

# Disability sports coaching: towards a critical understanding

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DOI:

[10.1080/21640629.2016.1157324](https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2016.1157324)

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*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Smith, B, Townsend, R & Cushion, CJ 2016, 'Disability sports coaching: towards a critical understanding', *Sports Coaching Review*, vol. 4, pp. 80-98. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2016.1157324>

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1 **Disability Sports Coaching: Towards a Critical Understanding**

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19 **Abstract**

20 The growing work that addresses coaching disabled athletes has thus far failed to engage with  
21 the field of disability studies, and as a result misses a crucial opportunity to develop a critical  
22 understanding of coach learning and practice in disability sport. Therefore the aim of this  
23 paper is to bridge the gap between coaching and disability studies and to review critically the  
24 current literature in coaching, in order to problematise some of the assumptions that underpin  
25 disability coaching research. Disability studies, and in particular the models of disability, are  
26 an important first step in a critical understanding in disability sport coaching. The models of  
27 disability provide a lens through which researchers, coach educators and coaches can  
28 question how they learn to coach disabled athletes, interrogate knowledge about impairment  
29 and disability, and critically evaluate coaching practice. In connecting with disability studies,  
30 we hope to help coaches, and researchers make sense of how they position disability, and  
31 appreciate how coaching knowledge and practice are produced in context. In turn, we feel  
32 that such critical understandings have the potential to develop nuanced and sophisticated  
33 ways of thinking about, and developing, disability sports coaching.

34 **Keywords; Disability Studies; Models of Disability; Coach Education; Coach Learning;**  
35 **Coaching Practice.**

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## 43 **Introduction**

44 We know very little about coaches who work in disability sport<sup>1</sup>. This is despite the  
45 acceptance that coaching is a social process comprising complex interactions between coach,  
46 athlete and context (e.g. Cushion, Armour & Jones, 2003; Cushion & Jones, 2006, 2012;  
47 Jones, Edwards & Viotto Filho, 2014; Potrac & Jones, 2009, inter alia). However, the  
48 emerging research exploring disability coaching (e.g. Cregan, Bloom & Reid, 2007; Duarte &  
49 Culver, 2014; McMaster, Culver & Werthner, 2012; Tawse, Bloom, Sabiston, & Reid, 2012;  
50 Taylor, Werthner & Culver, 2014; Taylor, Werthner, Culver & Callary, 2015, inter alia) has,  
51 not yet explicitly engaged with the field of disability studies. This neglect limits the  
52 discursive space through which to explore coach learning and practice in disability sport and  
53 clearly misses an opportunity to advance the sports coaching field.

54 This paper goes some way to bridge the gap between coaching and disability  
55 studies. Central to disability studies are models of disability. To demonstrate the nature,  
56 scope and limitations of existing knowledge, the paper uses the lens of disability studies to  
57 address, critique and problematise some of the current understandings of coach learning and  
58 practice in disability sport coaching. In so doing, we attempt to carve a critical space where  
59 researchers and practitioners can make explicit the assumptions that situate the problems,  
60 methods and questions that guide research and practice. Our contention is that disability  
61 studies provide an ontological and epistemological platform for exploring and understanding  
62 coach learning and development in disability sport, and to reconceptualise coach education  
63 and coaching practice in more critical terms. In this sense, ‘critical’ means a self-conscious  
64 process of exposing the underlying assumptions that influence particular ways of *thinking*  
65 about disability – rather than say particular methods – to highlight the limited engagement  
66 with disability studies and offer opportunities to develop and enhance coaching by presenting

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<sup>1</sup> Disability sport is a broad term used to describe sports that accommodate people with physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities (DePauw & Gavron, 2005).

67 some ways in which coaching can, and should connect with disability studies. To do this we  
68 focus on four models of disability and argue that disability studies are fundamental to a  
69 coherent conceptual understanding of the field of disability sports coaching.

