

Original article

Paralympic Athlete Retention as a Governance Challenge: A Community-Focused, Practice-Informed Analysis

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Abstract. Athlete retention in Paralympic sport is frequently framed as an individual-level issue related to motivation, resilience, or performance outcomes. Such perspectives, however, overlook the systemic and governance-related conditions that shape athletes' continued engagement over time. The purpose of this study is to reconceptualize Paralympic athlete retention as a governance and system-design challenge, with particular attention to community embeddedness, organizational continuity, and the management of critical transition points.

The study adopts a practice-informed sport management approach, integrating peer-reviewed literature identified through an ELICIT-assisted search process with documented applied practice derived from conference presentations on community-focused Paralympic sport delivery. The analytical interpretation focused on identifying recurring system-level retention patterns rather than on individual experiences.

The findings indicate that sustained athlete engagement is strongly associated with stable governance arrangements, coherent organizational roles, and the presence of community-based structures that provide continuity beyond competitive performance. Dropout most commonly occurred during periods of organizational disruption, unclear responsibility, or weakened community connection, rather than as a result of declining motivation or performance. Systems that treated athlete pathways as ongoing relationships, rather than linear progressions, demonstrated greater retention stability.

The study contributes to sport management and governance literature by positioning athlete retention as an indicator of system quality rather than individual commitment. For policymakers and sport managers, the findings suggest that improving retention requires

sustained attention to governance clarity, community integration, and the design of pathways that accommodate life-course transitions in Paralympic sport.

Keywords: Paralympic sport; athlete retention; sport governance; community-based sport; system design; parasport management

Introduction

Athlete retention has become a central concern in Paralympic sport systems, yet it is most often framed as an individual-level problem related to motivation, resilience, or performance outcomes (Weiss et al., 2020). Such framings obscure the extent to which continued participation is shaped by organizational environments, governance arrangements, and the quality of everyday sport experiences. Research examining parasport participation trajectories demonstrates that athletes' decisions to remain engaged are embedded in broader life-course processes rather than in isolated competitive outcomes (Allan et al., 2017).

Studies focusing on emerging adults with disabilities further indicate that transitions across education, employment, health, and family life represent critical moments of vulnerability for continued sport participation (Orr et al., 2020). In these phases, retention is strongly influenced by the availability of stable, supportive sport environments rather than by athletes'

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intrinsic motivation alone. This suggests that dropout in Paralympic sport should be understood as a systemic phenomenon rather than as individual disengagement.

Environmental and organizational determinants of sustained participation have been consistently highlighted in parasport research. Factors such as access to facilities, quality of coaching, social support, and organizational continuity play a decisive role in shaping long-term engagement (Blauwet et al., 2017). When these conditions are unstable or fragmented, even highly motivated athletes may struggle to remain within the system. Post-event legacy research further illustrates how structural discontinuity undermines retention. Analyses of participation patterns following major Paralympic Games show that initial increases in engagement are often not sustained when governance responsibility shifts or funding priorities change (Brown & Pappous, 2018). These findings point to retention as a governance challenge linked to system design rather than to short-term participation initiatives.

From a sport management perspective, inclusion and retention are increasingly understood as organizational practices rather than normative aspirations (Cunningham, 2019). Inclusive intent alone is insufficient if it is not supported by coherent governance structures, clear roles, and stable delivery mechanisms. This perspective is reinforced by research demonstrating that early sport experiences for athletes with disabilities are shaped by coaching practices and organizational culture, which in turn influence long-term retention (Arbour-Nicitopoulos et al., 2018). Parasport pathway research further complicates linear models of retention. Athlete journeys in Paralympic sport are often characterized by late entry, sport switching, and intermittent participation, requiring systems that can accommodate non-linearity and re-entry (Dehghansai et al., 2018). Talent identification initiatives similarly highlight that entry into Paralympic sport is frequently opportunistic and dependent on system openness rather than structured progression (Dehghansai & Baker, 2019).

Local context also plays a significant role. Case-based research from diverse regions demonstrates that structural barriers—such as geography, economic conditions, and institutional fragmentation—shape participation opportunities and retention outcomes (Gallardo de León et al., 2024). These contextual factors reinforce the need to examine retention through a governance lens that accounts for variability across systems.

Taken together, the literature suggests that Paralympic athlete retention is best conceptualized as a system-level outcome shaped by governance,

organizational continuity, and community embeddedness. Accordingly, this study adopts a practice-informed sport management perspective to examine community-focused retention in Paralympic sport, drawing on documented applied practice to explore how governance arrangements, organizational processes, and community integration influence athletes' sustained engagement over time.

Research Hypothesis

Drawing on sport management and parasport governance literature, this study advances the following hypothesis: Paralympic athlete retention is primarily shaped by governance-related factors, including organizational continuity, community embeddedness, and the management of transition points, rather than by individual motivation or short-term performance outcomes.

