we need to provide experimentation unstructured learning so that we can experiment. Figure out for that particular person, what's best for them, and then we need to provide some advancement progression and an outline of what that looks like. What do you need to learn at this point, in order to go to the next point, and so on all the way up to your most elite level of athlete. And that goes parallel to what you would develop for your coaches as well. Overall, those experiences are going to lead to a more elite level of sport, no matter what the sport is. So I thank you for listening today. I hope that you can integrate some of this information as you develop curriculum for coaches and for athletes and become a very collaborative unit that is working for inclusion and working to integrate a healthier lifestyle by keeping all of our people active and involved and progressing in some form of activity that will allow them to reach a better lifestyle.

I'm open for questions, and I want to thank everyone for joining us.