70 As DePauw (2000) argued over 15 years ago, theoretical models of disability have  
71 implications for scholarly inquiry and the professional development of sports coaches. The  
72 models of disability may help coaches to understand how they position impairment and  
73 disability (as conflated or distinct concepts), to reflect on their own practice critically. Simply,  
74 how sports coaches and researchers understand disability and apply it to the coaching field  
75 will be influenced, either knowingly or unknowingly, by the models that capture how  
76 disability is understood in society. Moreover, the models provide researchers with the tools to  
77 expose sterile consensus and coaching dogma while at the same time offering a means of  
78 organising the field in the face of essential but exposed paradigmatic differences. In  
79 connecting with the models of disability, we are encouraging a sense of self-reflexivity, open  
80 dialogue, and rethinking about the conventions, assumptions and aspirations of both research  
81 and practice (Smith & Perrier, 2014a).

## 82 **Disability Studies: Models of Disability**

83 The paper considers four models of disability- from the medical and social model, through to  
84 a more contemporary social relational understanding, and finally the human rights model of  
85 disability. To contextualise the models, and show their utility in developing understanding in  
86 coaching we use the models as a lens to examine existing conceptions of disability coaching.  
87 We will then problematise some of the assumptions that permeate the disability coaching  
88 literature, and offer some ways forward for the field.

## 89 **Medical Model**

90 The medical model has historically been dominant in understanding disability and positioning  
91 research (Smith & Perrier, 2014a). This perspective, emerging from clinical practice, places  
92 the body under intense scrutiny. The central focus of the medical model lies in its positioning  
93 of disability as bound to the functional limitations of impairment (Swain, French & Cameron,  
94 2003). Impairment, then, typically becomes *the* defining feature of the disability experience  
95 (Fitzgerald, 2012). Disability is constructed as a deviation from the norm, to be othered, fixed,  
96 or intervened upon (Smith & Perrier, 2014a, 2014b; DePauw, 1997). From this perspective,  
97 people with disabilities are supported to fit in with normal life and are regarded as victims of  
98 a biological injustice.

99         However, the medical model has been criticised for applying a reductionist biological  
100 lens that does not capture the complexity of disability (Grenier, 2007; Silva & Howe, 2012;  
101 Smith & Perrier, 2014a, 2014b). A major criticism of the medical model is that it assumes a  
102 normative perspective on disability, creating a “normal/abnormal” dichotomy and  
103 overlooking the apparent social construction of “disability” and “normality”. As Quinn,  
104 Degener and Bruce (2002) claimed, the medical model “encapsulates a broader and deeper  
105 social attitude” (p. 14) in which a tendency to problematise people with an impairment and  
106 view them as an object for intervention is entrenched. The lived experience of disability is  
107 also ignored. Furthermore, the social environment and culture are treated as unproblematic  
108 and people with impairments are instead viewed as disadvantaged by their own bodies  
109 (Oliver, 1996). The medical model frames disability as an individual problem, a phenomenon  
110 located outside of culture, a “significant bodily and/or cognitive variation from those who  
111 meet the cultural expectation of embodied normality” (Thomas, 2004, p.28). In so doing, the  
112 medical model reinforces dominant ableist (i.e. normal) ideals and values conformity (Swain  
113 et al., 2003).

114           Aligning either implicitly or explicitly with the medical model has implications for  
115 coaches, because within the structure of sport the athletic body, including appearance,  
116 dispositions and actions, is significant in definitions of ability. The medical model should not  
117 be disregarded or abandoned but challenged as the dominant mode of thinking informing  
118 coaching, because coaches' corporeal thinking has practical implications in, for example,  
119 dealing with individual athletic needs, specialised equipment and classificatory competition  
120 demands (Burkett, 2013; Cregan et al., 2007). It is important therefore not to write the body  
121 out of our theorising (Hughes & Paterson, 1997). Performance disability sport is typically  
122 framed by the assumptions of the medical model. Here disability is reduced to biological  
123 processes and mechanisms (e.g. Goosey-Tolfrey, 2010), silenced in psychological  
124 interventions for disabled athletes (e.g. Banack, Sabiston & Bloom, 2011; Falcão, Bloom &  
125 Loughead, 2015; Martin, 1999) and corrected through strategies and frameworks for  
126 inclusive coaching practice (e.g. Hanrahan, 1998; Vargas, Flores & Beyer, 2012). These  
127 various approaches mean that the disabled athlete is constructed as an object to be  
128 "educated...observed, tested, measured, treated, psychologised...materialised through a  
129 multitude of disciplinary practices and institutional discourses" (Goodley, 2011, p.114).  
130 Coach learning in these terms is framed by behaviourism, and practice informed by medical  
131 discourse that embraces scientific functionalism and technocratic-rationality (e.g. Burkett,  
132 2013). This promotes a dominant consciousness where all problems are instrumental or  
133 technical problems to be solved (e.g. Burkett, 2013; Cregan, et al., 2007). The suggestion  
134 here is that coaching is fundamentally about improving sporting performance against the  
135 limitations athletes with a disability have. Here, disciplinary discourses (i.e. sport sciences)  
136 permeate the structure of coaching to organise, regulate and constrain the body to improve  
137 performance according to medical ideologies of normality (Cushion, 2011; Thomas & Smith,  
138 2009).

