

Development of the Paralympic Games

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of the Paralympic Games as an elite sporting event. The article first traces the evidence for sport practiced by disabled people prior to the first Paralympic Games. The origin of the Paralympic Games is then explained before key landmarks in the development of the event are articulated. The evidence suggests the first Paralympic Games took place in 1960, growing from 328 athletes from 21 nations across eight sports to 4,400 athletes from 168 national delegations across 22 sports at the 2024 Paris Paralympic Games. Challenges facing the Paralympic Games are considered, including the application and implementation of the classification system for athletes in their respective sport, cheating among Paralympic athletes, the use of technology to assist performance, the organisation and delivery of the Paralympic Games, and the social impact of the event for everyday disabled people. Finally, areas for future research are suggested, particularly the essence of the relationship between the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and the continued dissemination of Paralympic sport across the globe. The growth of the Paralympic Games has been significant but there are challenges for the Paralympic Movement to navigate as part of its future development.

Keywords: Paralympic Games; History; Classification; International Paralympic Committee; Intentional Misrepresentation; Empowerment; Legacy.

Introduction

This article aims to critically review the development of the Paralympic Games. To do this, it is important to understand the sporting ecosystem within which the Paralympic Games emerged. Following this brief review, the origins of the Paralympic Games in the form of the Stoke Mandeville Games, and subsequently International Stoke Mandeville Games, will be explored. Different developmental stages of the Paralympic Games will then be appraised. This begins with a review of how the Paralympic Games became an established sporting event between 1960-1972, then expanding and growing between the 1976 Paralympics and the 1988 Paralympic Games. The 1988 Paralympic Games are viewed as the starting point of the modern Paralympic Games (Legg & Steadward, 2011a), with the event growing significantly since then to 2025, the year this article has been written. Next, challenges facing the Paralympic Movement are appraised. Classification is reviewed in depth followed by a review of cheating within Paralympic sport. The use of technology within Paralympic sport is then appraised followed by a critical review of the organisation and delivery of the Paralympic Games in its current form. Finally, areas for future research are identified.

To set the scene and to understand the relationship between the Paralympic Games and sport for disabled people, the article begins with a brief overview of disability sport before the Paralympic Games.

Disability sport prior to the Paralympic Games

A common misconception is that disabled people did not take part in competitive sport before the formation of the Paralympic Games (Peers, 2009; Silver, 2018). In fact, there is evidence to suggest disabled people were competing in sport as early as 1796 in England (Harvey, 2012). This was not a phenomenon unique to England and the United Kingdom as a whole. Disabled people were also competing in sport before World War One in France and Germany (Silver, 2018). Silver (2018) didn't find evidence of disabled people playing competitive sport in the United States of America before World War One but did find data indicating competitive sport took place from 1945. Additionally, Peers (2009) notes that competitive sport was being practiced by deaf communities in 1888, by schools supporting visually impaired students in 1909, and even within Stoke Mandeville Hospital before Guttmann arrived there. What is clear is that sport for disabled people does not begin with the Paralympic Games. In England, it is true that some of the earlier examples of competitive sport for disabled people in the early 19th century were often for the amusement of aristocrats and a non-disabled

audience. Since 1850, however, there was greater acceptance in England for the right of disabled people to play competitive sport (Harvey, 2012). The Deaflympics, an event for athletes with hearing impairments, was established in 1924, in Paris, France. The Deaflympics pre-dates the early origins of the Paralympic Games by several decades. As is evident from these examples, the Paralympic Games was not the beginning of competitive sport for disabled people: other outlets for competitive sport were used by, and available to, disabled people (Peers, 2009).

The origins of the Paralympic Games: 1948 – 1959

The genesis of the Paralympic Games can be traced back to the involvement of a German-Jewish neurosurgeon, Dr Ludwig Guttmann. Guttmann fled Nazi Germany in 1939 to Oxford, England, where he took up a post at Oxford University (Brittain, 2018). Guttmann was an expert in spinal cord injuries (SCI) and demand for his services increased because of the fighting in World War Two. In 1943, Guttmann took a high-profile role at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, where he was tasked by the UK government to oversee the care for patients with SCI (Brittain, 2018). It was at Stoke Mandeville Hospital that Guttmann started to use sport as a rehabilitative and therapeutic tool for his patients (Silver, 2012). The sport Guttmann alighted on was archery due to its perceived usefulness in aiding the social and physical rehabilitation of the injured servicemen and women under his care. Indeed, it was the equalising nature of archery as a sit-down sport that further persuaded Guttmann of its virtues as a sport to rehabilitate individuals with SCI within wider society. This was down to the potential for disabled people and non-disabled people to compete alongside each other without much discernable difference (Brittain, 2018). In 1948, an archery event, featuring 16 competitors split into two teams, took place on the front lawns of Stoke Mandeville Hospital. One team was from Stoke Mandeville Hospital and the other from the Star and Garter Home in Richmond (Brittain, 2025). This event was designed to demonstrate the possibilities sport offered for rehabilitating individuals with SCI. Furthermore, the date of 28th July was a conscious decision by Guttmann to align with the date of the opening ceremony for the 1948 London Olympic Games (Gold & Gold, 2007). 1948 was thus the year the wheels were set in motion for the formation of the Paralympic Games in the guise of the Stoke Mandeville Games.

