

ENTRY OF BRAZILIAN PARALYMPIC ATHLETES IN HIGH PERFORMANCE SPORT

INGRESSO DE ATLETAS PARALÍMPICOS BRASILEIROS NO ESPORTE DE ALTO RENDIMENTO

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RESUMO

O objetivo do estudo é descrever as razões para o ingresso de atletas paralímpicos no esporte de alto rendimento no Brasil. Trata-se de um estudo com abordagem descritiva e qualitativa. A coleta de informações foi realizada por meio de entrevista semiestruturada. Participaram do estudo 20 atletas das seleções brasileiras paralímpicas de Atletismo e Natação. Os resultados revelaram que os principais motivos pelos quais os atletas iniciam no esporte paralímpico são: 1) Oportunidade de Acesso à prática (n=10; 50%); 2) Prazer pela prática (n=9; 45%); 3) Inspiração em ídolos paralímpicos (n=6; 30%); e ainda, 4) Reabilitação (n=5; 25%). Dessa forma, conhecer os motivos para o ingresso no esporte paralímpico, pode proporcionar o surgimento de novas gerações de atletas e também consolidar o país como uma das principais potências paralímpicas mundiais.

Palavras-chave: Esporte paralímpico. Atleta paralímpico. Alto rendimento.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to describe the reasons for the entry of Paralympic athletes in high performance sport in Brazil. It is characterized as descriptive and qualitative approach. Information gathering was conducted through semi-structured interview. The study included 20 Paralympic athletes from Brazilian Team of Athletics and Swimming. Results revealed that the main reasons why the athletes begin in Paralympic sport are: 1) the opportunity to practice access (n = 10; 50%); 2) the pleasure in the sports practice (n = 9, 45%); 3) Inspiration in Paralympic idols (n = 6, 30%); and 4) Rehabilitation (n = 5; 25%). So, knowledge of the main reasons for entry in Paralympic sport, can provide the appearance of new generations of Paralympic athletes and consolidate Brazil as one of the major world paralympic power.

Keywords: Paralympic sport. Paralympic athlete. High performance.

Introduction

Brazilian Paralympic sport is experiencing great results due to its recent achievements: eighth place at the Rio de Janeiro Paralympic Games 2016 and winner nation for three consecutive editions of the Para-Panamerican Games (2007, 2011, 2015), the main competition of Americas. This continuous progression in rankings turns Brazil into an emerging Paralympic force.

These results confirm the national Paralympic sport's evolution. It is evident the crescent number of athletes with disabilities entering the modality. Encouraged by various factors, this population becomes present in sports environments. Regardless of the reasons, the certainty is that sports practice promotes positive effects for people with disabilities such as improvements in general health, physical fitness, bone metabolism and greater functional independence. In addition, there is a greater mobility and a reduction of chronic diseases and complications secondary to disability¹⁻⁵.

Not only a search for better health conditions and rehabilitation, but also, a search for sport's performance improvement, which makes it part of the disabled person's reality.

In this context, in order to provide better sports practice conditions, whether focused on health or high performance, it becomes necessary to know the main reasons that lead disabled people to the sport. Those reasons can benefit sports results and direct the disabled person to the best suitable modality, as well as being important to direct those people with disabilities to a any sports practice, directly to performance or not.

Moreover, actually with the increasing number of athletes, competitions and Paralympic modalities, it is fundamental to improve the processes of developing new athletes, seeking to renew generations and consolidate the growing Paralympic development in Brazil. Thus, the purpose of this is describe the reasons for the entry of paralympic athletes in high performance sport in Brazil.

Methods

The study is characterized as a descriptive study with a qualitative approach. Twenty Paralympians, from Athletics (10 athletes) and Swimming (10 athletes) modalities, participated of this research. As inclusion criteria in the study, we established only athletes contemplated by *Bolsa Atleta Pódio* grant from *Bolsa Atleta* program of the Brazilian Ministry of Sports. The sample was non-probabilistic purposive, since it was characterized by the use of pre-defined criteria to obtain a representative group by people capable of providing the necessary information for research⁶.

