



AUSTRALIAN *para-sport*

The Progress and the Opportunities

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Australians love their sport. Whether it be tennis, rugby or basketball, para-sport has enabled all Australians to be included in a wide range of sporting activities both within the Paralympics and their communities, regardless of their ability levels.

The progress and growth within para-sport has been documented both in the media and within research, with Paralympic athletes becoming household names (think Dylan Alcott and Louise Sauvage) and statistics reporting that sport participation by people with a disability increased from 18% in 2012 to 27% in 2015¹.

At ESSA, we have also experienced progress within the para-sport space through some of our exercise and sports science professionals; members of the community dedicated to improving the landscape of para-sport for our athletes and those living with a disability who just want to get involved. This article delves a bit deeper into the world of parasport and how our members have been involved in supporting this important movement.

PROGRESS IS PROMISING

Accredited Exercise Physiologist, Accredited Sports Scientist and ESSA National Board Director, Dr. Emma Beckman has worked within the para-athlete industry for several years and has seen numerous positive changes as society shifts.

“So much has happened in the last 5-10 years! We saw growing numbers of Paralympians at every Olympic Games as the support grew but the number will remain similar now (about 4,000 athletes), and what you’ll notice now will be the quality of the performances that will continue to explode as professionalism increases and athletes continue to show us amazing things,” explained Dr. Beckman.

“From a research perspective, prior to 1992 there were nine articles that referenced para-sport. From 1992 to 2010, there were about 150 published, but in the last 10 years alone, we saw over 700 articles about para-sport published! That means we are growing our knowledge on sports medicine, training methods and adaptations, technique, technology, classification, psychology – everything!”

“I think we will consistently improve our understanding of how impairments impact on sports performance and how to best use technology and training methods to optimise performance outcomes. The benefits of sport for both physical and psychosocial outcomes will become so clearly articulated, and improvements to accessing programs and coaches will mean that more and more people with a disability will be able to participate in whatever physical activity and sport they like – as they should.”

PARALYMPICS AUSTRALIA AND GROWTH OF THE SECTOR

In 2019, the birth of Paralympics Australia developed out of a strategic move to better fit the growing stature of para-sport throughout Australia. The re-brand of the Australian Paralympic Committee was a clear identifier of growing success on and off the sports grounds.

Lynne Anderson, Chief Executive Officer for Paralympics Australia was quoted in the 2018/19 Paralympics Australia Annual Report² and explained in more detail.

“(2019) This was indeed a powerful year for Paralympics Australia, one in which our growing status and respect within Australia’s elite sports sector was rewarded with key and pivotal wins. Never before have para-athletes had a greater impact in Australia, with community desire for equity and inclusion of para-sport becoming more evident every day. As the Australian Paralympic movement continues to influence and empower a greater number of Australians, so too does its peak body, and it was evident to us that the Australian Paralympic Committee was a name that no longer captured such a broad role within Australian sport.”

2019 provided to be additionally pivotal due to two substantial revenue streams. First was a historic \$12 million-dollar Federal Government grant which aimed to boost the preparations of Australia’s most elite para-athletes ahead of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. This was to be on top of the \$385.4 million package for sport and physical activity announced in the 2019 Federal Budget which has been acknowledged as one of the biggest funding injections for sport in years.

Second was an agreed offer from Seven West Media to become the broadcast partner for the 2020 Paralympic Games. The deal was a massive coup which will position Seven alongside the United Kingdom’s Channel 4 as world leaders in Paralympic sport coverage.

Lynne Anderson continued by agreeing that this commitment came at a critical time for Australian sport.

“Para-sport continues to demonstrate a high return on investment, not just in relation to medals won by our athletes, but in the increased physical and mental well-being for Australians with a disability compared to those who don’t have access to sporting opportunities,” Anderson said.

“Australian sport needs funding support like this to grow high performance sport and participation opportunities at the grassroots level, and to help deliver on the National Sports Plan – Sport 2030.”

“The resounding feedback we are receiving from our stakeholders is that talent identification, supporting athlete pathways, and the high cost of para-sport equipment are the most important issues facing our movement, and we are pleased that this new funding is targeted at addressing these issues across sport.”

“The Paralympic movement is experiencing a wave of momentum, but with our growth, comes additional responsibility and challenges.”

OUR ATHLETES AND THEIR EXPERIENCES

Recently retired Matthew Cowdrey OAM said it’s incredible to think how far the Paralympic Games and the para-sport movement in general have come since his first Games³. The three-time Paralympian is the most successful Australian Paralympian in history, having won a total of 23 Paralympic medals including 13 gold. Matthew named the Athens 2004 games as a turning point.

