

### BACKGROUND

Physical activity and participation in athletics provides significant health and social benefits, improving overall quality of life for both able-bodied adolescents and those with physical disabilities. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) identified challenges preventing equality for student athletes with a disability such as inadequate policies and procedures, limited knowledge, and inexperience resulting in a lower rate of students participating. They advised the United States Department of Education (USDE) that many of these challenges could be resolved with communication between schools and districts, but a lack of clarity remains as to how to best provide equal opportunity for students with a physical disability. The perspective of the athlete is essential in understanding both the challenges and successful strategies for school-based sports participation.

### PURPOSE

To describe and interpret the lived experience of participating or attempting to participate as an athlete with a physical disability on a school-based sports team from the perspective of the athlete.

### METHODS

This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological research approach.

#### Procedure:

- Data was collected through in-person, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews or focus groups consisting of 4 participants (format was participant's choice).
- Conducted in a quiet secluded area
- Ranged in length from 15 to 60 minutes depending on the participant
- Audio-taped to allow for transcription of the interview

#### Data Analysis

- Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist
- Transcripts were reconciled with audio recordings and de-identified
- Constant Comparison coding was completed using NVivo Software
- Coding continued until data saturation was met
- Field notes and reflective journaling further supported the data analysis

#### Trustworthiness

- Trustworthiness was established using the four components of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Strategies employed:
- triangulation of sources
  - reflexive journaling
  - Nvivo tracking
  - peer debriefing
  - quotation exemplars
  - inquiry audit/audit trail
  - member checking
  - thick description

#### Participants

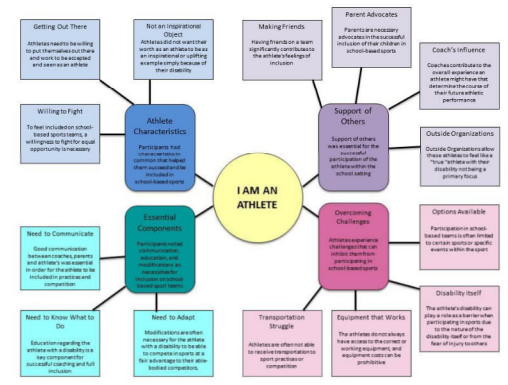
Participants were recruited at Adaptive Sports USA Jr. Nationals, ranged from 14 to 18 years in age, and represented a variety of disabilities and sports.

Participant #	Gender	Age	Disability	Grade	Type of School	State
1	Female	17	SCI	11th	Public	OH
2	Male	17	SCI	11th	Public	NJ
3	Male	17	Cerebral Palsy	10th	Public	NJ
4	Male	17	Cerebral Palsy	11th	Public	NJ
5	Female	15	Cerebral Palsy	9th	Public	IL
6	Male	16	Below Knee Amputee	10th	Private	LA
7	Male	16	Visual Impairment	10th	Public	LA
8	Male	18	Cerebral Palsy	12th	Public	LA
9	Female	14	Genetic Skeletal Disorder	7th	Public	OR
10	Female	16	Above Elbow Amputee	10th	Public	MO
11	Female	17	Dwarfism	11th	Public	MD
12	Male	14	Spina Bifida	8th	Public	WI
13	Female	17	Arthrogyposis	11th	Public	MD
14	Female	17	Spina Bifida	10th	Public	OH
15	Female	16	Dwarfism	9th	Public	MA
16	Female	14	Below Knee Amputee	8th	Public	FL

### I Am An Athlete:

### FINDINGS

There are many different factors that our participants described as influential on their experience of participating as an athlete in school-based sports. One overarching and four primary themes emerged from the data.



#### Athlete Characteristics

**Willing To Fight:** "...Sometimes, you have to fight, so you sort of have to be willing to be assertive, and know what you need. You don't just want to sit there, and not really go through anything. You have to do a lot in order to participate. That's just the truth of it." (Part 9)

**Getting Out There:** "...just get out there and do it because, yeah, you might not want to, but it really does change how you see things, and it's really fun being a part of a team with your high school." (Part 14)

#### Support of Others

**Parent Advocates:** "My mom had to walk through the school and actually bust several heads to get the coaches to even let me practice or participate." (Part 7)

**Coach's Influence:** "Sometimes it's just you might get a really good coach that'll accept you or you might get a coach that wants nothing to do with you and then there's just nothing you can really do about that. You just have to—I mean—push through it." (Part 6)

#### Essential Components

**Need to Communicate:** "...my coach—talk to the officials before every meet, and if I was doing fly or breaststroke, she would make sure I wouldn't be disqualified when I did the two-hand touch." (Part 10)

**Need To Know What To Do:** "It's always been kind of a struggle, because they never really have ever had anyone with a disability, so it's like they never really knew." (Part 11)

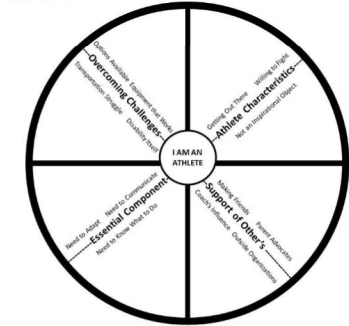
#### Overcoming Challenges

**Equipment That Works:** "I would usually have to stay after the practice so I could use the cones, the rope or whatever that they were using because they wouldn't adjust it for whenever I went up." (Part 5)

**Disability Itself:** "...they just thought it was dangerous cuz it was metal on my leg that I would injure some of the other players, so I had to start wearing a sleeve to help protect people." (Part 16)

### THE LIVED EXPERIENCE: WHEEL METAPHOR

A visual metaphor of a wheel was selected to describe the lived experience of the athlete with a disability participating in school-based sports. The four spokes represent the components of the athlete's experiences, each which are found to be in continual motion. During the athlete's experience in sports, if one of the spokes is loose or damaged the wheel might separate from the axle, damaging the wheel's integrity and thus impairing the athlete's ability to be seen as an athlete. If, however, the dynamics of the wheel are maintained, then the wheel should continue to turn and the athlete should be able to say and believe "I Am An Athlete."



### DISCUSSION

Multiple factors related to the athlete, environment, and school system were identified as important to the inclusion experience for athletes with a disability. Similar to barriers identified by the GAO, the athletes in this study experience several barriers that prevent them from equally participating in school-based sports with able-bodied athletes. The athletes discussed a strong desire to be seen as an athlete and the identified themes all contribute to their ability to achieve this within the school environment. Although not previously studied in the US, our study found similar themes to those identified in a study looking at sport participation of children with disabilities in the Netherlands (Jaarsma et al., 2015) and Australia (Shields & Symon, 2016). Internal motivation, importance of support from others and family, acceptance and social attitudes, issues with transportation, communication, and availability of information were very similar to themes noted in this study.

- The themes we identified are also consistent with findings from surveys from the athlete's, parent's, and coach's perspectives. Specifically, these surveys support:
- Inclusion is related to acceptance of teammates and coaches
  - Modifications are necessary for many athletes to participate
  - Equipment and transportation needs can be barriers
  - There is a need for coach training to increase knowledge in the area of disability
- Future qualitative studies looking into the perspectives of the parent and coach may help gain even further understanding of how these areas affect the inclusion process.

### CONCLUSION

This study supports overall positive experiences for the athlete with a disability in school-based sports, but identifies persistent barriers and necessary components for success. These findings may help provide guidance to school administrators and coaches, assisting with the inclusion process of an athlete with a disability in the future.

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