139           Specifically addressing coaching practice, an example of the implicit assumptions of  
140 the medical model in coaching research can be found in studies into the attitudes of coaches  
141 towards disabled athletes. Whilst well intentioned and valuable in highlighting coaches’  
142 often-negative attitudes, and demonstrating the need to change perceptions, this approach  
143 aligns with the assumptions of the medical model. These studies frame disability as an  
144 individual flaw that is manifest in deficits in adaptive behaviour that gives rise to narratives  
145 of fear, and creates challenges for coaches to overcome (e.g. Beyer, Flores & Vargas-Tonsing,  
146 2008; Conatser, Block & Lepore, 2000; Flores, Beyer & Vargas, 2012; Hammond, Young &  
147 Konjarski, 2014; Rizzo, Bishop & Tobar, 1997). These assumptions position disability firmly  
148 within the person, the athlete being the “problem” (DePauw, 1997) to be fixed, normalised or  
149 rendered docile through coaching practice. Thus, the dominance of medical discourse ignores  
150 questions concerning the formation and application of coaches’ knowledge of how to coach  
151 (Denison, Mills & Konoval, 2015). Disabled athletes then, become subject to normative  
152 assumptions about their abilities, producing an object that operates in isolation, out of social  
153 context (DePauw, 2000). This focus on the normalisation of the body and compliance with  
154 ableist standards creates a hierarchy of power where disabled individuals can lose autonomy  
155 over their bodies (Smith & Perrier, 2014b). Disabled athletes therefore occupy a “tenuous  
156 position” as they are pressured to showcase their “superhuman” athletic ability and distance  
157 themselves from devalued, disabled identities (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015, p.354; Bush,  
158 Silk, Porter & Howe, 2013).

159           Finally, the medical model assumes a perspective that simplifies the shifting,  
160 contextual, pedagogic practice of coaching, instead assuming a linear transfer of knowledge  
161 from coach to athlete, following a “top-down approach” (Côté, 2006, p. 220). In so doing, it  
162 ignores the cultural assumptions that are tied to disability, with coaches’ beliefs and  
163 assumptions tacit and unarticulated, and leaves the “social, cultural and political complexities



164 of practice” (Cushion, 2013, p.71) unexplored. Furthermore, as recognised in the wider  
165 coaching literature (e.g. Cushion, 2013; Cushion et al., 2003; Hassanin & Light, 2014;  
166 Townsend & Cushion, 2015; Turner, Nelson, & Potrac, 2012) so too in disability coaching  
167 that the contested, nuanced and dynamic effects of culture on coach learning and practice are  
168 left untouched. Thus, the assumptions of the medical model mean that the social world is left  
169 under-theorised and unchallenged (Smith & Perrier, 2014a) and understanding of coaching is  
170 superficial and impoverished.

