



## **‘LET ME WIN... BUT IF I CANNOT WIN, LET ME BE COURAGEOUS IN THE ATTEMPT’: CHALLENGES OF PARALYMPIC ATHLETES IN SRI LANKA**

**Abstract** – Comparing abled-bodied athletes and Olympic sports with disabled athletes and Paralympic sports, the latter are relatively less popular and receive proportionally less funding from formal sport agencies and government sector. The title, analyze in challenges of Paralympic athletes in Sri Lanka, was described specific objective such as to provide a pathway of eliminate or minimize the impact of the given challenges and identify the sporting needs and desires of Paralympic athlete across the area. Disabled athletes who is represented Paralympic were highlighted. The challenges faced by the athletes in study could be categorized as physical, economic and social. According to analyzed results problem with facility and equipment availability. Study was also concerned about the negative attitude displayed towards then as support of sponsorship and public and media. Especially in Sri Lanka there is lack of disabled athletes’ researches. Accordingly, there is a space to be filled up and will be answered by this study. Using the methods of investigative journalism and secondary data analysis were used of this study. As this study is analytical in nature as far as possible an attempt was made to collect secondary data. Previous studies were carried out provide a conceptual background of the study.

**Keywords:** Paralympic; athletes; needs; disabled.

## **‘DEIXE-ME GANHAR..., MAS SE NÃO POSSO GANHAR, DEIXE-ME SER CORAJOSO PARA TENTAR’: DESAFIOS DOS ATLETAS PARALÍMPICOS EM SRI LANKA**

**Resumo** - Comparando atletas com deficiência física e esportes olímpicos com atletas com deficiência e esportes paraolímpicos, estes últimos são relativamente menos populares e recebem proporcionalmente menos financiamento de agências esportivas formais e do setor governamental. O título, analisado os desafios dos atletas paraolímpicos no Sri Lanka, foi descrito como objetivo específico, para o qual é fornecer um caminho para eliminar ou minimizar o impacto dos desafios apresentados e identificar as necessidades e desejos esportivos dos atletas paraolímpicos em toda a área. Os atletas com deficientes representados no esporte paraolímpicos foram destacados. Os desafios enfrentados pelos atletas em estudo podem ser classificados como físicos, econômicos e sociais. De acordo com os resultados analisados, o problema é com a disponibilidade de instalações e equipamentos. O estudo também se preocupou com a atitude negativa exibida em relação ao patrocínio, ao público e à mídia. Especialmente no Sri Lanka, faltam pesquisas de atletas com deficiência. Nesse sentido, existe um espaço a ser preenchido e será respondido por este estudo. Métodos de jornalismo investigativo e análise de dados secundários foram utilizados neste estudo. Como este estudo é de natureza analítica, tanto quanto possível, foi feita uma tentativa de coletar dados secundários. Estudos anteriores foram realizados, e fornecem uma base conceitual do estudo.

**Palavras-chave:** Paraolímpico; atletas; necessidades; deficiente.

## **‘DEJARME GANAR... PERO SI NO PUEDO GANAR, DEJARME SER VALIENTE EN INTENTAR’: DESAFÍOS DE LOS ATLETAS PARALÍMPICOS EN SRI LANKA**

**Resumen** - Comparando atletas con discapacidades físicas y deportes olímpicos con atletas con discapacidades y deportes paralímpicos, estos últimos son relativamente menos populares y reciben proporcionalmente menos fondos de las agencias deportivas formales y del sector gubernamental. El título, analizó los desafíos de los atletas paralímpicos en Sri Lanka, se describió como un objetivo específico, para el cual es proporcionar una forma de eliminar o minimizar el impacto de los desafíos presentados e identificar las necesidades y deseos deportivos de los atletas paralímpicos en toda el área. Se destacaron los atletas con discapacidad representados en el deporte paralímpico. Los desafíos que enfrentan los atletas en estudio pueden clasificarse en físicos, económicos y sociales. Según los resultados analizados, el problema está en la disponibilidad de instalaciones y equipos. El estudio también tuvo que ver con la actitud negativa mostrada hacia el patrocínio, el público y los medios. Especialmente en Sri Lanka, hay una falta de investigación sobre atletas con discapacidades. En este sentido, hay un espacio para ser llenado y será respondido por este estudio. El periodismo de investigación y los métodos de análisis de datos secundarios se utilizaron en este estudio. Como este estudio es de naturaleza analítica, en la medida de lo posible, se intentó recolectar datos secundarios. Se han llevado a cabo estudios previos y proporcionan una base conceptual para el estudio.