All subjects were invited to participate in the study, after accepting, were interviewed only for one researcher in the cities of: São Caetano do Sul-SP, Itajaí-SC, Brusque-SC and Porto Alegre-RS, with time and place defined by common agreement between researcher and athletes, and with the coaches of Athletics and Swimming Paralympic Team knowledge. The study was approved by the Committee of Ethics in Research with Human Beings of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, under the No. 922.077.

To collect information, it was used a semi-structured interview, which allowed the subjects to freely discuss about the proposed theme. This technique enables a flexibility in matters according to the objectives proposed by the study⁷. The interview script was composed of the following questions:

1. *Can you tell me about your entry into the Paralympic sport?*
2. *What do you consider important for the beginning of your sports life?*
3. *Can you tell me if there were situations that made it difficult for you to enter Paralympic sport?*

To register the information, a Stereo MP3 Recording Panasonic RR-US551 audio recorder was used, and for data evaluation Content Analysis was used⁸.

After the interviews were carried out, the essential elements in the speech of each interviewee (unit of analysis) were identified, after which, the grouping and categorization of key points according to the study objectives (thematic categories) were executed for results discussion.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the main reasons for Brazilian Paralympic sport entry. It is possible to perceive main reason as the Opportunity of access to sports practice (n = 10; 50%), followed

by the Pleasure for sports practice (n = 9; 45%), Inspiration in Paralympic idols (n=6, 30%) and still, Rehabilitation (n = 5; 25%).

Table 1. Main reasons for paralympic sport initiation

Thematic Categories	Absolute frequency of responses	Relative frequency of responses	Total Respondents
Opportunity of access to sports practice	10	50%	20
Pleasure for sports practice	9	45%	20
Inspiration in Paralympic idols	6	30%	20
Rehabilitation	5	25%	20

Source: Authors

The study evidenced that 50% of Paralympians from swimming and athletics (n = 10) reported that opportunities to access the sports practice were the main reason they started.

The opportunity to access the sport is given through informal invitations from teachers, coaches, clubs and sports managers to train with staff and participate directly in competitions.

Below, it is possible to recognize it in the speeches of the Brazilian Paralympic athletes interviewed:

A4: "... when it was 2005 I was already in senior year of high school with 17 years, I received the invitation for Paralympic sport ...".

A10: "... the Roda Solta club liked my game with another teammate and invited us to come to Itajaí to meet Basketball and play for Itajaí and also to meet Athletics."

A15: "... an association from Joinville, went to my house and invited me to swim and from then on I kept swimming ..."

A19: "It was there in the city ... at age 12 I was invited by a city hall coach to join the Paralympic team."

Invitations for athletes that demonstrate sports potential is still a recurring practice for entry of Paralympians in Brazil. It is an informal way to initiate athletes with disabilities in sport, and can be considered an efficient tool to discover new ones.

Benfica⁹ emphasizes that even today this way is employed to select athletes with Paralympic sport potential. When investigating ten (10) Brazilian athletes, from swimming and athletic modalities, the author reports that 50% of athletes were approached and invited by coaches and physical education teachers to start practicing in clubs.

Also Florence¹⁰ in investigation with 20 Brazilian Paralympic athletes from judo, Football 5-a-side, swimming and athletics, related that some athletes were in informal sports practice of the modality and received invitations from people involved with high performance sport to join in a training of teams/associations.

According to Rosadas¹¹, these invitations are ways that teachers, coaches and even entities have to detect new talents for Paralympic sport, without the necessity to use motor tests or physical evaluations, only with performance observation in the practiced modality. A quick way that still allows the recognition of good athletes.

It is important to highlight that teachers, coaches and managers invitations are not only to participate in teams training, clubs and associations. In many cases, athletes are invited to

go directly to competitions, where they only have knowledge of the sport practice and its peculiarities (adaptations and functional classification) in the moment of competition.

