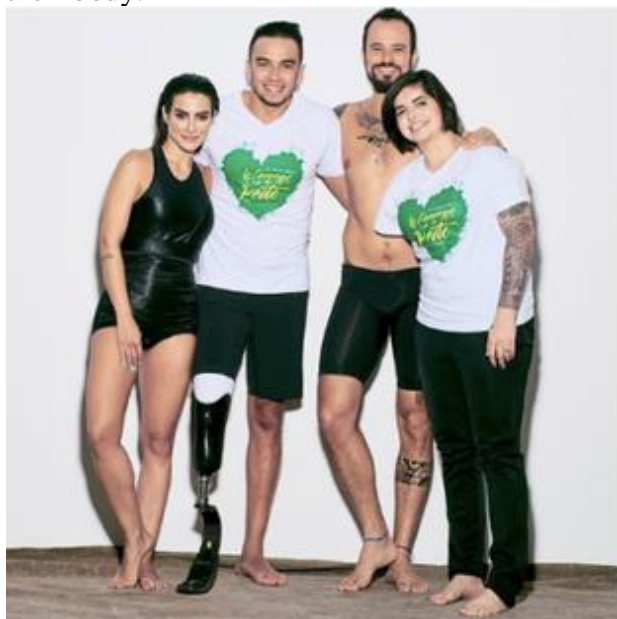


Why We Need Disabled Athletes in Mainstream Sports



It's been nearly 50 years since the origination of the Paralympic Games which showcased Paralympic athletic talent on a world stage and enabled athletes to achieve sporting excellence while inspiring people across the world. Yet even after decades of so-called inclusion in mainstream sports, these athletes continue to suffer from constant misrepresentation by way of their able-bodied counterparts.

Recently the editors of Vogue Brazil published an editorial titled "We are all Paralympians" which featured two Brazilian celebrities that each had a physical handicap photo-shopped onto their body.



Disability advocates were outraged – why photo-shop disabilities onto able bodied people when there is an abundance of Paralympic athletes available to be photographed? Furthermore, the title of the article itself takes away from understanding the reality of people with disabilities. We are not all Paralympians, and we never will be.

This example demonstrates a societal problem at large – disabled athletes, and furthermore disabled people, are in a constant battle to represent themselves to society in the way they desire. They want to be recognized as equals by means of representation, inclusion, and opportunity.

This community needs equal representation in mainstream media and participating in mainstream sports creates an outlet where athletes can demonstrate their capabilities on a national stage.

But even with this outlet, a question still needs to be addressed – after all the remarkable achievements paraplegic athletes have made to propel themselves into areas of inclusion and visibility, why does society continue to view these individuals through lenses of sympathy?

Why Society Disables Athletes

The sympathy seems to stem from a misunderstanding about what causes the difference in quality of life for disabled people versus their able-bodied counterparts. Physical impairments are not themselves to blame, but rather a “society that does not accommodate difference”¹.

Take the example of a disabled person who uses a wheelchair for transportation. Their entrance into a stadium is not dictated by their method of transportation and how they literally enter the building, whether that be on two feet or two wheels; but rather an absence of a wheelchair ramp making the venue accessible to them.

Societal structures often fail to make accommodations for those who do not fit “the norm”, in whichever capacity that may be. Specifically, “people with a disability are faced with workplaces which do not support those who work differently, public spaces which reject those who look different, and social norms which shame those who communicate differently”². Everywhere they turn they are hit with another obstacle to overcome, another basic right to fight for.

Why Disability Issues are Civil Rights Issues

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 was a US labor law that prohibited unjustified discrimination based on disability. It guaranteed equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, government services, and telecommunications.

¹ Erin O’Brien, “Disabled by society: Paralympians face challenges beyond the field,” www.theconversation.com, (August 29th, 2012).

² Ibid.

Now although this law has been enacted for nearly thirty years, enforcement has been spotty. A lack of regulations, limited funding of programs, and societal prejudices continue to restrict people with disabilities from being fully included in our society.³

A law is only as good as the enforcement and respect demonstrated towards it. And in many areas of American society, this respect is hard to find.

In fact, “people in the United States are profoundly uncomfortable with people who have disabilities, especially significant or visible disabilities. This has led, consciously or unconsciously, to health care, housing, and employment that segregates people with disabilities from the rest of society”⁴.