**Palabras-clave:** Paralímpico; atletas; necesidades; discapacidad.

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## **Introduction**

The disability sport movement is composed of three main international movements, Deaflympics, Special Olympics and the Paralympics. In similarity, these three movements seek to promote and raise awareness of human rights for persons with disabilities, by providing opportunities for physical activity, education and social engagement, especially in the field of Paralympics. Despite the growth, athletes with disabilities are disabled for various reasons. Some are hereditary and others are because of trauma, yet they face similar types of stigma and barriers to participate in competitive sports. In today's civilized world looking at disability from a human rights point of view and disabled communities are mainstreaming into the development process.

The lack of participation is most significant from athletes in developing countries who struggle to access taking part in international disability sport competitions. In total 23% of developing countries have not participated in either Deaflympics, Paralympic or Special Olympics World Games competition<sup>1</sup>. Oceania is the region with the least participation historically, followed by Africa and Asia. Participation in winter games from developing countries is very low, whilst the participation of women in winter sport is even lower and declining with time<sup>1</sup>.

According to UNESCAP<sup>2</sup> statistics, 7% of the Sri Lanka population has a disability. They can affect people from birth or be acquired later in life through injury or illness. One of the main contributing events to trauma-related disabilities was the civil war in Sri Lanka. Sport is one of powerful pathway for socialize with others, improve health and reduce risk of diseases; improve self- confidence, and self- esteem. But today not equal place for the disable sport and non- disable sport in Sri Lanka.

In this study identify the challenges of Paralympic athletes in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, this study has been provided a pathway to eliminate or minimize the impact of the given challenges and identify the sporting needs and desires of Paralympic athlete across the area.

## **Disability as a social construction**

Disability represents an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. Impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or

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action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations<sup>3</sup>.

Disability is thus not just a health issue problem. But it is a complex phenomenon. It is also reflective of a person's bodily reality and functionality, as well as , reflecting the interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives to the social relationships formed by such an individual or individuals<sup>3</sup>. The term disability is conventionally used to refer to attributes that are severe enough to significantly interfere with, or prevent, normal day-to-day activities. Like wise it is any physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses or activities. The term disability is conventionally used to refer to attributes that are severe enough to interfere with, or prevent, normal day-to-day activities.

According to the UNDESA<sup>4</sup> (p. 4), "persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various challenges, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others". Disabilities can be permanent, temporary, or episodic.

### **Paralympic sport of developed and developing Countries**

International sporting competitions are dominated by developed countries. The gap between developed and developing countries has become so wide that the latter have lost any hope of closing it<sup>5</sup>.

Andreff<sup>5</sup> (p. 252) claims that this gap is related to "a shortage of physical education and sport for all programmes, a lack of financing for sport, few sport facilities and little equipment, a 'muscle drain' to developed countries, and no capacity to host major sporting events". This results in with the result the fact that athletes from developing countries have fewer world-level sport performances than developed countries. The increased dependence on technological advances adds to the cost of athletes who are reliant on such advances. Limited access to sport services, sports information and the issue of doping are becoming increasingly problematic. Developing countries also face a range of social and cultural challenges that impact on sport participation including religion, culture, language, and the lingering influence of colonialism in many parts of the world.

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The experience of sport for people with a disability in developing countries is further compounded by religious and cultural beliefs and attitudes towards disability. A deaf sports administrator in the Philippines claims, for example, that this is because “most developing countries, due to particular religious beliefs, think deaf and disabled people are sinners and deserved to be punished (p. 14)”<sup>6</sup>.

Sri Lanka is unfriendly to the disabled as a country, says Dr. A. C. S. Perera<sup>7</sup>, a prominent rights activist for the cause, “It’s not just the disabled in the strictest sense of the word”, he pointed out. Accessibility is not just a physical issue, but a social one. By designing buildings that cannot accommodate the disabled, you inadvertently discount their existence. “It’s a deeply psychological thing”, points out Dr. A. C. S. Perera<sup>7</sup>, and “When society seems unable to make way for your needs, it’s very discouraging”.

