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Original article

Building Para-Sport Systems Without Blueprints: Governance, Capacity, and Cross-Sector Learning in Small Nations

Jayne Nethercott*[1]

[1] International Biathlon Union, Parabiathlon Working Group, Salzburg, Austria

Abstract. This study examines how Para-Biathlon systems are developed and sustained in small-nation contexts characterised by limited resources, evolving governance arrangements, and constrained capacity. Adopting a practice-informed sport management approach, the study integrates a structured synthesis of peer-reviewed parasport governance literature with analysis of documented applied system practice drawn from international Para-Biathlon contexts.

The findings indicate that governance clarity, mastery of operational fundamentals, cross-sector learning, and partnership-based capacity building are central to sustainable system development in small nations. Rather than following linear or scale-dependent performance models, Para-Biathlon pathways were found to rely on adaptive, non-linear designs shaped by contextual constraints and relational capacity.

The study argues that parasport systems in small nations can achieve coherence and sustainability through governance- and process-oriented strategies rather than through replication of large-nation high-performance models. These findings extend parasport governance scholarship by articulating transferable principles for system design in resource-constrained and structurally volatile sport environments.

Keywords: Para-Biathlon; Paralympic sport, winter sport, parasport governance; small nations; sport system design; cross-sector partnerships; organizational capacity; performance pathways

*Corresponding author: jayne.kavanagh@outlook.com
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Introduction

The development of parasport systems in small or resource-constrained nations presents a persistent challenge for sport management and governance research. Much of the existing parasport literature has focused on participation, inclusion, and legacy outcomes, often assuming the presence of stable infrastructure, centralized expertise, and sustained funding (Brown & Pappous, 2018). These assumptions are rarely met in small-nation contexts, where parasport systems are frequently fragmented, under-resourced, and subject to repeated governance and structural disruption.

Parasport participation trajectories are widely recognised as non-linear, particularly where athletes enter sport later in life or transition from rehabilitation, military, or non-sport backgrounds (Allan et al., 2017). In small nations, these trajectories are further shaped by limited access to specialist coaching, competition opportunities, and classification expertise, intensifying the coordination and governance demands placed on sport systems (Dehghansai et al., 2018). As a result, parasport development in such contexts is less a matter of scaling established models and more a question of system design under constraint.

From a sport management perspective, organisational capacity has been identified as a critical determinant of system sustainability, particularly within voluntary and hybrid sport systems (Cunningham & Warner, 2018). Capacity extends beyond financial resources to include governance clarity, human capital, institutional memory, and the ability to coordinate across organizational boundaries (Teixeira Matias &

Parent, 2018). In small nations, where economies of scale are absent, these relational and governance-based dimensions of capacity become especially salient.

Empirical research on community-based parasport programmes suggests that system fragility often emerges during periods of transition; between organizations, funding regimes, or governance structures, rather than at the point of athlete recruitment (Man et al., 2025). Unclear roles, duplicated responsibilities, and weak coordination frequently undermine otherwise well-intentioned initiatives (Man et al., 2020). Leadership-oriented analyses further indicate that governance decisions related to inclusion, equity, and accountability shape not only participation opportunities, but also long-term system legitimacy and stakeholder trust (Alexander-Urquhart & Culver, 2025). Cross-sector collaboration has been identified as a critical mechanism for addressing these challenges. Research on military veterans' engagement in parasport highlights the importance of partnerships between sport organizations, rehabilitation services, and military institutions in sustaining participation beyond initial entry points (Shirazipour & Latimer-Cheung, 2020). Similarly, studies of adaptive sport initiatives embedded within rehabilitation and community systems emphasize that sustained impact depends on integration within broader institutional environments rather than on stand-alone programs (Arthur-Banning et al., 2020).

Despite these insights, limited research has examined how parasport systems are deliberately designed, redesigned, and governed over time in small-nation contexts, particularly within performance-oriented winter sports. Existing scholarship tends to address discrete system components, such as coaching, participation, or volunteer engagement, rather than the integrated governance processes through which parasport systems evolve (Orr et al., 2020).

Para-Biathlon provides a particularly instructive case. The sport combines high technical and safety demands with evolving international governance arrangements, often within national contexts lacking established winter sport infrastructure. Athletes in such systems frequently sustain long competitive careers across multiple cycles, increasing the importance of pathway continuity and organizational coherence (Weiss et al., 2020). Research on parasport identity formation further suggests that sustained engagement is closely tied to athletes' sense of coherence and belonging within the system, rather than to short-term performance outcomes alone (Laidet et al., 2023).