This hypothesis reflects a system-level perspective on athlete retention, positioning sustained engagement as an outcome of organizational design and governance practices rather than of individual psychological characteristics. In line with the practice-informed nature of the study, the hypothesis is examined through analytical interpretation of recurring system patterns rather than through statistical hypothesis testing.

Methods

Study Design

This study adopts a practice-informed sport management research design aimed at examining Paralympic athlete retention as a governance and system-design challenge. Rather than treating retention as an individual-level psychological outcome, the study focuses on organizational and systemic conditions that shape athletes' continued engagement over time.

The design is particularly suited to contexts in which retention processes are embedded in complex, multi-actor sport systems and cannot be meaningfully isolated through experimental or purely quantitative approaches. Accordingly, the study emphasizes interpretive analysis of system-level patterns grounded in both peer-reviewed literature and documented applied practice.

Data sources

Three complementary sources informed the analysis. First, the conceptual and analytical framework of the study is based on a structured synthesis of peer-reviewed literature on parasport participation, athlete retention, governance, and community-based sport delivery. The literature was identified using an ELICIT-assisted

search process and includes empirical, conceptual, and review studies addressing retention, participation trajectories, organizational capacity, and inclusive sport governance.

Second, the study draws on documented applied practice derived from publicly delivered expert presentations and conference materials focusing on community-based Paralympic sport delivery and athlete retention. These materials were presented by practitioners occupying leadership and coordination roles within Paralympic sport systems and reflect accumulated system knowledge rather than individual narratives. The presentations were treated as contextual evidence of recurring organizational patterns and challenges, not as primary qualitative data.

Third, the analytical interpretation was informed by the author's long-term professional engagement with Paralympic sport systems, including involvement in program development, governance processes, and collaboration with athletes, coaches, and sport organizations across community and national levels. This experience supported contextual sensitivity and interpretive depth but was not treated as an independent data source.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed a deductive–interpretive process. Core analytical categories were derived from the literature, including organizational continuity, community embeddedness, governance clarity, management of transition points, and perceived organizational support. The applied practice materials were examined to identify recurring patterns aligned with these categories.

Rather than coding individual statements or producing frequency counts, the analysis focused on system-level regularities—that is, patterns that appeared consistently across contexts and were interpretable through existing theoretical frameworks. Only observations that could be meaningfully anchored in the peer-reviewed literature were retained. Where applied practice suggested phenomena not yet well documented in the literature, claims were explicitly bounded and framed as context-specific.

Methodological Rigor and Trustworthiness

Methodological rigor was addressed through theoretical triangulation between literature-based constructs and applied system observations. Consistency between independent sources strengthened the credibility of identified patterns, while divergences were treated as analytical prompts rather than as evidence gaps.

To avoid over-interpretation, the study maintains a clear distinction between documented practice, experiential insight, and theoretical inference. The analysis does not claim empirical generalizability; instead, it aims for analytical transferability, offering insights that may inform governance and system design in comparable Paralympic sport contexts.

Ethical Considerations

The study relied exclusively on publicly available materials and anonymized system-level observations. No personal data, confidential organizational information, or identifiable athlete narratives were used. As such, formal ethical approval was not required.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of applied practice reveals that athlete retention in Paralympic sport is rarely determined by singular events or decisions. Instead, retention emerged as a cumulative outcome of how athletes experienced continuity, recognition, and belonging within their sport environments. Across contexts, dropout was most often associated with moments where organizational support weakened or governance responsibility became unclear.

A central pattern concerned community embeddedness. Systems that anchored athletes within local clubs or community-based programs demonstrated greater retention stability than those relying on centralized or episodic delivery. Community-based structures provided continuity across competitive cycles and life transitions, reinforcing prior findings that inclusive community environments strengthen sustained participation (Cunningham & Warner, 2018). Longitudinal evidence further supports the role of community participation in enhancing social inclusion and continued engagement among adults with disabilities (Sweet et al., 2021).

Volunteer structures played a critical, though often overlooked, role in shaping athlete experience. Applied practice indicated that volunteer continuity and quality directly influenced athletes' perceptions of care, competence, and organizational commitment. This observation aligns with research showing that volunteers are central to the delivery of quality participation experiences in community-based disability sport programs (Man et al., 2020). When volunteer turnover was high or poorly managed, athletes reported feelings of instability that contributed to disengagement.

Implementation gaps emerged as a recurring threat to retention. Periods of organizational change—such as shifts in funding, leadership, or governance responsibility—frequently disrupted athlete pathways. Research on community-based program implementation

identifies such transition points as critical moments where retention risk increases due to loss of clarity and support (Man et al., 2025). Applied practice confirmed that athletes often exited the system not due to dissatisfaction with sport itself, but due to uncertainty about future opportunities.