The Stoke Mandeville Games continued to take place each year, growing to 121 competitors, 11 teams, and 4 sports, in 1951. Joining archery was netball, snooker, and javelin (Brittain, 2018). At this stage, the Games

were national in scope, but this was to change in 1952 when the first international team competed. Representatives from the Netherlands, in the form of four veterans from the Doorn Military Rehabilitation Centre, competed against athletes from the United Kingdom at the Games, heralding the International Stoke Mandeville Games (Brittain, 2025). More nations joined the Games, resulting in 17 countries taking part in the 1959 International Stoke Mandeville Games (Brittain, 2018). At this point in time, the Games had only ever taken place at Stoke Mandeville Hospital in England. In 1960, still known as the International Stoke Mandeville Games, the event took place in Rome, Italy. This was significant because this was where the Olympic Games were also taking place and was the first time the International Stoke Mandeville Games had taken place anywhere other than in Buckinghamshire, England, let alone in the same city as the Olympic Games. As such, the 1960 International Stoke Mandeville Games are widely viewed as the first edition of the Paralympic Games (Brittain, 2025; Legg & Steadward, 2011a). It is important to point out the rehabilitative ethos driving the genesis of the initial Stoke Mandeville Games was still very much present during this period (Gérard et al., 2025). Guttman continued to promote the rehabilitative potential of the Games internationally and Guttman's iron grip on the movement was still firmly in place. Furthermore, the introduction of classification systems in the 1950s further underlined the medically driven organisation of the Games, as the classification system determined who should be allowed to compete based on medical perspectives (Gérard et al., 2025).

The role of Guttman in supporting disabled people to compete in sport has been critiqued by some scholars. Peers (2009, 2012) challenges the narrative of Guttman being viewed as a saviour of disabled people through the rehabilitative potential of sport. Peers argues historical accounts of Guttman have perpetuated stereotypes of disability as a 'tragedy' and something to 'overcome', and that the use of sport by Guttman was perceived to have 'saved' disabled people. Peers disputes this and argues disabled people had a more active and independent role than has historically been reported. Wedgwood (2014) describes the hostility of a prominent disability rights activist, Harlan Hahn, towards sport. Hahn argued sport is ableist and reinforces medicalised and disablist perceptions of disability. For Hahn, competing in sport was diverting attention from the main event: that of emancipation for disabled people (Wedgwood, 2014). In a balanced critique, Wedgwood argues Guttman played an important role, but the Paralympic Games does not offer a panacea for disabled people, individually and socially. At the same time, Hahn is wrong to shun sport completely as sport can provide a

platform for greater awareness and understanding of disability (Wedgwood, 2014). What is universally accepted is the prominent role Guttman played in establishing the origins of the Paralympic Games through the International Stoke Mandeville Games (Brittain, 2018).

Establishing the Paralympic Games: 1960 – 1972

The historic event of 1960 demonstrated the international portability of the International Stoke Mandeville Games: it no longer had to be limited to its ancestral home, Stoke Mandeville, England. 1960 was also a continuation of Guttman's attempts to link the competition with the Olympic Games (Brittain, 2025). The main reason for doing so was to confer legitimacy for the event and to support its growth and development. 1964 saw the Paralympic Games staged in Tokyo, a few weeks after the Olympic Games had been hosted in the same host city. At this stage, the event was still primarily known as the International Stoke Mandeville Games (National Paralympic Heritage Trust, n.d.), but Legg and Steadward (2011b) claim this Games was when the term, 'Paralympics', was first used officially. In this context, 'para' referred to 'paraplegic' and 'lympics' to the Olympic Games. Rather than the meaning of parallel Games we are familiar with today, the 'Paraplegic Olympics' was appropriate as only paraplegic athletes were eligible to compete at the 1964 Paralympic Games (Brittain, 2018). Moreover, the association with the Olympic Games further promoted Guttman's agenda of a close association with the Olympic Games, though the IOC were not particularly open to the close links being made by Guttman (Brittain, 2025).

The 1968 Paralympic Games was not held in the same location as the Olympic Games, Mexico City, Mexico. Instead, the Paralympic Games was staged in Tel Aviv, Israel (Brittain, 2025). The organisers of the 1968 Olympic Games were thought to be concerned about the physical capability of Paralympic athletes to compete at the high altitudes of the venues, and the lack of a disability sport scene in Mexico (Legg & Steadward, 2011b). Legg and Steadward (2011b) theorise Israel, having been involved in war in recent times, were keen to host the 1968 Paralympic Games because of the rehabilitative origins and focus of the event. From 1968 until 1984, the Paralympic Games were held in a host city different to that of the Olympic Games. Gold and Gold (2007) argue the IOC were primarily concerned with the capability of cities to host the Olympic Games, and did not compel cities to also stage the Paralympic Games. As such, Olympic host cities covering the 1968 – 1984 period, refused to stage the Paralympic Games for a variety of different reasons. Reasons offered

included cost, limited commercial opportunities, and the growth in scale of the Paralympic Games (Gold & Gold, 2007).

