



## Research paper

## The learning and mentoring experiences of Paralympic coaches

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Participation in the Paralympic Games has grown substantially, yet the same growth and development has not occurred with empirical literature for coaching in disability sport.**Objective:** The purpose of the current study was to explore Paralympic coaches' perceptions of their learning and educational experiences, including their formal and informal mentoring opportunities.**Methods:** Six highly successful and experienced Paralympic coaches were individually interviewed in this qualitative study. The interview data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's guidelines for thematic analysis.**Results:** Results demonstrated that Paralympic coaches faced several challenges to acquire disability specific coaching knowledge and skills. These challenges led the participants to utilize an array of informal learning situations, such as actively seeking mentoring relationships when they first entered the field. After becoming expert coaches, they gave back to their sport by making mentoring opportunities available for aspiring coaches.**Conclusion:** The results of the current study address the value and importance of mentoring as a structured source of education and career development for aspiring Paralympic coaches.

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Despite the rapid increase of participants in the Paralympic Games,<sup>1</sup> the same growth and development has not occurred with empirical literature for coaching in disability sport.<sup>2–5</sup> A major consequence of limited research in disability sport is the lack of available coaching resources. Disability sport coaches have noted there is a lack of specificity in coach education programs for disability sport, resulting in decontextualized sources of information.<sup>6</sup> Thus, there are only a few current empirical sources on the knowledge of disability sport coaches.<sup>6–10</sup> For example, McMaster and colleagues found that disability sport coaches developed a highly personal relationship with their athletes that, in turn, assisted in the acquisition of knowledge and effective coaching practices. Similarly, Duarte and Culver<sup>8</sup> used a life-story methodology to explore the life and career progression of a single sailing coach becoming an adapted sailing coach. Relationships with colleagues, athletes, and mentors throughout her career helped her advance from a recreational para-swimming instructor to a developmental adapted sailing coach. Cregan and colleagues<sup>7</sup> investigated the career evolution and knowledge of elite coaches of

swimmers with a disability. All of the study's participants started by coaching able-bodied swimmers. They began coaching swimmers with a disability when these swimmers arrived at their facility, forcing them to independently acquire disability-specific knowledge because no formal training was available. In summary, there does not appear to be clear learning paths for coaches of athletes with a disability. Furthermore, there appears to be few formal coach learning resources readily available for this specialized group of sport coaches.

Reviews investigating disability sport research over the last 20 years<sup>3,4</sup> have established a need for empirical research that studies coaches of athletes with a disability. From psychological and pedagogical perspectives, coaching athletes with a disability requires many of the same skills as coaching able-bodied athletes, such as helping athletes to set realistic goals, develop realistic skill progression, provide consistent and appropriate feedback, and build team cohesion.<sup>2,7,9</sup> Despite these similarities, the athletes' physical disabilities often place different demands on their coaches and require coaches to acquire disability-specific knowledge.<sup>10</sup> Coaches require both knowledge of contextual factors, such as understanding the nature of the athlete's disability, and knowledge of necessary biomechanical adaptations.<sup>7</sup> They must also be aware of their athletes' living accommodations, transportation needs, and

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medical conditions.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Falcão and colleagues<sup>9</sup> found that Paralympic athletes relied extensively on their teammates to accomplish daily tasks. These findings suggest there are context-specific factors to coaching athletes with a disability that require courses and learning opportunities specific to this domain. An understanding of the additional duties and responsibilities of disability sport coaches, as well as how they learn this specialized knowledge, is timely and necessary.

The majority of research on coach learning has focused on elite coaches of able-bodied athletes.<sup>11,12</sup> Coach learning is typically defined by either formal or informal learning pathways.<sup>13</sup> Formal learning resources include large-scale coach education programs that are provided by national sport governing bodies. Formal education programs provide novice coaches with essential technical and tactical knowledge but fall short in preparing coaches to deal with social and personal aspects when managing their athletes.<sup>14</sup> Informal learning opportunities include coaching clinics, workshops, mentoring, interacting with other coaches, and self-directed learning such as reading coaching manuals or using the internet. Coaches typically value informal sources of knowledge acquisition more than formal education resources.<sup>15</sup> However, in the context of Paralympic sport, most coach certification programs are developed for able-bodied sport coaches and are not tailored to the needs of aspiring Paralympic coaches.<sup>6,7</sup> Therefore, coaches of athletes with disabilities are often forced to acquire knowledge through informal learning situations such as hands-on experience and the observation of other coaches.<sup>6</sup> In some instances, coaches formed communities in which they shared techniques and expanded their knowledge with other like-minded individuals in able-bodied sport.<sup>16</sup> These groups are called Communities of Practice<sup>17</sup> and are prominent as informal coach learning resources, although they have yet to be investigated in disability sport. These communities of practice are often viewed as prime environments for coaches to seek out mentors and advisors as well as collaborate with peers.<sup>16</sup>

