



Coaching Disabled People: What Coaches Need to Know

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You should not underestimate the impact your coaching can have on disabled people. You can inspire and motivate them to continue to play their sport.

Current sports participation statistics tell us that there is still much work to be done to support disabled people in sport.

Did you know that:

- sports participation among disabled people is significantly lower across all age groups than the overall population
- the proportion of disabled people receiving tuition or coaching is lower than the overall population?¹

sports coach UK spoke to a number of disabled people involved in sport at all levels. The following responses and guidance have been taken from those conversations.

Positive lessons to learn:

- Involve disabled people in all of your sessions.
- Recognise a disabled athlete as an individual, not an impairment.
- Have a shared vision with your participants in terms of coaching goals and expectations. Communicate and work together to achieve them.
- Talk to your disabled participants about their impairment to plan effective coaching sessions and adapt practices.
- Know the sport you coach. Have a passion to develop yourself as a coach.

'A good coach is someone who is understanding. I think the most important thing is having a coach that you can get on with and one who communicates well with you. I think you both need to be on the same wavelength. If your coach wants different things to what you want, or if they have different goals to the athlete, I don't think it works. I think the most important thing is that you are both clear on what you are trying to do.'

(STEVE)

'We need people who are really, really good at the sport, who are prepared to work with disabled athletes – not the other way round. We need people who are good at coaching the sport, who can adapt it. That is how we are going to move forward. What you find with some people is that it's limited because they will pick up the coach who will work with a disabled person, and they are not necessarily the best coach.'

(JOY)



¹ EFDS (2010) 'Overall Participation of Disabled People in Sport', Active People Survey 5. Loughborough: EFDS.

'You can't beat practical experience. Coaches need more of it. In terms of the older generation, they don't understand disability. In their time, disability was shut out of the way, so they've had to learn what disability is and change their view on it. A few weeks after coaching us they change their view.'

(ROSS)



Stop being so negative!

- Don't assume you can't coach disabled people. As well as your previous coaching experiences, a willingness and open mind are important qualities that will help you to coach disabled athletes.
- Not all disabled people want to only participate with other disabled people. Welcome more disabled people into your coaching sessions.
- Don't learn everything you can about every impairment. Talk to the individual and adapt your session – they have the best knowledge of what their body can do.
- If an activity isn't working for everyone, adapt it. Use the great coaching knowledge you have.
- Don't hide in your shell. Talk to, and learn from, other coaches and share your experiences and ideas about coaching disabled athletes.

'I've had experiences in the past where a coach has basically said he can't do anything for me, that he thinks I can't be helped to improve. So I was told not to bother to train. It's not exactly inviting you to a session if you've been told nothing can be done for you.'

(JOHN)



Here's what our interviewees want to see:

From the start

- A warm welcome goes a long way. Confidently approach your participant and talk to them about what experience they have had, and what they want to get out of your sessions. (Scope: [#endtheawkward](#))
- How do disabled people get to hear about your coaching sessions? You could advertise your sessions via the Internet and local social networks supporting disabled people (try your local [county sports partnership](#))
- If you have not coached disabled people before, be open-minded and see it as an opportunity to extend your experiences on your road to becoming a better coach.
- When playing sport or being active, some disabled people may prefer to be with other disabled people. Others may prefer to be coached together with disabled and non-disabled people. Get to know what other opportunities are available locally, so you can signpost people if necessary.
- Check your coaching venue is accessible (contact [EFDS](#) for more details). It's not just about ramps and lifts!

'A good coach has to be able to understand me. You know, know my body, know how it moves. There's no point thinking I'm like someone without a disability. So for me, my coach needs to be in tune with my body. To do this they've got to keep thinking all the time; they need to be reflective.'

(MARK)

During your session:

- Don't get hung up on labels (for example, someone has CP; someone else has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD]). See through the label and talk to the person.
- Remember, we are all individuals. One disabled person will not be the same as another; so coach the individual not the impairment.
- Remember to develop your sport-specific technical knowledge as well as your understanding of disability. This will help you to work more effectively with disabled people.
- Communicate continually with everyone in your session and get their views on how it went at the end.

'Coaches have a lack of understanding. There isn't enough on offer to help them understand about cerebral palsy (CP) or dwarfism etc. It isn't until they coach someone or talk to someone that they think, "hang on a minute, it's not as scary as it first seemed" and then they carry on.'

(ROSS)

Developing as an inclusive coach

- Network with other coaches and share your experiences or ideas for coaching disabled participants. Join the Coaching Disabled People group through [LinkedIn](#), or check with your [CSP](#) when the next coaching forum or conference is being held.
- Develop a better understanding of how your sport (eg rules and equipment) can be adapted for people with different impairments. Try a sports coach UK workshop to learn more about [adapting sport appropriately for disabled people](#), [coaching disabled people](#), or [communicating effectively with deaf people in sport](#). The workshops also provide a great opportunity to talk to other coaches.
- Know where you can go locally (eg contact your [CSP](#) or [governing body of sport](#) disability/equity development officer; or visit a local disability sports club) for further support.
- National organisations can also help. Check out the sports coach UK website for the [disability contacts information](#).