Growing the Paralympic Games: 1976 – 1987

1976 is an important year in Paralympic history for several reasons. First, the 1976 Summer Paralympic Games in Toronto, Canada, were the first Paralympic Games to officially include medal events for athletes with impairments other than spinal cord injury. From 1948 at the Stoke Mandeville Games to the 1972 Paralympic Games in Heidelberg, Germany, only athletes with spinal cord injuries were allowed to compete for medals at these Games. 1976 therefore represented an expansion of the impairment groups eligible to compete for medals at the Paralympic Games. Of course, most of the medal events at the 1976 Paralympics were for athletes with a spinal cord injury but, nevertheless, the movement had expanded and broadened its scope. The committee responsible for organising the 1976 Toronto Games changed the name of the event from the Paralympics to the ‘Olympiad for the Physically Disabled’ to reflect the broadened scope of the event: using the term ‘Paralympics’ to refer to the Paraplegic Games was no longer accurate in its original Paraplegic Olympics guise (Legg & Steadward, 2011b). 1976 was significant for the Winter Paralympic Games, too, as this was the year the event was established. Then known as the ‘Winter Olympic Games for the Disabled’, the event took place in Örnsköldsvik, Sweden, and included just two sports: alpine and cross-country skiing (National Paralympic Heritage Trust, n.d.). Amputee and visually impaired athletes were eligible to compete. The event was small in scale due to the relatively short timescale involved in organising the Games (Brittain, 2018).

If 1948 – 1959 can be viewed as the forerunner to the Paralympic Games, and 1960 – 1972 represents the birth and consolidation phase of the Paralympic Games, then 1976 acts as the beginning of an expansion to the concept through the inclusion of a greater range of impairment groups and the founding of the Winter Paralympics (Brittain, 2018; Legg & Steadward, 2011a). The 1970s also witnessed increased contestation to the rehabilitation ethos of the Paralympic Games (Gérard et al., 2025). As Gérard et al. (2025) point out, cultural and societal understanding of disability was being challenged from a medical model perspective to a recognition of the need to remove societal and structural barriers that limit active participation of disabled people within society. During the 1970s, the increasingly common attempt by athletes and sports teams to

modernise and adapt wheelchairs to aid sporting performance, reflected the ongoing resistance from athletes to the rehabilitative origins of the event (Gérard et al., 2025). The passing of Guttman in 1980, along with increased organisational involvement from the IOC in international disability sport, began to move the focus of the Paralympic Games away from rehabilitation to an elite sport event (Gérard et al., 2025).

Additions to the sporting programmes continued at both the Summer Paralympic Games and Winter Paralympic Games. In 1980, the Summer Paralympic Games in Arnhem, Netherlands, saw the introduction of events for athletes with cerebral palsy (Legg & Steadward, 2011b), while the 1980 Winter Paralympic Games in Geilo, Norway, grew in size from 53 athletes in 1976 to 299 athletes (National Paralympic Heritage Trust, n.d.), including the inclusion of athletes with a spinal cord injury (Brittain, 2018). The 1984 Winter Paralympics were held in Innsbruck, Austria, and saw the addition of athletes with cerebral palsy and athletes from a classification called, ‘les autres’, literally meaning ‘the others’, to the programme (Brittain, 2018). As the eagle-eyed reader may have spotted, the early editions of the Winter Paralympic Games were held in the continent of Europe, where the winter sport scene was well established, a practice that continued until the 1998 Games were held in Nagano, Japan (Brittain, 2018). Meanwhile, the 1984 Summer Paralympic Games were unique in the fact they were split across two host venues: New York, USA, and Stoke Mandeville, England. This unusual situation occurred because the original joint host with New York, the University of Illinois at Champaign, USA, was unable to fulfil its commitments due to funding difficulties (Gold & Gold, 2007). As such, and to keep the viability of the 1984 Paralympics, the wheelchair events were hosted at Stoke Mandeville while all other events were in New York (Gold & Gold, 2007). Despite the chaotic organisation, the 1984 Games at Stoke Mandeville were endorsed by the IOC as the first official Paralympic Games (Gold & Gold, 2007). This leads us nicely onto the final developmental phase of the Paralympic Games, commencing in 1988, which Brittain (2018) has labelled, ‘institutionalising the concept’, and Legg and Steadward (2011a) as ‘transcendence’. This modern formulation of the Paralympic Games will be the focus of the next section.

The making of the modern Paralympic Games: 1988 – present day (2025)

The Seoul 1988 Paralympic Games are widely viewed as the first edition of the modern Games we are familiar with today (Legg & Steadward, 2011a). This is mainly due to the realignment between the host city for the Olympic Games and the Paralympic Games, a practice that has continued to date and to at least 2032 (IPC,

2018). In 1988, there was no legal framework compelling Olympic hosts to stage the Paralympic Games. However, the increasingly close working relationship between the IOC and the International Co-ordinating Committee, the governing body responsible for organising the 1988 Paralympic Games (Gold & Gold, 2007), was important (Brittain, 2025). The organisation and delivery of the Seoul 1988 Paralympic Games was administered through separate organising committees for the Olympics and the Paralympics, but venues, equipment and key personnel were shared between the events (Gold & Gold, 2007). The Seoul Paralympic Games is also important for the change in orientation to the event. The Paralympic Games had pivoted to being an elite sport event, away from the rehabilitation ethos that had driven the movement since its inception (Gérard et al., 2025; Legg & Steadward, 2011a). This was due to the relationship with the IOC and opportunities for growing the event and its commerciality. The consequences of this change in event purpose will be explained in further detail in the next section. Shortly after the Seoul Paralympics, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) was founded in 1989. This provided one governing body to support with the administration of the Paralympic Games and made it easier for the IOC to coordinate with one organisation rather than the collection of organisations that had been the case in the 1970s and 1980s (Brittain, 2018). The establishment of the IPC shortly after the Seoul Games provides further evidence for 1988 acting as the first ‘modern’ edition of the Paralympic Games.