A study conducted by the Ministry of Social Services also revealed that out of 6010 children in 76 Divisional Secretary divisions, over half (3015 children, or 50.1% of the whole) did not attend school<sup>8</sup>. The social environment within sporting organizations needs to be addressed to ensure there is a positive attitude towards persons with disabilities and a willingness to accommodate the specific needs of athletes with disabilities.

### **Paralympic sport in Sri Lanka**

The body with responsibility for promoting and coordinating disability sport in Sri Lanka is the National Paralympic Committee (the NPC). Currently the NPC is promoting fifteen para sports in Sri Lanka (athletics, wheelchair marathon, badminton, table tennis, wheelchair basketball, cycling, sitting volleyball, standing volleyball, beach volleyball, cricket (blind and deaf teams), power-lifting, shooting, wheelchair tennis, archery and swimming). The NPC organizes annual Para Games which include most of these sports, as well as annual Army Para Games for soldiers with disabilities. The NPC also organizes teams to compete internationally. Government support for disability sport has increased as a result. In 2014 the NPC has sent a team of disabled athletes to the Asian Para Games in South Korea. In 2012, for example, the NPC took a team of disabled sportsmen to London for the Paralympics. Sri Lanka won its first ever Paralympic medal – Pradeep Sanjaya won a bronze in the men’s 400 m T46 category (arm impairment). This success has helped to increase the profile of disability sport in Sri Lanka, including within the Ministry of Sports. Recently, Sri Lankan Paralympian Javelin Thrower Dinesh

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Priyantha Herath, won the bronze medal in the Javelin F46 event, claiming Sri Lanka's second Paralympic medal in the history of the games.

Some mainstream national sports federations also promote disability sport and connected with NPC. For example, Sri Lanka National Volleyball Federation has provided coaching to disabled volleyball players and sent two teams (men and women) to an Asia Sitting Volleyball tournament in China in 2011. Also, Sri Lanka Tennis Association has a wheelchair tennis section. It organizes national para tennis tournaments and has supported Sri Lanka para tennis players to compete internationally. Sri Lanka is ranked as one of the best countries in Asia in wheelchair tennis.

### **Challenges of Future Paralympic athletes in Sri Lanka**

Comparing abled-bodied athletes and Olympic sports with disabled athletes and Paralympic sports, the latter are relatively less popular and receive proportionally less funding from formal sport agencies and government sector. We can't see disabled athlete play in the ground. It can be seen very rarely. Limited sport opportunities were provided to persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka<sup>9</sup>. Under the Ministry of Sport, government sports officers and coaches have been appointed to all districts, and are well trained in mainstream sports, but they haven't any specific and regular training on adapted sport to include people with disabilities.

Sport also provides opportunities for persons with disabilities to develop social skills, forge friendships outside their families, exercise responsibility, and take on leadership roles. Through sport, persons with disabilities learn vital social interaction skills, develop independence, and become empowered to lead and make change happen<sup>10</sup>.

In general, it has been experienced that just placing disabled and able-bodied athletes together does not necessarily lead to genuine integration. According to Nixon<sup>11</sup> (p. 17),

Genuine interaction of disabled and able-bodied persons implies interaction between them that is unaffected by disability stigma or the disadvantaged status of disabled people. It implies interaction in which disabled people do not feel pitied, scorned, different, deviant, morally inferior, or even specially favored because they are disabled.

Genuine integration in sport can be seen as communication between disabled and able-bodied athletes without being stigmatized or handicapped.

In the words of the disabled athlete participant.

Sports is a way to change our attitude, that there is no such state as 'we cannot do anything'<sup>9</sup> (interview with national para player A1, 24 Feb 2014)

Sport has given me a big hope for my future. I wish to become a national player in the future<sup>9</sup> (interview with national para player B1, 24 Feb 2014).

Sri Lanka has sent seven-member of team to compete in the Paralympic Games in London in 2012. They were determined to win the first ever Paralympic medal for the country but say their effort has being hampered by a lack of official support.