This unease has also led to the perpetuation of popular stereotypes about the disability community. Supposedly the community is “full of lazy malingerers with made-up or trivial conditions”⁵. This belief is exactly why we need a platform for disabled people to dispel these overused myths.

While the workplace and public areas are the first and foremost important areas of inclusion, those disabled people with exceptional athletic talent can represent the community in a way which utterly contradicts the image as well as limitations society believes to be true.

Why is Disability Invisible in the Media

Television has always been full of people who fit the imagined societal norm – Caucasian, middle to upper class, thin, heterosexual men and women. Now I say “imagined” because this representation is not at all accurate for the type of people American society is comprised of.

We come from different backgrounds, sexualities, races, genders, and religions. We face different obstacles throughout the courses of our lives, and have various ambitions for the future. In what way does the homogenization of culture benefit us as a society? Simply put, it doesn’t.

This respect for difference needs to be demonstrated on national scale and what better platform than through the media? Now bringing the focus back to those facing physical challenges, it is their right to have as much space in the media as the rest of us.

However, depiction of physically disabled people by their able-bodied counterparts (like in the images from Vogue Brazil) is not the answer. Their representation needs to be from the people

³ <http://www.thearc.org/what-we-do/public-policy/policy-issues/civil-rights>

⁴ <https://www.aclu.org/issues/disability-rights#current>

⁵ <http://www.dailydot.com/layer8/7-disability-issues/>

and the athletes themselves. Although “we can all be supporters of the Paralympic movement, it is always good to remember that the role, more than ever, is not ours.”⁶

Why We Need to Redefine the Image of Disabled Athletes

The traditional view of an athlete consists of men and women who are incredibly gifted, driven, and hardworking individuals whose talent allows them to excel on the playing field. Given these characteristics, physically challenged athletes should receive an equal amount of recognition as those athletes who are not.

The beautiful thing about sports is the power they possess to catalyze social change and challenge misconceptions. Regardless of your background, you can bond with other people over a shared interest and work towards a common goal. Suddenly your differences from one another do not seem to be so diverse after all.

As explained by USA Paralympian Anjali Forber-Pratt, “If an individual with a disability who has an interest in sport can partner with a sport club or coach for the mainstream sport, then he or she gains the respect and support from that sporting community. Through inclusion, people living with a disability then have allies and a network of support to acquire necessary equipment or to join training sessions and compete.”⁷

Not only does this inclusion immensely benefit those athletes participating, but it also does wonders for the younger generations to see that their dreams are in fact achievable. As Ade Adepitan, a wheelchair basketball Paralympic medalist explains, “if you are a disabled kid and you see someone like you competing, who also happens to be a great athlete, imagine the confidence boost that will give and the impact on your life”.⁸

Why We Need the Paralympic Movement

Which is exactly why we need the Paralympic Movement. Through the Paralympics, athletes just as incredible as their able-bodied counterparts can compete on a world stage, gaining visibility and representation. Not only is this redefining the image of a traditional athlete, but it is bringing disability rights to the mainstream. The Paralympics are a vehicle to the advancement of representation, and the inclusion of physically challenged athletes in mainstream sports is paramount.

⁶ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/rio-2106-paralympics-vogue-brazil-photo-campaign-editing-models-amputees-a7210956.html>

⁷ <https://www.sportanddev.org/en/article/news/challenges-and-responsibilities-para-athletes>

Bibliography

Butler, Patrick, and Owen Gibson. "Challenge for Paralympics to change lives and perceptions." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 20 May 2012. Web. 11 Feb. 2017.

The Independent. Independent Digital News and Media, n.d. Web. 11 Feb. 2017.

Dailydot. "7 huge disability issues you may not know about." *The Daily Dot*. N.p., 13 Mar. 2015. Web. 11 Feb. 2017.

"Disability Rights." *American Civil Liberties Union*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Feb. 2017.

"Disabled by society: Paralympians face challenges beyond the field." *The Conversation*. N.p., 09 Feb. 2017. Web. 11 Feb. 2017.

"Public Policy and Legal Advocacy." *The Arc / Civil Rights Issues*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Feb. 2017.

"Sportanddev.org." *The challenges and responsibilities of para-athletes*. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Feb. 2017.