The increasingly close relationship between the IOC and the IPC continued throughout the 1990s. For the Barcelona 1992 Olympic and Paralympic Games, the organising committee, COOB92, consolidated the administration and management of both Games under one organising committee (Gold & Gold, 2007). The 1992 Paralympic Games further pushed the Paralympic Games away from its rehabilitation origins, following criticism for the large number of events and medals available at the 1988 Games (Gérard et al., 2025). As such, the 1992 Paralympic Games reduced the number of events and medals compared to the 1988 Games to promote the elite sport focus of the Paralympic Games (Gérard et al., 2025). Since 1992, the IPC became the sole organisation, as recognised by the IOC, with overall responsibility for the governance of Paralympic sport (Gold & Gold, 2007). The increasing professionalisation of the IPC, and clarity as to the roles of the IOC and IPC in the management of the Paralympics, helped pave the way for historic agreements between the two parties in the early 2000s (Gold & Gold, 2007; Legg & Steadward, 2011a). First, a memorandum of understanding between the IOC and the IPC was established in 2000 following the Sydney Games, with the

IOC granting IPC representation on IOC commissions and financial support to the IPC (Brittain, 2018; 2025). This memorandum of understanding was strengthened in 2001 with a contractual agreement signed between the two presidents, Juan Antonio Samaranch of the IOC and Dr Robert Steadward of the IPC. This contractual agreement confirmed the close working relationship between the IOC and the IPC in the management of the Paralympic Games and paved the way for the 'one city, one bid' movement (Legg et al., 2015). The 'one city, one bid' agreement compelled prospective Olympic Games hosts to stage the Paralympic Games using the same venues and facilities shortly after the Olympics (Gold & Gold, 2007; Legg et al., 2015). The agreement commenced in 2008 for the Summer Paralympic Games in Beijing, China, and in 2010 for the Winter Paralympic Games in Vancouver, Canada. Further agreements were struck to continue the close IOC-IPC relationship and 'one city, one bid' philosophy. In 2003, a broadcasting and marketing revenues agreement for the Paralympic Games guaranteed IOC payments to the IPC for the 2008, 2010, and 2012 Games, an agreement extended in 2006 to cover the 2014 and 2016 Games (Gold & Gold, 2007). In 2012, there was a further strengthening of the 'one city, one bid' agenda, ensuring the Games up to and including the 2020 edition were covered by this agreement (Brittain, 2018; Legg et al., 2015). The latest arrangement, confirmed in 2018 during the PyeongChang Winter Paralympic Games, extended the IOC-IPC partnership until at least the 2032 Paralympic Games (IPC, 2018).

The close alignment between the IOC and IPC in the management of the Paralympic Games has had a significant impact on the size of the Paralympic Games. The growth in the Summer Paralympic Games since Seoul has been exponential in terms of the number of nations competing (Brittain, 2018). 60 nations competed at the Seoul 1988 Paralympic Games compared to 168 at the 2024 Paris Paralympic Games (Brittain, 2018; IPC, 2024). There has been strong growth in the size of the Winter Paralympic Games, though not to the same degree as the Summer Paralympic Games. 22 nations took part in the Innsbruck 1988 Paralympic Games compared to 46 at the 2022 Beijing Winter Paralympic Games (Brittain, 2018; IPC, 2022). It is unclear whether the growth of the Paralympic Games would have occurred organically, but it is true to say the close links forged between the IOC and IPC since 1988 has supported the growth of the Paralympic Games as a sporting event. However, the numbers belie the dominance of select nations as part of the athlete delegations that constitute the Paralympic Games. Brittain (2018; 2025) found the growth in the number of nations taking part conceals the small delegation size from some nations. For example, at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games,

Brittain (2018) found 46% of the nations taking part comprised of three or less athletes per delegation, with 22% of nations having a sole representative. There is a gender imbalance at the Summer Paralympic and Winter Paralympic Games. Progress has been made at the Summer Paralympic Games compared to 1988 when only 22% of the total athletes were female. At the 2024 Paris Paralympic Games, 45% of the total athlete delegation were female (IPC, 2024). Despite the improvements, there is still a gender imbalance, and this is an issue the IPC is focused on. Unfortunately, the Winter Paralympic Games still has a clear male-dominant athlete split. In 1988, 20% of athletes were female compared to 24% at the Beijing 2022 Winter Paralympic Games (Brittain, 2018; IPC, 2022). It is unclear why the proportion of female winter Paralympians has remained stubbornly low. The gender imbalance is highlighted by there being less than one per cent of para ice hockey athletes identified as female athletes before 2022 (IPC, n.d.a). There has been improvement in that there are now 20% of para ice hockey players that are female in 2025, but it is only at the 2030 Paralympic Games that a female event in para ice hockey is deemed realistic (IPC, n.d.a). Improving the representation of female athletes within Winter Paralympic sports will support developments to make the Games more gender balanced, but this is not a short-term fix. The Summer Paralympic Games, like the Summer Olympic Games, has a higher profile for political, sporting, and geographical reasons. It is possible nations with limited resources have preferred to focus on the Summer Paralympic Games and that this is where the IPC has been primarily concerned with growing representation due to the Summer Games being the flagship event in the IPC's portfolio. This is speculation on behalf of the author; therefore, further investigation is needed to understand why such a discrepancy in representation between the two events exists.