Many aspiring coaches will seek guidance from a mentor coach at some point in their career.<sup>18,19</sup> The main function of mentoring is to foster a learning environment where a coach mentor oversees the developmental progression of a mentee with the purpose of helping the individual to recognize career potential, develop skills, and work towards professional goals.<sup>20</sup> In the business setting, mentoring has been used as a process that supports and facilitates learning<sup>21</sup> and improves career and psychosocial functions,<sup>22</sup> with mentored employees reporting higher job satisfaction, organizational socialization, career commitment, opportunity, recognition, career mobility, and self-esteem.<sup>23–25</sup> Not only do individuals benefit from formalized mentoring programs, but organizations that implement formalized mentoring programs as a form of career development also experienced benefits that included improved employee motivation and communication and management of corporate culture.<sup>26,27</sup>

Specific to sport, mentoring has been described as a highly effective way for coaches to acquire valuable information, learn roles and responsibilities, and improve individual coaching styles and behaviors.<sup>18,20</sup> Despite this, empirical research on mentoring in sport is limited.<sup>18,19,28</sup> This point is especially concerning in the coaching literature where scholars from around the world have emphasized the need for structured mentoring programs.<sup>16,18,19,29–33</sup> One recent example came from Koh and colleagues<sup>28</sup> who implemented a formalized mentoring program for novice basketball coaches in Singapore. An eight-hour mentoring program was created that consisted of observation and hands-on sessions between experienced mentor coaches and mentees. Separate focus group interviews were conducted with the mentors and mentees after completion of the mentoring program. The

results indicated that both the mentees and mentors benefitted from participation in the program. The mentees learned technical knowledge of basketball, athlete psychology, innovative thinking, and time management skills from their mentors. The mentees stressed the importance of matching mentors and mentees based on personality and level and style of coaching to maximize the benefits of the program. The mentors engaged in self-reflection and improved their communication skills and coaching styles.

Despite the many advantages of mentoring, the mentor-mentee relationship does not follow a set path and acquiring a mentor coach is usually a case of being in the right place at the right time.<sup>18,20</sup> Furthermore, Bloom<sup>20</sup> outlined several barriers that contributed to the lack of formalized mentoring programs in sport coaching: lack of funding to professionalize the process, lack of consistency in the types of mentoring, and no clear indicators to define the effectiveness of formalized coach mentoring programs. The need to understand and incorporate mentoring experiences into the Paralympic sport context is timely to support and enhance the training of new coaches in this domain. Also, incorporating mentoring experiences for Paralympic coaches will undoubtedly improve their skill sets, which will lead to enhanced training and competition experiences for Paralympic athletes. The purpose of this study was to explore Paralympic coaches' perceptions of their learning and educational experiences, including formal and informal mentoring opportunities. This focus guided the following research questions: What are the formal and informal learning experiences of current Paralympic coaches? How can a formalized mentoring program be developed to accommodate the learning and educational needs of aspiring Paralympic coaches?

## Method

### Participants

Criterion-based sampling<sup>34</sup> was used to select participants who were identified as among the best Paralympic head coaches in our country by a panel of experts that included current and former members of the Canadian Paralympic Coach Council advisory board. The sample consisted of six coaches who agreed to participate in the study after eight coaches were sent letters from a total known pool of 12 experts in our region. The six participants represent a homogeneous sample of men from a small total population, and the study contained questions related to a very circumscribed area, which helps to explain why saturation was reached with six people. Moreover, the list of participants was all male, which may be indicative of the Paralympic coaching context in Canada. Following institutional ethics approval, Paralympic head coaches were contacted by e-mail, provided with a description of the study, and invited to participate in the study. Coaches who agreed to participate identified a time and location for an interview to take place. Six high-level male Paralympic coaches of various individual, team, and coacting sports participated in this study. Participants averaged 53 years of age and were involved in Canadian Paralympic sport for approximately 12.5 years.

### Interviews

Research in the Paralympic sport context is in its early stages of development. Thus, qualitative interviews were used to highlight the participants' experiences and enable them to tell their unique stories.<sup>35,36</sup> Members of the research team with extensive knowledge on coach learning, mentoring, and disability sport created a 10-question semi-structured interview guide. Opening questions introduced the topic and focused the conversation on the participants' personal experiences (e.g., Describe your evolution into coaching, both able-bodied and Paraspport.). These questions served

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