### 171 **Social Model**

172 The social model<sup>2</sup> was developed by disabled activists from the Union of the Physically  
173 Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) who attempted to reclaim the term “disability” from  
174 medical discourse. Underpinned by Marxism, the social model breaks the causal link between  
175 impairment and disability (Oliver & Barnes, 2010; Smith & Bundon, in press) to reconstruct  
176 disability as *entirely* socially constructed (Thomas, 2014). This perspective turns a critical  
177 gaze toward society and is based on the premise that disability is the product of a complex  
178 collection of structural barriers that create disadvantages, exclusions and restrictions for  
179 people with impairments (Thomas, 2014). These barriers permeate all aspects of social life:  
180 employment, housing, education, transportation, civil rights and the built structures of  
181 everyday life (Thomas, 2014). Importantly, the social model delineates *impairment*, as in the  
182 medical model, as a physical characteristic (Swain et al., 2003), but reconceptualises  
183 *disability* based on the notion that it is socially constructed and an act of exclusion and  
184 oppression:

185           In our view, it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is  
186           something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily

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<sup>2</sup> The social model is neither a social theory in its own right (Oliver, 1996; Thomas, 2007) nor, strictly speaking, is it a model. It is perhaps closer to a conceptual tool. Because it is commonly called a ‘model’ in the literature this term will be used throughout the paper.

187 isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore  
188 an oppressed group in society.

189 (UPIAS, 1976, cited in Oliver, 1996, p.33).

190 As Oliver (1996) argued, the social model has the power to “transform consciousness” (p.42)  
191 by connecting personal experience to professional practice. The restrictions that people with  
192 impairments face in sport can be readily observed, and challenged, through the social model;  
193 from individual attitudinal and institutional prejudices, to inaccessible sporting facilities,  
194 exclusionary policies or unusable transport systems (Oliver, 1996; Smith & Papathomas,  
195 2014; Thomas, 2014). Moreover, the social model provides a revelatory and liberating  
196 perspective on disability, relocating the disability in the structures of society and outside of  
197 the individual (Smith & Perrier, 2014a). This stands in direct contrast to the medical model  
198 which locates disability within the individual.

199 Despite its potential, the social model has not been drawn on explicitly in the  
200 coaching literature, where applying it may help to focus important questions regarding coach  
201 education and learning. For example, a consequence of the limited research on coaches in  
202 disability sport is the lack of informed resources to support coach development (Tawse et al.,  
203 2012). Indeed, conceptualisations of disability coach education remain silent and unexplored,  
204 despite the importance of developing formalised learning structures for coaches in disability  
205 sport (Tawse et al., 2012). This issue should arguably be addressed, considering the wealth of  
206 research that evidences coaches’ preferences for uncritical sources of knowledge  
207 (Stoszkowski & Collins, 2015) and informal modes of learning (Cregan et al., 2007; Duarte  
208 & Culver, 2014; McMaster et al., 2012; Tawse et al., 2012) where coaching practice is based  
209 predominantly on informal and experiential modes of learning, while disability is ignored in  
210 many mainstream coach education programmes (Cregan et al., 2007; McMaster et al., 2012;

211 Taylor et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2015). The lens of the social model could provide the means  
212 for research to question why this is the case.

213         A possible reason is that currently, coach education and development in disability  
214 sport follow a compartmentalised approach that is underpinned by medical discourse (Bush &  
215 Silk, 2012). As a result, disability coach education is characterised by discontinuous training  
216 episodes designed to deliver impairment specific knowledge and contains little follow-up  
217 support or longitudinal data to evidence meaningful application to coaching practice (Cregan  
218 et al., 2007; DePauw & Gavron, 2005). The current situation, therefore, is particularly  
219 concerning when considering the growing body of coach development rhetoric challenging  
220 coaches to be inclusive without any specific education in coaching people with a disability  
221 (Hammond et al., 2014). In addition to this, the social model can offer insight into the  
222 barriers that disabled people may face in entering the coaching pathway. As Bush and Silk  
223 (2012) highlighted, barriers such as inaccessible educational resources and a lack of  
224 opportunities to practice or appropriate mentors may influence the number of disabled people  
225 who become coaches. The social model, therefore, is a useful frame through which to  
226 highlight something of the inadequacies of coach education in this field, yet so far, the  
227 literature evaluating disability coach education is yet to apply such critical perspectives.