Despite challenges in increasing the depth and breadth of the Paralympic Games, the modern Paralympic Games has undergone radical change since the first Games in 1960. The event has shed its rehabilitative ethos and is now unashamedly an elite sporting event first and foremost. The number of nations competing in the Paralympics has grown exponentially, increasing the commercial, broadcasting, sporting, political, and social importance of the event. What started off as an amateur operation in the Paralympics' early days has evolved into a professionalised operation. Despite the growth and the professionalisation of the Paralympics, challenges face the IPC and need to be confronted to ensure the Paralympics can continue to develop further. This is the focus of the next section.

Challenges to the development of the Paralympic Games

Having reviewed and charted the development of the Paralympic Games in detail, we now have a clear understanding of how the event has grown to what it is like in 2025. It is now prudent to consider potential challenges the IPC must confront as part of the future development of the Paralympic Games. The most pressing challenge, that of classification, is where my review of the challenges begins.

Classification

The classification system is one of most contentious issues within the Paralympic Movement. Classification aims to provide fair opportunities for athletes based on the functional use of the athlete's impairment in sport (Connick et al., 2018). Currently, the following broad impairment categories are included in the Paralympic Games: spinal injuries, amputees, vision impairment, cerebral palsy, les autres (meaning "the others"), and intellectual disability (IPC, n.d.b; IPC, n.d.c). Intellectual disability is currently only represented at the Summer Paralympic Games. What this demonstrates is the range of impairments included at the Paralympic Games and the challenge to ensure fair competition for all. Catering for a variety of impairment categories can make it a barrier to communicate why athletes from different impairment classes compete alongside each other. The LEXI system has been one method that has tried to simplify the classification process for viewers but explaining the classification system in a clear and understandable manner presents a challenge for growing the event (Brown, 2024).

Historically, the classification system used a purely medical approach to assign athletes to their eligible sport events (Connick et al., 2018). The lived experience of impairment is such that there is diversity of experiences and impact of an individual's impairment and, as such, the influence it can have on their sporting performance (Kons & Patatas, 2023). Consequently, the functionality of impairment and its role on sporting performance is now incorporated as part of the classification system, with the IPC seeking scientific and evidence-based data to inform the outcomes of the classification process (Connick et al., 2018). Research indicates, however, this approach is not being consistently delivered across Paralympic sports and geographical regions (Allen et al., 2021). Consequently, the classification system has been critiqued for its robustness, fairness, and its impact on equity of opportunity for athletes with severe impairments (Dutia & Tweedy, 2021; Howe, 2011; Loland, 2021). This section will not go into the details of the classification system itself but, instead, focus on some of

the issues prevalent with the classification system that may influence the development of the Paralympic Games.

It is important to note the difficulty classifiers deal with when conducting the classification experience. Intentional misrepresentation (IM) is a form of cheating that has been described as one of the biggest challenges facing the movement (Brown, 2023; Gowans et al., 2025). IM is the practice of deliberately manipulating the severity of one's impairment so that the athlete is placed in an 'easier' category than should be the case for the functionality of their impairment (Makitov et al., 2024). IM makes the classification process that much trickier for classifiers. Despite the challenges with the classification system (to be explained in more detail shortly), it is a necessary process to ensure 'fair' competition in Paralympic sport. Classification is also important to ensure the Paralympic Games programme continues to operate within the current athlete quota of 4,400 set by the IOC. Nonetheless, the experience of classification can be disempowering for some athletes (Howe, 2011; Howe & Silva, 2017). Athlete voice is not always considered, and the experience of classification can be inconsistent depending on the classifier (Dornick et al., Lawson et al., 2023). This is a crucial omission considering research suggests the origin of one's impairment can have an impact on the functional performance of impairment within sport (Kons & Patatas, 2023). Moreover, Tuakli-Wosornu et al. (2021) found impairment aetiology can influence sporting performance. It is understandable the IPC is keen to have as objective a system as possible, but ignoring lived experience and subjective perspectives can undermine the classification process. The lack of consultation and involvement of athletes can in part lead to difficulties for some athletes and coaches in understanding the rationale and methodology of the classification outcome (Birchall et al., 2024; Lawson et al., 2023). Indeed, some athletes have commented on the poor communication that exists between them and classifiers (Dornick et al., Lawson et al., 2023). Educational resources for athletes and coaches have been suggested to support athletes feeling more informed and thus empowered as part of the process (Birchall et al., 2024; Lawson et al., 2023). The asymmetric power dynamic between classifier and athlete (with the classifier holding the power) can cause stress for athletes and feel that classification is imposed upon athletes, rather than athletes feeling a part of the classification process (Lawson et al., 2023; Powis & Macbeth, 2020).

It has been argued the classification system is marginalising athletes with severe impairments in the Paralympic Movement. The argument posits there are fewer sporting opportunities for athletes with more complex requirements (Dutia & Tweedy, 2021). Howe (2011) argues athletes with severe impairments are being marginalised due to the IPC's drive to market and commercialise the Paralympic Games. Howe (2011) posits ableist conceptions of sporting ability are such that athletes with more challenging requirements might not 'look the part' when attempting to sell the product. Dutia and Tweedy (2021) found fewer swimming events have been offered to swimmers with more severe impairments at the Paris 2024 Paralympics than had been the case previously. Dutia and Tweedy explain that events for each sport class can only take place if the following condition is satisfied: there are a minimum of 10 athletes from at least four nations on the world ranking list. This is increasingly difficult to achieve because of systemic and political barriers limiting opportunities for these athletes across the Paralympic sporting system, globally (Dutia & Tweedy, 2021).

