How coaches can remove participation barriers for disabled athletes

Published 13/03/17 by Blake Richardson

Esther Jones takes time off from training to soak up the atmosphere during the Atlanta 1996 Paralympic Games

Without wishing to generalise, it would be fair to say that many disabled people have to overcome a number of hurdles before they even set foot in a club environment. A coach lacking in confidence and fearful of causing harm can represent another hurdle to participation. Former Paralympic gold medallist, coach and now coach educator Esther Jones provides some coaching strategies for turning potential obstacles into opportunities.

- With a few minor adjustments to the way you work, you can make your coaching more inclusive and effective.
- It is a fallacy that a good coach needs to possess specialist knowledge of how to coach a disabled person.
- The person should be the first thing you see. Don’t define your whole relationship with your athlete by their impairment.
- Put yourself in your athlete’s shoes. Appreciate that just turning up is an emotional barrier disabled people must clear.
- If you are coaching somebody then you have got a responsibility to them, whether they are disabled or non-disabled.

We have all flirted perilously with that all too narrow line between success and failure in our sporting escapades.

The margin for error in competition can be minuscule: denied victory by the width of a post, a dodgy refereeing decision, a dastardly cup draw, or your star player slipping on a bar of soap while exiting the shower and missing the rest of the season with cruciate ligament damage. It happens.

When things go wrong, we blame the whims of Lady Luck; when things go right, we say we made our own luck.

Fine lines are an intrinsic feature of sport, adding to its thrilling unpredictability.

But we tread the same precarious pathways in other aspects of our lives, and do not embrace the adrenaline rush with quite
so much relish.

Esther Jones walked this tightrope two decades ago when, as a budding young athlete with cerebral palsy (CP), she went in search of a mainstream athletics club to pursue her dream of racing for Great Britain at the Paralympic Games.

She found herself on the wrong side and the right side of this ‘fine line’ in the space of a few days. The episodes would prove to be a defining moment in her life.

**Open and closed doors**

As a schoolgirl, Esther was told, reluctantly, by her local athletics club that they could not accommodate her. She had ambitions to be a sprinter, but the only coach who had ‘disability training’ was the javelin coach.

The sprints coach suggested that Esther should work with someone ‘better qualified’ than him because, she feels, he saw the impairment before the person.

‘I wanted him to look at me with his “sprints coach head on”, and instead, all he saw was a disabled person.

‘I had faced one barrier in just getting there, as the nearest all-weather synthetic track was over 20 miles away. To be then told I’d be better off going to a throws coach was a big blow. I wanted to be a sprinter.

‘I had a lot of support from disability sport organisations, but I knew I needed the sport input if I was to make it through to the performance arena and represent my country. That was what I needed from him, but we never even got a chance to see how it could work. A missed opportunity for both of us.’

When opportunity knocked, it had instead knocked her for six.

‘As a person with a physical disability, whose disability is never more prominent than when they are running, I had put myself in a vulnerable position. There was an emotional barrier I had to get through to just to turn up, and my confidence was shaken.’

The knock-back could have wrecked her hopes of an international career there and then, before her journey had even got out of the starting blocks.

But she was brave enough to swallow her apprehension, and fear of a second rejection, and search out another club.

The rest, as they say, is history. She found a specialist sprints coach at a club literally a few minutes’ walk away, where she gained training and competition opportunities to supplement the support and guidance from Cerebral Palsy Sport.

She went on to compete for Great Britain in three Paralympic Games (Barcelona, Atlanta and Sydney), winning gold in the T38 400m in Barcelona in 69.92 seconds (in a world record time) while adding three world championship golds for good measure.

But what about those budding disabled athletes whose fragile self-esteem or lack of resilience does not allow them to clamber over the wrong side of that fine line and try again?

What happens when they fall at the first hurdle because of a lack of confidence shown by the coaching team?

I know, I know, things are different now than they were 20 years ago. It’s not so much of a club lottery these days. Such examples have thankfully been consigned to the past.

But even if, in the vast majority of cases, this is indeed the case, and a disabled footballer, basketball player, hockey player, athlete and so on can expect a warm welcome and skilled coaching support on joining, the industry cannot afford to rest on its laurels.

It is fair to say there is there still a fear factor among many mainstream coaches who work with or around disabled people.

So while the entry barrier may have been lifted, there are other obstacles lying in wait as soon as a disabled participant’s feet are through the door.

Kadeena Cox
Kadeena Cox is the reigning T38 400m Paralympic champion (seen here on her way to gold in Rio), and was on the shortlist of 16 finalists in the 2016 BBC Sports Personality of the Year

You have a responsibility

Sports Coach UK Development Lead Officer Esther wants to make sure mainstream coaches are aware of their responsibilities to disabled participants, to ensure the industry continues to make strides in the right direction.