“Instead of swimming in the outdoor pool in Athens we were in the indoor water polo pool that was obviously significant smaller in seating capacity. There’s a range of other things that you notice in retrospect but at the time, when you were there, was the most exciting thing I’ve ever done. I just loved every second of it.”

“I think we had maybe a half an hour highlights package on the TV and that was it. In many ways, I was lucky I grew and matured in the same way that the movement grew and matured across all the years that I was involved.”

Following on from the Athens Paralympics, Paralympic gold medallist, Kurt Fearnley OAM addressed his experiences during his 2013 Australia Day speech⁴.

“Things slowly built over the next two games in Athens and Beijing, however, the advances were more on the sporting field than off it. The approach and performance of the athletes were becoming more professional, teams were better prepared, athletes were faster and stronger.

London made us athletes feel like superstars, not just gladiators in the eyes of our peers but genuine superstars. Everywhere you looked across the city of London, every disability was proudly displayed across buildings and banners. You were stopped in the streets, not just because you were in a uniform but also because people knew your name and what you did. Major corporations featured Paralympic athletes in their advertising campaigns. You couldn't switch on the television or pick up a paper without being smacked in the face with the Paralympics.

We may have shared venues with our Olympic brothers and sisters but by the time the Paralympics came around they were long gone, and this was obviously our stage. Seeing the corporate world support and be the standard-bearer for Paralympic sport was something that I'd always hoped would become a reality and it really was that way in London.”

Dylan Alcott is an undeniable shining star in the realms of para-athletes has also seen a positive change over the years explaining that 15 to 20 years ago athletes with a disability had to pay to compete⁵.

“There was no funding, no-one cared. The changing of the tide is now, and sponsors are realising that. If they don't, they'll regret not getting involved.”

“I'm the lucky one who has it at the moment,” reflected Alcott. “The next generation of young athletes, other sports, they deserve the same thing. They train just as hard as the Roger Federers, Usain Bolts, Michael Phelps, whoever it is. It means the world to me to be able to cut through, break that glass ceiling. Hopefully it flows on for years to come and this becomes the norm.”

“When I made the switch to play tennis from basketball, I remember I said to Tennis Australia, ‘I really want you to treat me like a professional tennis player first and foremost, who just happens to have a disability’,” said Alcott. “I wanted to get treated like Nick Kyrgios did, or Thanasi Kokkinakis, or Sam Stosur or Lleyton Hewitt.”

“I remember as a 14-year-old lying in bed and all I wanted to do was make it in the mainstream in some way,” he tearfully recalled after lifting his latest Australian Open trophy⁶. “I wanted to show we could be normal people, get a job, have a partner – I just wanted to see people with a disability succeeding in the mainstream.”

ESSA CONNECTIONS

ESSA members are working within various avenues to support the para-sport space and members of the community living with a disability to engage in sporting activities to benefit their physical, mental and social health.

Dr. Emma Beckman is working with the next generation

“I'm lucky enough to work with athletes who have high support needs and we have three incredible athletes in the UQ ParaSTART program who are smashing goals and doing amazing things. I've also been working with a few RaceRunning athletes over the last six months. RaceRunning is a new athletics event for people who have cerebral palsy and are moderately to severely impaired. Watching these athletes find the freedom of running through RaceRunning is an incredible thing to watch.”



Max is 12 years old and dreams of one day competing at the highest level, the Paralympics. He trains incredibly hard with his Accredited Exercise Physiologist and has a Sports Scientist in his team (and an amazing judo instructor!).

Matthew Knapman is working with para-athletes

Matthew previously trained Australia's oldest Invictus Games competitor, Graham Bell for the 2018 Invictus Games

(competing in archery), and was interviewed by ESSA in late 2018 where he shared his support for the Games and the importance they hold in paraspport community.

“Graham Bell contacted me in September 2017. Graham had a number of injuries which included a moderate to severe impingement in C6/C7 due to his operational service in the Army. He also suffered multiple orthopaedic injuries 20 years ago from a serious motor vehicle accident with residual arthritis and other complex issues.”

“His initial goals were to participate in the Invictus Games in Indoor Rowing, Seated Volleyball, Cycling or Archery. We trained once a week focusing on improving overall fitness (on the rowing machine and bike), and increasing strength and endurance completing full body movements. I wrote a program for Graham to complete independently as well which he was able to adhere to. At the end of the Games, Graham came 11th in the Men’s Open Recurve (Archery).”

“The Invictus Games have been so amazing to watch! It gives them purpose again after struggling to fit back into regular life post-service. Additionally, it gives them focus on an end goal such as reaching a certain distance in one minute on the rowing machine or being able to consistently hit the target in archery. Being so easy to measure, it gives them back some control which they may have lost. The opportunity to represent your country getting the recognition they deserve and the chance to be athletes despite their injuries or illnesses would be life-changing.”