One of the fundamental challenges with the classification system is to ensure it is fair and robust for all athletes within the Paralympic Movement. For example, swimming has made strong progress with regards to classification of swimmers with limb deficiency (Hogarth et al., 2018) but visually impaired athletes are subject to the same classification principles, disregarding sport-specific influences (Mann & Ravensbergen, 2018). Scholars have frequently called for a sport-by-sport classification system to provide a more comprehensive and authentic experience of classification (Allen et al., 2020). However, to do so is costly, time intensive, and difficult to implement across the globe considering the resource disparities that exist across national paralympic committees (Harrington & Misener, 2025; Van Biesen et al., 2021). Nevertheless, studies have found improved efficacy in classification through the adoption of sport specific principles (Allen et al., 2021). It is difficult to achieve a classification system that is pliable enough to adapt to sport-specific demands, but it is needed if athletes are not to be discriminated against (Van Biesen et al., 2021). Moreover, some impairment classes, such as intellectual disabilities, are not as easy to objectively classify as other impairments (e.g., amputees). Historically, and currently, it has been difficult to provide objective classification of athletes with intellectual impairments at the Paralympic Games (Van Biesen et al., 2021). It was only at the Atlanta 1996 Paralympic Games when intellectually disabled athletes were officially allowed to compete. However, following a cheating scandal at the 2000 Paralympic Games involving athletes claiming to have an intellectual impairment (this will be discussed further in the 'cheating' section), the intellectual impairment category was

banned from the next two Paralympic Games, returning to competition at the 2012 Paralympic Games. There is a limited programme available to athletes with an intellectual impairment, with the classification challenge not the only reason for this but likely to be a factor.

The classification system is not perfect, but the current version is serviceable and ensures there is a system to support parasport athletes to compete (Connick et al., 2016). The inherent complexity in trying to achieve fairness among athletes with very different requirements present challenges for the development of the Paralympic Games. Gowans et al. (2025), based on their Delphi study, propose four actions to be implemented to strengthen the process and to minimise the threat of manipulation to the classification system. Compulsory classification educational content for athletes ahead of the experience of classification was suggested, which may help to alleviate some of the issues highlighted by Birchall et al. (2024) and Lawson et al. (2023). Video recording the classification process and sterner bans for athletes engaging in IM, may reduce instances of cheating within the classification system (Gowans et al., 2025). Finally, Gowans et al. (2025) suggest support structures and guidance for classifiers who suspect foul play has occurred. The classification system is needed to ensure viewers can believe what they are watching is fair and above board. At the same time, there is unfairness within the system. Explaining the classification system and ensuring viewers understand why athletes with seemingly different impairments are allowed to compete in the same event, is one of the main challenges in growing interest in the Paralympic Games. The Winter Paralympic Games use a different classification system for Alpine Skiing, Biathlon and Cross Country. For these sports, a factored time is used in a system like a handicap in golf (Lyons, 2014). It is possible the athlete who crosses the line first is not the champion due to the factored scoring time of athletes. Explaining the Paralympic product is a challenge and one that the IPC needs to work on for sporting integrity and marketability reasons.

Cheating

Paralympic sport is not immune to threats to its sporting integrity: cheating occurs in Paralympic sport just as it does in Olympic sport. Continuing the conversation on classification, athletes who practice IM have a competitive advantage because they are competing against athletes who face greater functional challenges from their impairment on their sporting performance. IM can be practiced before or during the classification process (cf. Makitov et al., 2024). IM is tricky to prove due to the difficulty in providing objective measures

to capture the practice of IM (Makitov et al., 2024). The most famous example of IM is from the Sydney 2000 Paralympic Games referred to earlier. In this example, 10 of the 12 athletes on the Spanish Men's Basketball gold-winning team were found to have faked the presence of an intellectual impairment: in fact, they had no intellectual impairment at all (Brittain, 2025). This scandal, and the uncovering of systemic manipulation of the intellectual disability classification system, led to the banning of the intellectual impairment category from the Paralympic programme until the London 2012 Paralympic Games. IM presents a fundamental challenge to the classification process and the sporting integrity of the Paralympic Games.

Boosting is a form of cheating that is unique to the Paralympic Games and is relevant to athletes with a spinal cord injury at or above a T6 level (Mazzeo & Santamaria, 2015). Boosting can be a life-threatening procedure due to the elevated blood pressure that is induced as part of the practice (Mazzeo & Santamaria, 2015). Despite the risks, some athletes engage in boosting due to the performance benefits that can accrue. Blauwet et al. (2013) found boosting can provide a 9.7% improvement in race time for athletes, with the performance enhancement particularly pronounced for endurance events. The study is a bit dated now but Bhambhani et al. (2010) found 16.7% of the 99 Paralympic athletes surveyed employed boosting for performance enhancement. Boosting is more localised than IM within the Paralympic Movement but still presents a threat to the integrity of the Paralympic Games' sporting product and potential development.

The alleged abuse/misuse of therapeutic use exemptions (TUEs) by some athletes, do not appear to be as big an issue as boosting and IM are. Data suggests there is an equivalence between Olympic and Paralympic sport here, albeit once contextual factors are considered (e.g., TUEs are likely to be higher in Paralympic sport due to medical requirements linked to impairments) (Vernec et al., 2024). There is much less data on doping in Paralympic sport compared to the Olympics. Doping is seen to be an issue within Paralympic sport and there appears to be less strenuous effort to test during competition than might be expected for Olympic events (Blank et al., 2023; Qvarfordt et al., 2024). Cheating via doping, which can include IM, is seen as a significant threat, and needs greater attention and resources to ensure fair competition and integrity is upheld in Paralympic sport (Blank et al., 2023).

