International Paralympic Committee

IPC Position on Factor Systems for Combined Sport Class Events

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International Paralympic Committee

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Related Policies:	2015 Athlete Classification Code & International Standards (IPC Handbook, Section 2, Chapter 1.3.2)
	IPC Position Statement on Background and Scientific Rationale for Classification in Paralympic Sport (IPC Handbook, Section 2, Chapter 4.3)
Implementation Timelines:	The IPC Position has immediate effect, with implementation and compliance no later than 1 January 2024 for Summer Sports and 1 January 2026 for Winter Sports

1 Background

The Introduction of the 2015 Athlete Classification Code (IPC Handbook, Section 2, Chapter 1.3) states:

> *"The unique systems of classification used in Para sports perform two radical functions which support the realisation of the vision [of the Paralympic Movement, red.]:*
>
> 1. *defines who is eligible in Para sport and consequently has the opportunity to reach the goal of becoming a Paralympic athlete;*
> 2. *groups athletes into sport classes which aim to ensure that the impact of impairment is minimized and sporting excellence determines which athlete or team is ultimately victorious"*

The challenge of creating classes which minimise the impact of impairment on the outcome of competition is considerable and therefore the IPC actively encourages Para sports to pursue the development of systems of classification that are based on scientific evidence. Evidence-based systems of classification are a critical means of ensuring that decision making is transparent and that Paralympic stakeholders – athletes, coaches, administrators and the public – can be confident that the athletes or teams that succeed in Para sport do so because of their sporting prowess and not because they have impairments that cause less activity limitation than the impairments of their competitors.

To complement the development of evidence-based systems of classification and optimise confidence in the outcome of para sports competitions, the competition format preferred by the IPC is single class events – that is, competitions in which all athletes that are competing directly against each other for the same medal are in the same class.

2 Factor Systems

2.1 What is a Factor System?

A few sports in the Paralympic Movement do not use single sport class events but combine events so that athletes from different sport classes compete directly against each other for the same medal. In order to ensure that all athletes remain competitive in such combined events, sports apply "Factor Systems". These are corrective mechanisms put in place, either through statistical modelling or through consensus, to adjust race times and allow for the merging of different results into one standard outcome, in other words: first, second and third place finishers for the event.

Sports that combine events with such 'Factor Systems' include: Para Cycling ('factors'), Para Triathlon ('staggered start'), Para Alpine Skiing ('percentages'), Para Nordic Skiing ('percentages').

2.2 Why are Factor Systems used?

The motivation for this combination of sport classes is largely to maximize the number of athletes entitled to participate (for example, Paralympic Games, Paralympic Winter Games) without adding extra events, some of these not being viable in their own right (in other words, too few athletes in a particular sport class). Extra events would be a challenge (for example, maximum number of events per sport at a particular Competition) or would have a (significant) operational impact (for example, prolonged competition schedules).

2.3 Why are Factor Systems problematic?

There are several key reasons why Factor Systems are problematic:

2.3.1 **Conceptual Confusion:** The Athlete Classification Code (IPC Handbook, Section 2, Chapter 1.3) defines athlete classification as "grouping Athletes into Sport Classes according to how much their Impairment affects fundamental activities in each specific sport or discipline." (Code, art. 2.1). The purpose hereof is "to ensure that the impact of Eligible Impairment in each event is minimized." (Code, art. 2.2). A sport class is "a category defined by each International Sport Federation in the Classification Rules of the sport, in which Athletes are categorised in reference to the ability to perform the specific tasks and activities fundamental to the sport in a non-competitive environment." (Code, art. 4.4).These provisions of the Code are further expanded upon in the IPC Position Statement on Background and Scientific Rationale for Classification in Paralympic Sport (IPC Handbook, Section 2, Chapter 4.3). In Paralympic sport, the unit of classification is not performance but the impact of a certain (type of) impairment on a specific activity. As a result, an improvement in performance through training does not change an athlete's sport class. In the IPC Position Statement this is referenced as a 'Selective Classification' system. This is a fundamental concept of Paralympic classification and results in different sport classes that, as a logical result, lead to competitions with different events for each sport class. It is therefore contradictory to this concept that athletes, once allocated a unique sport class on the above premise, are merged together with athletes from different sport classes. This is even more questionable when the unit of merging such sport classes is entirely based on performance-related characteristics (for example, race times). This is exactly what happens with

'Factor Systems' and this is why this strategy in in contravention to the principles of the Athlete Classification Code.

2.3.2 **Reduction of Confidence in Competition Outcomes:** The realisation of the Paralympic vision depends on Paralympic stakeholders – athletes, coaches, administrators and the public – having complete confidence that athletes who win Para sport competitions do so because of sporting excellence. The principal justification for IPC investment in evidence-based systems of classification is to build this confidence. Factor Systems introduce an unnecessary layer of uncertainty about competition outcomes because they entail a range of assumptions about athlete performances and depend on very large sample sizes. The uncertainty introduced by Factor Systems constitutes an unacceptable risk to the realisation of the Paralympic vision.

2.3.3 **Discouragement of the growth in the sport:** The use of Factor Systems is mostly motivated by small athlete numbers in different sport classes and supported by arguments for 'fairness and equal chances for athletes in different sport classes to win a medal' in one combined event. These arguments cannot be supported to merge sport classes and uphold the principles of the Athlete Classification Code. When the number of Sport Classes has been determined, it is the role of the sport federations and their administrators to put in place effective development, promotion and retention strategies to maximize participation and ensure large, competitive fields in each sport class. Creating larger competitive fields by combining classes provides the sport to use them with an "easy out", reducing the need to do the hard work required to promote participation in their sport.

2.3.4 **Scientific non-validity:** Merging classes on the basis of statistical modelling requires significant data entries. These are missing with the small athlete numbers. Statisticians will argue that there are corrective measures that account for small sample sizes, but given that performances are the variables that are used for the formulas, there is great risk that variability of performances have a potentially significant impact on how 'factors' between classes relate to each other.

2.3.5 **Open to Abuse:** Factor Systems are open to abuse by athletes from the same class who – purposefully or not – sub-perform in competitions in a number of events to obtain a favourable factor that will work to their advantage in more important competitions (e.g. World Championships, Paralympic Games). This poses an unnecessary and unacceptable risk to the integrity of competition.

2.3.6 **Disadvantaging athletes with high support needs:** In addition to the above argumentation, a longitudinal analysis of participation rates of athletes with high support needs in the Paralympic (Winter) Games, revealed that any combination of sport classes leads to a reduction of the number of athlete entries from the lower of the combined sport classes. This is partially due to the recruitment of athletes that require less assistance (often to be understood as 'cost-savings') in the preparation to (such as training) and during an event. As such, the introduction of combined events is not fitting the principles of diversity and inclusion of the Paralympic Movement.

3 Decision

The IPC Position on Factor Systems for Combined Sport Class Events is to prohibit the use of Factor Systems for major competitions and Games. Such Systems contravene with the basic principles of the Athlete Classification Code.

Some sports combine events, with or without a 'Factor System', for lower level competitions. The IPC Position does not address the use of 'Factor Systems' in these events. In such events, factor systems may have some value in order to have as many athletes as possible competing while keeping competition logistics somewhat under control to some extent (e.g. open national competitions).