"The only equipment I have for training is my walking stick, we don't ask for special facilities; what we are asking for is proper equipment to train for major sports events", says the team captain PA Lal Pushpakumara, high jumper. He said he does not have proper facilities, equipment or funding in placed<sup>12</sup>.

Soldier UDP Pradeep Sanjaya is currently the world's fifth-ranked player in arm paralysis T46 in the 400 m. He also competes in the 200 m. He said that "I have to buy all the equipment, shoes and clothes, everything from my own salary. I did not get any sponsorship for my training", he says. "If we are get proper equipment and sponsorship, I'm sure we would do much better", Pradeep Sanjaya said<sup>12</sup>.

"We don't get sponsors; nobody bothers about us. I'm sure we would perform much better if we were getting the same attention as able bodied players" said Amara Indumathie Karunathilake first female athlete include Paralympic team 2012<sup>12</sup>.

The majority of challenges faced by the athletes in study could be categorized as physical, economic and social. According to analyzed results problem with facility and equipment availability. Majority of athletes were also concerned about the negative attitude displayed towards them as support of sponsorship and public and media. The majority of the athletes interviewed they feel negative comments lack of new technology equipment. To Crawford and Stodolska<sup>13</sup> (p. 141), "The high cost of equipment forced athletes to use whatever was readily available, even though it was not proper equipment to be used during international competitions".

Accordance with the development of the Flex-Foot prosthesis in 1987, first used in the 1988 Paralympics in Seoul, is the foundational design for the energy return prosthesis technology currently used in disability running sport<sup>13</sup>. According Howe<sup>14</sup> (p. 874), "These mobility aids have been a product of state-of-the-art technologies and, as a result, the athletes who are the vanguards of the deployment of this new technology are producing performances that would have been considered impossible 20 years ago". Today the use of Flexfoot technology is universal on the Paralympic levels even though a single prosthesis can cost up to \$32,000 (£20,000). The lack of suitable resources and materials due to the cost, clearly affects the sportsperson with disabilities. It is apparent that the social capital associated with sport may not be particularly even in its distribution. Furthermore, even in those thought of as egalitarian and inclusive such as Sri Lanka disabled sport movement to be fractured.

Despite the efforts to promote disability sport in Sri Lanka, more desires to be done to address the disparities between disability and non-disabled sport ways to overcome physical, social and economic challenges should be sought. According to the data available it is clear civil athletes face more challenges than soldiers' athletes. Nimanthika and Madhushani<sup>9</sup> study has shown more than 90 percent of disabled athletes are enriched with three forces (Army, Navy and Air force) and Department of Police. Also, it has shown few athletes are civilians and they are facing more challenges in economically and getting sponsorships.

The Ministry of Sports and the Sri Lanka Paralympic Committee need to initiate and coordinate programmes to identify new talent and identify their challenges. In addition, no clear pathways have been established to foster the sporting careers of athletes from the early introduction to sports through to elite performance.

There is very little media coverage of disability sport in Sri Lanka. Sports organizations could be far more proactive by providing stories to the media about events and programmes. Within sporting organizations, finances and specific budgets for athletes with disabilities should be implemented. In addition, both long-term and short-term planning must incorporate the needs of persons with disabilities. They must be represented in the organization structure, activities and equipment provision for athletes with disabilities must all become an integral part of their planning. Coaching has been

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identified as a specific issue and further training of coaches to accommodate the special requirements of athletes with disabilities is required.

## **Conclusion**

The result of this study found that physical impairment disability athletes have both positive and negative experiences as result of participation in disability sport. Negative experiences were related to equipment, finance and social support. The majority of challenges which were faced by the athletes were availability of modified sport equipment.

Although there was concern expressed by the athletes about the negative attitude, they felt from the sponsorship to continue sport carrier and lack of public media support for the sport. Concern the civil athletes they experience relatively more feel negative experience than soldier athletes related to sport facilities, modified equipment, accessibility, and transport and coaching. The majority of challenges faced by the civil athletes mainly include were the lack of government support, lack of sponsorship, economic support, appropriate facilities and public and media support. They brought not only medals but some lessons to learn for the officials who took the blind eye towards their participation in the event. The authorities concerned should look into this aspect very seriously and provide them equal facilities as the able athletes who compete in international events.

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