Thus, this form of initiation is still used in Brazilian Paralympic sport, and its results have been positive and can be considered a form of detection of new talents for modalities as well. Allied to this, in Brazil there is School Paralympic Project which is considered the largest school competition for young athletes in the world¹² and also contributes to detect new promises for Paralympic sport.

In 2018, thinking about improving and expanding the scope of the entry of people with disabilities in Paralympic sport, two important actions emerged to consolidate the process of sports initiation in the country: The Paralympic School Camping and Paralympic Training Center. This projects aims to insert people with disabilities from 12 to 17 years old who stand out in the Paralympics School Games for an intensive training period at the Brazilian Paralympic Training Center¹³.

And in 2019, the Brazilian Paralympic Committee (CPB) created the Paralympic Reference Centers. In order to train and offer the necessary support to athletes with disabilities from initiation to high performance, and aims to implement a Paralympic Reference Center in each of the 27 federal units by 2024¹⁴.

Another important reason why athletes entry Paralympic sport is pleasure for practicing it, evidenced by 45% of the interviewees (n = 9). According to the athletes' speech, the enjoyment at sports practice is a strong reason why they started.

A3: "... it was when I won my first three silver medals and that's when I fell in love with the sport."

A6: "... I'm a dedicated person because it's what I like, it's what I do because I like it, so for me that's very important ..."

A7: "... I won the three 100m, 200m and 400m races, competed with the men ... and from then on I got a taste, I fell in love with athletics."

A8: "... so then, from the beginning I always had a taste for the sport, I never saw myself not playing some sport ..."

A12: "... for you to want, you have to love it and love you have to have since childhood ..."

A15: "... I really like what I do, I really like swimming ... I keep swimming because ... you know, with certainty, quality of life, health issue ..."

Pleasure through sports practice is one of the main reasons that lead athletes to do it. The need to engage in sports practices is guided by different reasons, among them, pleasure is one of the most cited¹⁵.

Samulski and Noce¹⁶ in an investigation among Paralympic Training Centers of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Recife, with sixty-four (64) athletes from nine modalities, evaluated the different reasons that led them to start in the sport. The authors found that the most important one was the enjoyment for the practice, 76% of the athletes highlighted it as decisive for joining the sport.

Greguol et al.¹⁷ also points out that satisfaction through sports practice is fundamental for the athletes' entrance in modalities such as athletics and wheelchair basketball. The authors also report that pleasure is considered a deciding factor for athletes to continue training.

In this manner, the delight in practicing sports is one of the main determinants for children and young people to continue in the modality. Young people, who pointed pleasure as one of the most important reasons to enter the sport, are more likely to keep practicing it over time¹⁸.

Also, Jaarasma et al.¹⁹ in study with 76 dutch Paralympians, reported that fun and pleasure for practice are claimed for 32% of athletes as one of the main important reasons to entry and continuity in the in paralympic sports.

In addition, having an Idol in Paralympic sport is evidenced in our study. 30% of the investigated athletes (n = 6) report this as an important reason to join the practice.

In fact, Clodoaldo Silva, the "Paralympic Shark" is one of those inspiring cases. The athlete is considered the greatest Paralympian in Brazil. Clodoaldo Silva is an inspiration also evidenced by other Brazilian Paralympic athletes⁹.

Some of the reasons why motivation through Paralympic idols is possible are the marketing actions carried out by the CPB. From the 2004 Athens Paralympic Games, CPB have invested in a wide dissemination and distribution of the Games' television rights²⁰. This promotion of Athens Paralympic Games, considered a milestone in the relationship of the Paralympic movement with the Brazilian media²¹, brought national awareness and visibility for Paralympic sport, brought visibility and helped in the creation of Paralympic idols.

The London Paralympic Games (2012) ratify this scenario by being the first time a Brazilian television channel (Sportv) bought the broadcast rights.