228         Furthermore, the social model can be valuable in exploring and scrutinising coaching  
229 practices in disability sport, so that we may develop an understanding of exclusion in  
230 pragmatic ways. As Burkett (2013) stated, the considerations of coaching a disabled athlete  
231 may place demands on the skills, knowledge and practices of coaches beyond that which is  
232 expected in mainstream sporting contexts. Research in coaching disabled athletes, for  
233 example, points to coaches managing a multitude of pragmatic and contextual constraints  
234 such as limited financial support, fewer coaching and support staff, a lack of coaching and  
235 training resources and equipment, and a smaller talent pool (Taylor et al., 2014). Furthermore,

236 coaches may need to communicate with athletes' families, support workers and caregivers,  
237 and reflect upon the accessibility of facilities and transportation (Cregan et al., 2007). Indeed,  
238 access to facilities, a lack of information, equipment costs and a lack of professional training  
239 for coaches directly impact upon the sporting opportunities disabled people can enjoy (Bush  
240 & Silk, 2012; Smith & Sparkes, 2012). Research in coaching has identified structural barriers  
241 that exclude athletes and provides insight into the disabling tendencies of coaching practice  
242 (e.g. Bush & Silk, 2012; Cregan et al., 2007; Dorogi, Bognar & Petrovics, 2008; Taylor et al.,  
243 2014). However, the research does not connect with the social model, leaving this work cut  
244 off from disability studies and floating in sterile and superficial 'humanistic' coaching  
245 discourse. The social model offers an emancipatory perspective on disability, proposing both  
246 a research construct *and* a political challenge to professionals whose practices disable people  
247 with impairments (Bickenbach et al., 1999). In this sense, the social model can make a  
248 political argument in demanding change in coaching and coach education.

249         Despite the potential benefits of connecting the social model to disability sport  
250 coaching, a criticism of the social model is that it ignores the functional implications of  
251 impairment, and as a result also fails to address an important reality for many people - that of  
252 dysfunction, illness, or bodily pain (Martin, 2013). As Hughes and Paterson (1997) argued,  
253 the social model of disability proposes an "untenable separation" (p.326) between body and  
254 culture, and impairment and disability. As a result the social model fails to explain the role  
255 that impairments have upon individuals and their embodied, lived experiences (Shakespeare,  
256 2006). Furthermore, the understanding within the social model that people with impairments  
257 face only structural disablism can be a limited view, as it ignores the cultural and experiential  
258 dimensions of disability (Reeve, 2004). Here, the agency of the impaired body is overlooked,  
259 leaving unchallenged another way in which people are oppressed and excluded (Smith &

260 Bundon, in press). Instead, focus ought to turn to the tension between structure and agency<sup>3</sup>  
261 that constitutes exclusion within disability sport, in line with the view of coaching as a  
262 contested, negotiated and relational activity (Jones, Edwards & Viotto Filho, 2014).

### 263 **Social Relational Model**

264 In response to the medical and social models and subsequent criticisms, Thomas (1999, 2007)  
265 developed the social *relational* definition of disability. Thomas argued that:

266           Disablism is a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions  
267           of activity on people with impairments *and* the socially engendered undermining of  
268           their psycho-emotional well-being. (2007, p. 73)

269 By reconciling structure *and* agency the social relational model “carves out a space of  
270 understanding” in which disability is reconceptualised as a manifestation of social  
271 relationships (Smith & Bundon, in press; Smith & Perrier, 2014a, p. 12). Drawing on the  
272 social model, a central tenet of the social relational model is that disability is socially  
273 constructed. However, the social relational model also positions disability within the  
274 sociocultural and historical traditions that influence collective activity. Disability is given  
275 meaning through the relational practices that shape how people experience the world. Here,  
276 disability is a bodily reality for many people, but is not limited to impairment, as the medical  
277 model illustrates, nor is it entirely social. Instead disability is lived, experienced, socially  
278 constructed and culturally fashioned (Smith & Perrier, 2014a). Thomas (2007) created an  
279 understanding of disability as “profoundly bio-social...shaped by the interaction of biological  
280 and social factors, and are bound up with processes of socio-cultural naming” (Thomas, 1999,  
281 p. 43). To illustrate, the biological effects of certain impairments, such as pain and fatigue,  
282 can pose limits on the participation of disabled people in sport. Further, the relational

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<sup>3</sup> For a more applied sense of agency and structure in relation to coaching, see *The Sociology of Sports Coaching* (Jones, Potrac, Cushion & Ronglan, 2011). These authors- drawing on Giddens (1984) - position agency as the ability of the individual to “exercise some form of power” (p.142), and structure as the expression of cultural rules and values that influence human behaviour.