Taken together, the literature suggests that parasport system development in small nations is best understood as an adaptive, governance-driven process shaped by organizational learning, cross-sector collaboration, and values-based leadership. Accordingly, this study adopts a practice-informed sport management perspective to examine Para-Biathlon system development in small-nation contexts, drawing on documented applied practice to identify patterns of governance, capacity building, and system adaptation over time.

Research Proposition

In small-nation contexts, sustainable Para-Biathlon system development is more strongly associated with governance clarity, cross-sector learning, and partnership-based capacity building than with centralized funding intensity or replication of large-nation high-performance models..

Methods

Study Design

This study adopts a practice-informed sport management design to examine system-level processes shaping parasport development under conditions of structural constraint. The approach integrates peer-reviewed literature on parasport governance, organizational capacity, and athlete pathways with documented applied system practice drawn from international Para-Biathlon contexts.

Rather than testing causal relationships, the study seeks to identify recurring governance and management patterns that influence system sustainability. This design aligns with established management research examining organizational development in complex, resource-limited sport environments.

Data sources

Three complementary sources informed the analysis. First, a structured synthesis of peer-reviewed parasport and sport management literature was undertaken, informed by an ELICIT-assisted search process. The literature addressed parasport governance, small-nation sport systems, athlete development pathways, community-embedded delivery models, and cross-sector partnerships.

Second, documented applied system materials were analysed, including publicly delivered expert presentations and slide decks focused on Para-Biathlon development in small-nation contexts. These materials were produced by individuals occupying formal leadership roles within national parasport and biathlon systems and reflect applied experience of governance transition, system construction, and performance pathway design. These artefacts were treated as

documented practice rather than as qualitative interview data.

Third, the author's long-term professional engagement with parasport system development informed interpretive sensitivity and contextual understanding. This professional experience supported analytical judgement but was not treated as an independent data source.

Analytical Approach

Analysis followed a deductive–interpretive process. Governance and management constructs identified in the literature; including organisational capacity, governance clarity, partnership configuration, system adaptability, and pathway sustainability, were used as sensitising concepts. The applied materials were examined for recurring patterns aligned with these constructs. Only observations that could be meaningfully interpreted through, or cautiously extend, existing scholarship were retained and claims unsupported by the literature were explicitly bounded.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of documented Para-Biathlon system practice revealed that development in small-nation contexts was rarely linear or cumulative. Instead, systems evolved through cycles of formation, disruption, and reconfiguration, often triggered by changes in funding arrangements, governance responsibility, or international structures. This pattern aligns with parasport research indicating that system stability is contingent on governance processes rather than on initial program design (Cunningham & Warner, 2018).

A recurring theme concerned the centrality of governance clarity. Periods of system stagnation were consistently associated with ambiguity regarding leadership authority, responsibility for athlete pathways, and coordination between organizations. When governance roles were clarified, even in the absence of substantial new resources, systems regained operational momentum. This finding supports research demonstrating that clear governance structures are critical enablers of functionality in voluntary and hybrid sport systems (Teixeira Matias & Parent, 2018).

Governance clarity alone, however, was insufficient to sustain development. Applied practice emphasised the importance of operational discipline in everyday processes, including reliable scheduling, communication routines, and coordinated support services. These foundational practices reduced organizational strain and enabled strategic focus. Consistent with prior research, parasport initiatives were more likely to falter due to implementation breakdowns than to conceptual flaws (Man et al., 2025).

Contextual sensitivity emerged as a defining feature of system design. Decisions regarding training centralisation, competition exposure, and athlete support were shaped by local infrastructure, geography, and institutional relationships rather than by imported models. These findings align with case-based research demonstrating that parasport development is constrained by local economic and institutional conditions, requiring context-specific solutions (Gallardo de León et al., 2024).

Cross-sector learning played a critical role in mitigating capacity limitations. Rather than developing expertise exclusively within sport structures, system leaders drew on knowledge from other sports, military rehabilitation programs, and athlete or sporting charities. This approach enabled rapid problem-solving, reduced duplication, and supported innovation, reflecting broader findings on the value of inter-organizational learning in constrained environments (Arthur-Banning et al., 2020).