From such attitudes, Brazilian Paralympic athletes gain more media visibility, as they begin to be recognized nationally and internationally, they become a stimulus for more and more people with disabilities to enter the sport, and facilitate the emergence of new generations of Paralympians in the country.

Another motive evidenced by the speeches of Brazilian Paralympic athletes is Rehabilitation. 25% of the investigated athletes (n = 5) emphasize this, as one of the reasons why they started in the sport.

A11: "At 16 I did my fourth and last knee surgery on my left leg and that was when my doctor recommended swimming as a physiotherapy, so my entry into the Paralympic sport was not because I wanted to be a great athlete, it was not because I wanted to be a great swimmer, it was because of physical therapy treatment, a medical recommendation ... "

A13: "... by means of medical indication that I began to improve the movements of members ...".

A17: "... when I was about 12 years old ... I started with rehabilitation, right, so I would not aggravate my spine problem anymore."

The use of sport as part of the process of rehabilitation in people with disabilities, in addition to providing therapeutic results, contributes towards the high performance sport²². Until the mid-2000s, most Paralympic athletes came from rehabilitation programs (by medical recommendation)²³.

Rehabilitation is shown in other studies^{9,10,24} as a form for Brazilian Paralympic athletes to enter the sport. These athletes had contact with it during their rehabilitation process and continued to improve it.

Outside Brazilian reality, rehabilitation is also an important factor. Sousa²⁵, by carrying out an extensive investigation with twenty-nine (29) Portuguese Paralympic athletes, points out that some of them come from rehabilitation programs, mainly Paralympic Boccia athletes.

Wu and Williams²⁶ by investigating Paralympians in athletics, basketball, rugby and wheelchair tennis report rehabilitation as an important reason for their initiation in the chosen sport modality.

Roberts et al.²⁷ consider an effective importance of sport in the rehabilitation process, the authors relate using exercise in rehabilitation programs are highly effective strategies for promoting a healthier lifestyle for veterans.

Hoekstra et al.²⁸ in research with Dutch and Canadian governments, relate of both countries promote high performance disability sports via several national programs with rehabilitation and recreational approaches to promote sports and physical activity among people with disabilities.

Although rehabilitation processes provide physical, motor and social benefits, it can be considered an important tool to direct people with disabilities to the sport^{22,29}, this study seems to direct towards a new perspective of initiation in the Brazilian Paralympic sport.

Conclusions

The results demonstrate that new forms of initiation in the Brazilian Paralympic sport are currently occurring, unlike what was perceived in previous times, where the main form of entry was through rehabilitation programs^{9,10}.

Currently invitation from professors, coaches and managers of the sport is the main form of entry into Paralympic sport and it has revealed athletes with potential success in long-term trainings. Despite having a positive result in the search for athletes, they should not be considered the best way to recruit them.

In Brazil, projects that seek to provide people with disabilities access to sport are improved, promoting the growth of people with disabilities who seek to entry in sport, in addition to enhancing the possibilities of new generations of athletes.

In addition to Brazil³⁰, countries like England³¹, Australia³² and United States³³ have used new ways to recruit athletes for the sport. These are competitions and sports programs, preferably for children and young people with disabilities, with the objective of identifying athletes eligible for the Paralympic sport and preparing them to make it to national teams.

In addition, the inspiration through Paralympic idols can motivate the participation of more people with disabilities in the sport. This tool should be improved, since it seems to bring positive results to those who are starting and with the Rio 2016 Games revealing successful athletes that will inspire next generations in the country.

Rehabilitation programs should be great allies for referring people with disabilities to sports, we consider that in Brazil, programs should improve the way that routing to be possible to provide the sport initially as an ally rehabilitation and subsequently directed to the high sports performance, thus favoring the emergence of new Paralympic athletes.

In this manner, expanding the knowledge of the main reasons why people with disabilities start in the Paralympic sport will favor the processes of detection of new talents, in addition to enabling the emergence of generations of athletes in Brazil, consolidating the country as one of the main Paralympic powers.

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