Technology

The extent to which technology, such as the use of prosthetics and carbon fibre wheelchairs (IPC, 2021), is used to support sporting performance has been debated within the Paralympic studies field. Technology performance aids are well established within Paralympic sport. But the extent to which technology is becoming too dominant on the performance of athletes is open to debate from some scholars (McNamee et al., 2021). If technology is used too much, does this devalue the sporting achievements of these athletes? Does this devalue the sporting spectacle or product? Some critics have suggested the need to ensure technology does not get a point where it is driving the human, rather than the human being in control of the technology (McNamee et al., 2021). Furthermore, Howe (2011) has argued the ‘cyborgification’ of athletes (athletes that are celebrated for their technological enhancements) can disempower athletes that do not fit this narrative. Howe argues athletes that do not conform to the prominence of the cyborg risk being alienated within the movement and pitied by the audience rather than celebrated. Howe and Silva (2017) argue the increasing prevalence of technology is creating disparities within the Paralympic Movement, even among those athletes that are eligible for technological performance aids. The expense of creating the technology and the scientific expertise and knowledge required for producing cutting edge sports wheelchairs and prostheses is such that the playing field is becoming more uneven among rich and poor nations (Brittain, 2025; Howe & Silva, 2017). The use and misuse of technology present a challenge to the classification system in providing a fair contest for all (McNamee et al., 2021). This is counter to the IPC’s mission to provide an inclusive Paralympic Games and can limit the growth of the event worldwide.

Organisation and delivery of the PG

What is the point of the Paralympic Games? Should the Paralympics be about showcasing the potential of disabled people in order to achieve positive social change for disabled people within society? Or is the Paralympics, first and foremost, an elite sporting event? It is clear the Paralympic Games has developed into an elite sporting event, having begun life as a rehabilitation pathway for patients with spinal cord injuries (Brittain, 2012). Since the 1988 Seoul Games, the Paralympic Games have become more professionalised and serious in its commitment to sporting excellence. Some research suggests the Paralympic Games is increasingly viewed as an elite sporting event by the public (Pullen et al., 2020). This is unlikely to have been

the case before the turn of the century among many of the public. What cost has this move to professionalisation, and elite sport, had on the spirit of the Movement?

As stated earlier, the origins of the Paralympics lie in rehabilitation and providing opportunities for disabled people to use the Paralympics for the betterment of their life chances within society (Brittain, 2025). The classification system and elite sport are exclusionary by design: you need to have a certain type of impairment and have the necessary ability level to compete. As such, the Paralympic Games is one of the most exclusive events for the public to engage with disability. The IPC is committed to growing the Paralympic Games as a sporting event while at the same time continuing its stated objective of using the Paralympic Games to achieve progressive social change for disabled people (IPC, 2023). Are these missions compatible? It is a question that the Paralympic Movement needs to grapple with as part of the development of the Paralympic Games. As has been pointed out earlier in this article, there is evidence for the marginalisation of athletes with severe impairments within the Paralympic Movement (Dutia & Tweedy, 2021; Howe, 2011). Furthermore, the growth of the Paralympic Games has been powered by a relatively small number of nations (Brittain, 2025). Data from the IPC suggests approximately 50% of the athletes at the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games were from 10 national delegations (IPC, n.d.d). The cost and expense of technology have further exacerbated and skewed the development of the Paralympic Games towards rich and developed nations. When considering the social change agenda, we must also appraise the tangible difference the Paralympic Games make to the lives of everyday disabled people. Data is thin on the ground on this front, certainly the longevity of any perceived positive changes that may stem from the event. The Paralympic Games, like the Olympic Games, is likely to benefit those who are in a position to profit from the event, rather than have an automatic trickledown impact to wider society (Müller, 2015). Can the growth in the sporting importance of the Paralympic Games to nations effectively support and align with the social change objective? This author has their doubts, and it is a challenge for the IPC to consider as the Paralympic Games develops further.

It is undeniable the close relationship between the IOC and the IPC has accelerated the growth and development of the Paralympic Games (Brittain, 2018). As the Paralympic Games continues to grow in significance and importance, should the status quo of the Paralympic Games following the Olympic Games remain? If we return to our earlier discussion of social change and inclusion, should Paralympic sport not be

integrated within the Olympic Games if we are concerned about inclusion (Bellieni, 2015)? Following the adoption in 2006 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), it is not legal to segregate people along the lines of disability (Beekman et al., 2023). Yet, this is what occurs with the Paralympic Games and the Olympic Games. Two separate events with specific athletes permitted to compete. Beekman et al. (2023) raise the question of how sporting events for disabled people should be allowed while the medicalised approach to disability is not permitted by the CRPD, despite this often being used as part of the Paralympic classification process. Bellieni (2015) argues disabled people should be included within the Olympic Games if we are serious about inclusion. Could this be the future of the Paralympic Games, to be disbanded so that the Olympics includes para-athletes? This already occurs in the Commonwealth Games but there are concerns that integration works for some, not all, notably athletes with severe impairments being marginalised (Quinn & Misener, 2023). There are also logistical concerns with this idea. Unless events are cut from the Paralympic programme, a combined Olympic and Paralympic Games would be too big and difficult to organise for only a very few nations, if that (Misener, 2024). For example, the athlete village would need to be significantly bigger if a combined event was to occur, and the event would run for a much longer timespan too, with all the cost, disruption to normal life, and security challenges this entails. There is also an argument for retaining the Paralympic Games as a separate event to ensure there is a sufficient platform to showcase the sporting abilities of para-athletes (Misener, 2024). The Paralympic Games certainly does this at present and moving to a combined event would likely reduce the chance for Paralympic athletes to take centre stage. For now, the prospect of the Paralympic Games being integrated into the Olympic Games is unlikely.