Heidi Joosten and the view from an athlete

Heidi is both an Accredited Exercise Physiologist and a para-athlete and was interviewed last year by ESSA about her involvement in the Invictus Games.

“In 2017, I competed in Toronto at the Invictus Games in athletics in the 100m, 200m, and 400m event, as well as the mixed relay, where I received silver medals in all four

events. Then, competing at the Invictus Games last year was such a healing and uplifting experience alongside my fellow Australian teammates and competitors from other nations. The social connection was very important to me and I have made lifelong friends. The Invictus family has been important for my recovery by helping to assist with my transition and allow me to feel socially connected with other like-minded veterans.”

“In 2018, I was selected for the Invictus team and competed in Sydney in October. My favourite highlight from the 2018 Invictus Games was crossing the finish line in the 200m race and winning a gold medal on home soil with the crowd roaring and having my family and friends there to share the special win with me – it was a very emotional moment for me. The overall outcome of my performances surprised me immensely. The icing on the cake was backing it up with three other gold medals in the 100m, 400m and the long jump.”

Mark Liberatore is working behind the scenes

The expansion and roll out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) since 2016 have enhanced the opportunities available both for people living with disabilities and for the service providers who function within the scheme. Mark is an Accredited Exercise Physiologist (AEP) and the Manager for Health, Wellbeing & Sports for the Cerebral Palsy Alliance in Northern Sydney – he provided commentary on how the NDIS has helped to progress the disability and sport/exercise physiology sector.

“There has been a huge surge in demand for exercise delivery services over the past five years. When the NDIS was first trialled in regional parts of NSW and the ACT and then implemented in metropolitan NSW in 2016, the majority of NDIS plans funded to include support around exercise focused on capacity building outcomes and specifically how AEPs could support participants to achieve functional goals related to activities of daily living.

In the past couple of years, there has also been increased acknowledgment from the agency and more specifically NDIA planners around participant goals related to sports and recreation. This change has led to increase in demand for services run by exercise professionals and goals related to participation in community sport and elite sport outcomes. The focus has progressed from simply allowing the clients to improve their standard of living to allowing them to thrive socially as they now have another outlet.

There has been significant growth in disability sport and recreation options in both the community and at an elite level, which has had a positive impact on referrals. There are a range of providers in the sector as well as from mainstream services who are providing community sports and recreation opportunities to people living with



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disabilities. This increase in supply was based on a surge in demand for these supports in their NDIS plans under social and community participation funding categories.”

Mark also highlighted how the NDIS provides a significant opportunity for the exercise and sports science industry to support this specific community.

“This rise in participation has led to an increased number of participants looking to engage in sport at a community and elite level. The pathway to elite sport and community-based competition provides opportunities for exercise and sports scientists by way of the need to develop strength and conditioning aspects related to performance. The unique challenges of disability sport provide an outstanding opportunity for growth in both the client and practitioner as they both need to think outside the box to get the most out of the experience.

The progress of services within the sector to include these funding supports has aligned with the vast amounts of research highlighting the essential role participation in sport and recreation plays in empowering people with a disability. The NDIS provides exercise professionals with many rewarding opportunities to collaborate across disciplines while ensuring that clients not only overcome their challenges but forge a strong sense of self in the process.”

FINAL THOUGHTS

Para-sport is not a new notion. Sport for athletes with an impairment has existed for more than 100 years, and the first sport clubs for the deaf were already in existence in 1888 in Berlin⁷. What is important, is the progress that has been made in the last 10 years which has provided brand new opportunities for those living with a disability to enjoy sport, and for our para-athletes to have their well-deserved time in the spotlight.

Behind these successes is also the exercise and sports science professionals who are working together towards continued growth. Dr. Patrick Campbell, ESSA’s Member Development Officer for Sports Science sums it up below.

“The growth of parasports is undeniable and it’s a space that will continue to evolve. With this, comes many new opportunities for accredited exercise professionals to move into interesting and challenging new areas. Working with athletes in the para-sport space brings new or alternative considerations from a scientific and coaching perspective and will provide fresh opportunities to develop new skills. The setting is often a diverse and complex environment, with many unique issues that will be both extremely rewarding and challenging; but will ultimately lead you to become a better practitioner.

The progression and popularity of para-athletes in the public-eye is there for all to see, with Dylan Alcott now considered to be among the top echelons of Australian sporting identities. Funding, support and political focus on the industry will continue to progress meaning there will be some fantastic opportunities for ESSA professionals to build on these successful foundations and move into new and exciting areas.”

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