A perceived lack of knowledge or training should not block someone’s entry route into sport or physical activity, or their opportunities to flourish once inside a club environment.

The simple fact – that warrants highlighting – is that if you are coaching somebody then you have got a responsibility to them, whether they are disabled or non-disabled.

‘Anyone walking into a club should get the best experience. If someone has come to you, irrespective of whether they are disabled or whatever other barriers might exist, you have got that responsibility as a coach to make sure they have a positive experience,’ says Esther.

‘The reason I worked for Sports Coach UK in the first place was, when I finished competing, I wanted to make sure that disabled people had that opportunity to have a coach.

‘Those opportunities were really limited when I first started out because mainstream sport wasn’t really that open.

‘I would hope that a lot of what I experienced, certainly as a youngster, has become outdated now and that we have moved on. Disability sport is so much more in the public eye, and coach education much improved.

‘I have to say that by the time I finished my career, I was part of a great, friendly and supportive club (Mansfield Harriers and AC). They were really supportive of me, and I was proud to compete for them.

‘But I would definitely say there is still a fear factor among coaches.’

So while the battle is being won, the struggle is not over yet.

‘The reality is [despite the improvements] disabled people have fewer opportunities, and that shouldn’t be the case,’ adds Esther.

She says coaches need to understand that a good coach can be a good coach to anyone; someone who sees the needs of an individual and helps them to be the best they can be.
**First impressions count**

A good starting point for coaches is to adjust their empathy dial when they come into initial contact with a new disabled member of the club.

Coaches need to think, what barriers have they gone through just to get here in the first place? It can’t have been easy just walking through the door.

‘What coaches do in that instant is absolutely make or break. There should be no hesitation in welcoming them. That feeling of reassurance is one of the biggest things you can do for people.’

Sarah Milner is Sports Coach UK’s Inclusion and Diversity Lead Officer, and she agrees with Esther that lack of confidence both by the coach and the participant remain barriers to participation.

‘This is why our workshops exist, and why my role exists,’ says Sarah. ‘Because it is absolutely down to the lack of confidence by the coach.

‘Many coaches are put off because they feel they should know all about disability and how to coach disabled people, or even worse, feel they will be liable if something goes wrong. But the training exists (see links below) to build confidence in coaches, because if you are a good coach, you can coach anyone.’

Developing a coach’s ability to deliver positive and engaging sessions to any participant is a strategy Sarah believes will help sustain, and ultimately grow, participation by disabled people in sport and physical activity.

And help knock down a few known barriers for disabled people accessing sport, which include:

- knowing where the clubs are in the first place that are ‘disability-friendly’
- after finding a club, the disabled person having confidence that the coach can support them to develop
- even more than that, the parents or carers being confident in a coach’s ability.

**Changing perceptions**

As a former Paralympian, coach and now coach educator, Esther has a profound understanding of the coach-athlete relationship.

She allays coaches’ fears by explaining that, besides a welcoming attitude, you can help put participants at ease by making them appreciate what they can do, rather than focusing on what you believe they can’t do because of their condition or impairment.

‘I’ve had CP all my life, but I couldn’t tell my first coach what I could or couldn’t do. We had to work it out together. Don’t assume that somebody’s disability will impact any more or less on their ability to take part in a session,’ she says.

It is a fallacy that a good coach needs to possess specialist knowledge of how to coach a disabled person.

Your first thought should be to make sure you are operating in a safe environment that is appropriate for every person you are working with.

And the general checks you carry out to ensure your participants are in good health and are not carrying any injuries are also standard practice for whoever you are coaching.

‘You might be thinking in that first coaching session that you are going to struggle. Don’t worry about it,’ says Esther. ‘Nobody is expecting you to have all the answers. Just have a positive attitude. Say: “I’ve never done this before but, great, welcome along, let’s work through this together.” That’s all the reassurance people are going to need. You’re not saying you are the expert but that you are looking forward to working together and learning together.

‘If you know you are working with someone with CP, for example, and they have told you how they think it affects them, you as a coach might think, “OK, what else do I need to know? I might go to the CP Sport website for some guidance.”’

‘But don’t get hung up on the details of their impairment. The person should be the first thing you see, don’t define your whole relationship with your athlete by their impairment. Take an interest in them without singling them out in the group.’

As this article illustrates, there is a fine line between feeling included and excluded if you are a disabled member of a mainstream club.
A good coach will ensure that those who may be wavering between the two settle on the right side of that line and go on to enjoy a lifetime of playing sport that is both rich and rewarding.

Please share your views by leaving a comment below

Next steps:

You can read Esther’s blog, entitled ‘Disability sport or mainstream sport? I needed both for my Paralympic career’ here.

And we have included a comprehensive list of links to the best online resources for coaches wanting more information on working with disabled athletes in our follow-up blog, ‘Follow the signposts’.