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Determining International Parasport Success Factors For Para-Athletics In The UK

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Aim and Research Question

Parasport, also identified as disability sport, is identified as sport practised by people with physical, visual and intellectual impairments (Vanlandewijck, 2006). Parasport is attracting increased attention, with many nations adopting a systematic approach to the pursuit of international sporting success. The acceptance of an approach developed in a non-disabled context assumes that the determinants of success are concomitant for parasport and non-disabled sport alike. This study aims to identify the international parasport success factors for UK para-athletics, a model titled Determinants of International Parasport Success (DIPAS) is conceptualised.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

As international sporting success is pursued by nations globally, researchers have attempted to create models and develop frameworks to denote the critical policy factors required to top medal tables, frequently in the literature this is referred to as 'The Global Sporting Arms Race' (De Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg, and Shibli, 2006). The empirical research on which elite sport development theory has been created has focussed on non-disabled, Olympic contexts. The acknowledgement of policy factors by academics, which enable success, has resulted in a homogenous approach to national elite sport policy and elite sport structures in an Olympic context. For many nations, the approach to the production of parasport success has mirrored the established elite Olympic sport structures (Great Britain and Northern Ireland, France, Netherlands, Canada, Australia). There is an assumption that the determinants of success are concomitant for parasport and non-disabled sport. Patatas, De Bosscher and Legg (2018) contend that there are significant differences between both systems that influence the way sport policies should be developed. Nations adopting the tried and tested Olympic support structure to chase parasport success are doing so with the belief that the critical success factors are the same for parasport and non-disabled sport. Patatas et al. (2018) provide an understanding of how parasport differs when compared to the non-disabled sport and what this means for sport policy. Policy development in this area is currently underdeveloped and a significant knowledge gap is evident in relation to studies examining international parasport success factors; international sporting success factors in sport-specific contexts and an absence of studies that address both dimensions.

Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis

The study uses a mixed methods research design. A four-phase sequential design was adopted which included both quantitative surveys completed by para-athletes and their coaches and qualitative semi-structured interviews, with athletes, coaches and UK Athletics staff. An independent sample t-test was used to establish whether the different types of impairment (e.g. seated/non-seated athletes) and determinants of success identified were statistically significant. Further analysis using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine whether there are any statistically significant differences between the means of three or more independent (unrelated) groups. Participants were grouped for this study by event group (Throws, Jumps Sprints and Distance), classification group and nature of impairment (congenital or acquired). Interviews undertaken with UK Athletics staff, athletes and coaches were analysed thematically using template analysis.

Results/Findings and Discussion **

The results of this study suggest that the determinants of success identified for para-athletics include the factors identified in previous non-disabled studies but that there are additional variable factors for consideration. A strategic approach to elite sport development, the determinants of international para-athletics success, in this context can be simplified down to the presence of some or all of the 10 factors outlined by Oakley and Green (2001) or the 'nine pillars' derived from the literature by De Bosscher et al. (2007). In addition, this study supports the inclusion of Athlete Carer Pathways, as outlined by Patatas et al. (2018). The relevant variable factors identified by this study are grouped as: nature of impairment (acquired or congenital); level of support and care needs; level of equipment needs.

Conclusion, Contribution and Implication

This study derives a model for Determining International Para Athletic Success (DIPAS), which may be of value for the development of para-athletics policies and the design of parasport support structures in the future. Consideration of the DIPAS model may enable improved structures and enhanced support of para-athletes, consequently improving success rates and ensuring appropriate spend of public money. It is recommended that the research approach is repeated in nations that perform comparably in para-athletics. Further research within athletics is advised to explore variance across event disciplines and ensure appropriate allocation of resources.

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