

EXAMPLE OF A PROFESSIONAL ABSTRACT

TITLE: CLASSIFICATION OF THE ELITE ATHLETE IN DISABILITY SPORT – A HOLISTIC ATHLETE'S PERSPECTIVE

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Classification is an integral part of any sport event for athletes with disabilities. The guiding principle of classification in competition is to create an equal playing field for athletes to pursue sport excellence. As such, classification may have an effect on athletes at every stage of their athletic career, and by extension, on the development and future of the sport. The athlete model, as introduced by Wheeler, Malone, VanVlack et al. (1996), can provide a useful framework for examining the impact of classification on athletes. Stages of the athletic career are Initiation, Competition, and Retirement. Each phase is interconnected.

Initiation to sport happens at the community level. Yet it is often an athlete's experience that classification does not "officially" occur until the athlete enters the international realm. Classification needs to be finalized much earlier to allow for the athlete maximize his/her potential. During the competition phase, changes in classification can create extra stress for athletes, and could have a ripple effect resulting in last minute event changes consequently affecting many athletes. Inaccuracies in the classification system do not support the athlete who has mentally and physically prepared with the expectations of competing in a certain classification. The difficulties of refocusing in an already stressful and competitive environment are not to be underestimated. For example an athlete finds out at the last minute that he or she is competing at a higher classification level at the last moment or worse, finds out that an event has been cancelled. Retirement is when the athlete re-invests into "everyday life". Athletes for whom classification has been an issue may find that the retirement transition difficult, as the decision to retire may not be perceived as having been entirely voluntary. For example, re-classification of the athlete may result in the athlete no longer qualifying for an event or there being no event for them. Such involuntary retirement is problematic since these former athletes are the biggest walking or wheeling advocates to promote and improve the sport system. The emotional impact of a forced exit may mean that these athletes are a lost resource. Their re-entry into community life with a positive attitude towards the athletic experience is an invaluable resource to ensure the development of the sport continues.

Classification in disability sport presents many complicated issues that can have a profound effect on both sport system and individual athlete development. *This*

presentation will explore some of these issues using the athlete model as a framework for discussion.

KEY WORDS: athlete model, competitive environment.

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