Athletes' sense of belonging also proved central. Experiences of inclusion were shaped not only by access to training, but by relational dynamics, role clarity, and recognition within the sport environment. Research on parasport identity formation underscores that sustained participation is closely tied to perceived meaning and social connection (Laidet et al., 2023). Qualitative evidence from wheelchair team sports similarly highlights that perceived organizational support influences athletes' willingness to remain engaged (Eglseder et al., 2024).

Retention challenges were particularly pronounced during transitions related to injury, health, or classification change. Applied practice indicated that systems with established links to rehabilitation and health services were better able to support athletes through such disruptions. This finding is consistent with research on military veterans' sport participation, which emphasizes the importance of integrated pathways that bridge rehabilitation and community sport (Shirazipour & Latimer-Cheung, 2020). Community-based adaptive sport initiatives further demonstrate that retention improves when sport participation is embedded within broader support networks (Arthur-Banning et al., 2020).

From a governance perspective, the findings challenge deficit-oriented explanations of dropout. While individual motivation fluctuated, disengagement was more often linked to structural discontinuity than to loss of interest. Retention was strongest in systems that treated athlete pathways as ongoing relationships rather than as linear progressions. Longitudinal research on Special Olympics participation supports this interpretation, showing that organizational context is a stronger predictor of retention than performance level (Weiss et al., 2020).

Synthesis and Governance Implications

Synthesizing these findings, athlete retention in Paralympic sport emerges as a governance outcome shaped by how systems manage continuity, transitions, and community connection. Clubs and community organizations functioned as retention anchors, particularly when they provided stable identities and roles beyond competitive success (Brown & Pappous, 2022). Organizational stability, even at modest levels of resourcing, supported sustained engagement by

reducing uncertainty and fragmentation (Teixeira Matias & Parent, 2018).

Incremental system development further supported retention. Rather than pursuing rapid expansion, systems that prioritized gradual capacity building and relationship maintenance were better positioned to retain athletes over time (Pate & Bragale, 2019). Leadership practices also mattered. Values-based leadership that emphasized trust, transparency, and learning fostered organizational cultures in which athletes felt secure enough to navigate change (Alexander-Urquhart & Culver, 2025).

Gender and visibility emerged as additional considerations. Research on female Paralympians suggests that retention challenges may be masked by participation statistics that fail to capture uneven experiences across groups (Sanchez-Plesha et al., 2022). Governance approaches that do not attend to such differential experiences risk reinforcing invisible forms of dropout.

Finally, a broader societal perspective reinforces the importance of retention as a social outcome. The Paralympic movement has long been framed as a vehicle for social integration and empowerment, positioning sustained participation as both a sport and societal objective (Blauwet & Willick, 2012). From this perspective, athlete retention reflects not only individual commitment, but the capacity of sport systems to provide meaningful, inclusive, and continuous opportunities over time.

Conclusions

This study examined Paralympic athlete retention through a governance and system-design lens, challenging dominant framings that locate dropout primarily in individual motivation, resilience, or performance outcomes. By integrating peer-reviewed literature with documented applied practice, the analysis demonstrates that sustained engagement in Paralympic sport is more accurately understood as a systemic outcome shaped by organizational continuity, community embeddedness, and the management of critical transition points.

The findings indicate that retention is not the result of isolated interventions or short-term participation initiatives, but of how sport systems structure everyday experiences over time. Athletes were more likely to remain engaged when governance arrangements were clear, support roles stable, and pathways sufficiently flexible to accommodate life-course transitions such as changes in health, employment, classification status, or competitive level. Conversely, disengagement most often occurred during

periods of organizational disruption, role ambiguity, or withdrawal of community-based support.

Importantly, the analysis highlights the central role of community-oriented structures in anchoring athlete participation. Clubs, local programs, and community organizations functioned not merely as delivery sites, but as relational environments that provided identity continuity beyond competitive success. In this sense, retention emerged less as a function of achievement and more as a product of belonging, recognition, and predictable organizational presence.

From a governance perspective, the study underscores that retention is a collective responsibility distributed across multiple actors rather than an attribute of individual athletes. Systems that treated athlete pathways as ongoing relationships—rather than linear progressions toward performance milestones—were better equipped to support sustained engagement across time. This finding has direct implications for how Paralympic sport systems conceptualize success, evaluate effectiveness, and allocate responsibility for athlete dropout.

The study also contributes to sport management scholarship by reframing retention as a governance indicator rather than a participation metric. Retention reflects the capacity of sport systems to manage continuity through change, to integrate community resources, and to align inclusive values with operational practice. As such, it offers a lens through which the quality of governance and system design can be assessed beyond performance results alone.

Finally, while the practice-informed approach adopted in this study does not claim empirical generalizability, it offers analytically transferable insights for Paralympic sport systems facing similar challenges. For policymakers, governing bodies, and sport managers, the findings suggest that improving athlete retention requires sustained attention to governance clarity, organizational stability, and community integration rather than reliance on motivational narratives or isolated programmatic solutions.

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