Having outlined some of the challenges to the development of the Paralympic Games, potential areas for future research and scholarship are identified.

Future research into the development of the Paralympic Games

The relationship between the IOC and the IPC and its impact on the development of the Paralympic Games is an underexplored area. Some scholars have reviewed the relationship between the IOC and IPC (e.g., Gérard et al., 2019, 2025; Legg et al., 2015; Purdue, 2013) but further research should be undertaken to understand the extent to which the relationship benefits/hinders the development of the Paralympic Games. Currently, the IOC determines the city where the Paralympic Games is hosted due to the ‘one city, one bid’ agreement (Legg

et al., 2015). Is this helpful for the Paralympic Games to grow? Can the Paralympic Games thrive without the support of the IOC? The answers to these questions are unclear. It would also be interesting to understand the extent to which social change through the Paralympic Games is enabled/disabled by the IOC-IPC relationship. Some concerns over the approach of the IPC as part of its relationship with the IOC were expressed by some Paralympic stakeholders as part of Purdue's (2013) work. 12 years on, are those concerns still prevalent and important? Furthermore, it would be useful to learn the influence of the IPC-IOC relationship on the ability of the Paralympic Games to cater for a greater diversity of impairments. This is currently hampered by the imposition of an athlete quota by the IOC for the Paralympic Games, which is set at 4,400 athletes for the 2028 Los Angeles Paralympic Games (IPC, 2025). The quest for growing the event has helped both the IPC and IOC, as well as some of the Paralympic athletes, but if the IPC operated on its own could it offer greater opportunities for a wider range of athletes? It is only through greater research into the IPC and IOC relationship that answers to these questions may emerge.

Knowledge of the Paralympic Games is still very focused from the perspectives of Western and developed nations. Exceptions exist to this, particularly among recent host nations that do not fit both categorisations (E.g., Brazil, China, and Japan as non-Western nations), but it is rare to glean insights from non-Western and developing nations. Further scholarship in this area would enrich our understanding of the reach the Paralympic Games has, and opportunities for growing the event within these geographic and cultural spheres. Work by Akambadi et al. (2023) in Malawi has provided some data on the reception of the Paralympics in an African context. Their work revealed the power the Paralympic Games can have on perceptions of disability and ability, though the authors note this was heavily influenced through the moderation of the research design used as part of the study (Akambadi et al., 2023). An interesting insight from that study was the lack of compatibility to the lived experiences of the Malawians involved when viewing athletes using technological or bespoke sporting equipment (Akambadi et al., 2023). Further work in non-Western and developing nation contexts would support our knowledge of the extent to which the Paralympic Games has grown and can continue to develop.

The legacy potential of the Paralympic Games to provide greater opportunities for disabled people within sport and society is often claimed (Brown & Pappous, 2018). However, studies have failed to find strong

evidence for supposed social and sporting changes (Pappous & Brown, 2018). Where data suggests some positive changes may have occurred, it is not clear the extent of the longevity of these impacts. Longitudinal studies that aim to map and evaluate the social potential of the Paralympic Games would help us understand the reach of the social change agenda the IPC espouse. Currently, the evidence-base here is limited.

Conclusion

The Paralympic Games has changed significantly since its origin. The event is an internationally recognised elite sporting competition watched by millions of people across the world, a far cry from its rehabilitation-centred beginnings. Despite the strong development over the past 30 years, it feels as if we are at a critical moment in the history of the Paralympic Games. The London 2012 Paralympic Games were widely viewed as being a landmark Games that helped propel the Paralympic Games into the sporting consciousness of the public. The 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro stalled the momentum somewhat given the financial challenges that plagued the organisation and delivery of the event. The Paralympic Games in Tokyo dealt with obvious challenges in the form of a once in a century pandemic, Covid-19, forcing the Paralympics to be staged without fans present. The Paris 2024 Paralympic Games seem to have recaptured the momentum generated by the London 2012 Paralympics. Can this momentum continue in Los Angeles for the 2028 Paralympic Games? If it does, one feels the Paralympic Games will continue to go from strength to strength. If momentum stalls again, then questions will be posed as to the direction of the event and its development.

The Paralympic Games has some significant challenges to deal with if it is to continue its development. The most serious challenge is the classification system and the threat posed by intentional misrepresentation. Consumers need to clearly understand the product and the complexities of classification present difficulties here. There are also legitimate concerns about the inclusivity of the event for all para-athletes, particularly athletes with severe impairments and athletes with intellectual impairments. Consumers also need to believe what they are experiencing is genuine sport, with intentional misrepresentation being the obvious hindrance to this. If the IPC can continue to develop the classification system so it is clear, transparent, fair, and robust, then the chances of the Paralympic Games continuing its growth are fair. Questions about the purpose of the Paralympic Games need to be critically reviewed. Can the Paralympic Games marry its stated aim of being an elite sport event while also delivering social change? If these aims are mutually exclusive, which direction

should the IPC take the event in? Addressing these philosophical questions will have significant implications for the future development of the Paralympic Games.

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