Partnerships emerged as a central mechanism of sustainability. Long-term collaborations with military organizations, charities, and international partners provided continuity during periods of institutional change and enabled flexible athlete entry pathways. Research on parasport participation among veterans similarly highlights the role of such partnerships in sustaining engagement beyond rehabilitation contexts (Shirazipour & Latimer-Cheung, 2020).

Athlete development pathways differed markedly from conventional long-term athlete development models. Athletes entered the system at diverse life stages and progressed at variable rates, often balancing sport with employment or rehabilitation commitments. These patterns align with parasport research emphasising adaptable pathways and managed transitions (Allan et al., 2017).

Retention was strongly associated with system coherence. Athletes were more likely to remain engaged when expectations were clear, support networks stable, and pathways consistent over time. This finding is consistent with longitudinal research demonstrating that retention in parasport is more closely linked to organizational context than to performance success alone (Weiss et al., 2020).

Culture also played a significant role. Performance was framed not solely in terms of results, but as an emergent property of a values-driven environment emphasising trust, curiosity, and psychological safety. Research on parasport identity formation supports the importance of such environments

in sustaining long-term engagement (Laidet et al., 2023).

From a governance perspective, these findings challenge assumptions that small nations must compensate for limited resources through centralized or rigid structures. Instead, flexibility, relational proximity, and cross-sector engagement functioned as strategic advantages. This perspective aligns with research advocating adaptive governance models responsive to local conditions (Brown & Pappous, 2022). Importantly, system failure was more often associated with coordination breakdowns than with absolute resource scarcity, reinforcing research identifying systemic rather than individual barriers to parasport development (Blauwet et al., 2017).

Finally, learning across cycles emerged as a defining characteristic of sustainable systems. Para-Biathlon systems that treated disruption as an opportunity for reflection and redesign were better positioned to rebuild coherently over time. This learning-oriented approach aligns with sport management scholarship emphasising organizational reflexivity as a driver of long-term resilience (Pate & Bragale, 2019).

Synthesis and Implications for Parasport System Design

The analysis presented in this study suggests that the development of Para-Biathlon systems in small-nation contexts cannot be adequately explained through conventional models of sport system growth. Rather than progressing along a linear pathway from grassroots to elite performance, the systems examined evolved through cycles of experimentation, disruption, and reconfiguration. In this sense, instability was not merely a constraint but an inherent condition shaping governance, partnerships, and performance culture.

A central implication is that the absence of a predefined blueprint does not preclude system coherence. On the contrary, governance clarity, operational discipline, and alignment of roles enabled systems to function effectively despite limited resources and structural fragility. Capacity, in this context, was relational and procedural rather than scale-dependent.

The findings further demonstrate that learning across organizational and sectoral boundaries is a decisive factor in sustainability. Cross-sector partnerships were not supplementary features but core mechanisms through which knowledge, legitimacy, and continuity were maintained. This suggests that parasport system design in small nations benefits from openness and adaptive learning rather than specialization alone.

From an athlete development perspective, the study highlights the importance of pathways that accommodate non-linearity. Late entry, talent transfer, and extended competitive careers were treated as normative rather than exceptional. Systems that planned for these realities were better positioned to support retention, identity continuity, and long-term engagement.

Taken together, these insights point toward a conception of parasport system design grounded in adaptability, relational capacity, and values-driven leadership. For policymakers and system leaders operating in constrained environments, the findings suggest a shift in focus; from replicating large-nation models toward designing systems that reflect local realities, leverage cross-sector relationships, and prioritise learning over optimisation.

Conclusions

This study examined Para-Biathlon system development in small-nation contexts through a practice-informed sport management lens. The findings support the proposition that sustainable parasport systems in constrained environments are shaped less by funding scale or centralized control and more by governance clarity, cross-sector learning, and partnership-based capacity building.

Rather than attempting to replicate large-nation high-performance models, small nations appear to benefit from adaptive system design grounded in operational excellence, relational capacity, and values-driven leadership. Para-Biathlon illustrates how systems can be built, dismantled, and rebuilt over time without fixed blueprints, provided that learning, collaboration, and governance coherence are prioritised.

By extending parasport governance scholarship into a winter sport and system-design context, this study contributes a nuanced understanding of how inclusive and performance-oriented parasport systems can emerge under conditions of structural constraint. The findings offer transferable insights for sport policymakers, governing bodies, and system leaders seeking sustainable development pathways in small or emerging parasport nations.

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