283 practices through which disabled people may face bullying from peers or coaches, become  
284 the target of jokes and negative stereotypes, or face physical and verbal abuse directly  
285 undermine a disabled person's psycho-emotional well-being (Smith & Papathomas, 2014).  
286 Thus the impaired body, and the psycho-social disablism found in sport become a form of  
287 social oppression (Reeve, 2004; Smith & Perrier, 2014a; Thomas, 1999, 2007, p. 73). The  
288 strength of the social relational model for coaching lies in its acceptance that exclusion is  
289 created and constructed in particular ideologies and values, ways of thinking, discourse,  
290 power structures, and practices (Swain et al., 2003), thus providing a platform from which to  
291 analyse the social relations within coaching that "construct, produce, institutionalise, enact  
292 and perform disability" (Smith & Perrier, 2014a, p. 12) and directs attention to impairment,  
293 experience and disablism.

294 Furthermore, using a social relational model allows coaching and coach learning in  
295 disability sport to be explored as an unequal, dynamic process that moves beyond dominant  
296 psychological approaches. As McMaster et al. (2012) usefully described, disability coaching  
297 is embedded within cultural contexts involving the relationship between the coach, athlete  
298 and the environment and the intersection of these factors is of "unique significance" (p.238)  
299 in developing coach and athlete learning in disability sport. In this relationship, coaches and  
300 athletes contribute to the coaching process, with the coach possessing sport specific and  
301 coaching expertise, and the athlete possessing embodied knowledge on disability, and in this  
302 sense both agents co-construct knowledge (Cregan et al., 2007). Indeed, a number of studies  
303 point to socialisation as a primary mode of development for coaches (e.g. Cushion & Jones,  
304 2012; Potrac & Jones, 2009; Potrac, Jones & Armour, 2002). Knowledge in disability  
305 coaching is similarly derived from experience (both coaching and athletic) and peer-to-peer  
306 coaching and mentoring (e.g. Burkett, 2013; Duarte & Culver, 2014; MacDonald, Beck,  
307 Erickson & Côté, 2015; McMaster et al., 2012). As Piggott (2015) argued, one of the obvious

308 consequences of this mode of learning is the “uncritical reproduction” (p.4) of coaching  
309 ideologies and practices that become unquestioned in knowledge construction and  
310 formulation of practical truths (e.g. “coach the athlete, not the disability”). Hence in disability  
311 sport coaching this accepted mode of learning creates a number of questions regarding  
312 legitimate knowledge and power. Therefore, through the lens of the social relational model,  
313 researchers can consider usefully the individual (coach and athlete), the environment (social  
314 space) and their interaction as the focal point for inquiry into coach learning in disability  
315 sport.

316           However, disability coaching research fails to explicitly harness the utility of the  
317 social relational model in exploring coach learning in more contextual and analytical ways.  
318 Research is currently limited to overly descriptive case-study examinations of coach learning  
319 in disability sport (e.g. Cregan et al., 2007; Duarte & Culver, 2014; McMaster et al., 2012;  
320 Taylor et al., 2014), the roles and philosophies of coaches in disability sport (e.g. Tawse et al.,  
321 2012; Robbins, Houston & Dummer, 2010) and the value of reflection in learning for  
322 disability sport coaches (e.g. Taylor et al., 2015). Whilst valuable in highlighting the complex  
323 nature of practice, and the recognising the diverse, integrated sources of knowledge that  
324 coaches draw upon in this context, these studies miss valuable and critical leverage to deepen  
325 understandings of disability and improve coaching practice by failing to draw on models of  
326 disability and connect with disability studies. Consequently, research continues to apply a  
327 narrow “coach-centric” (Blackett, Evans & Piggott, 2015, p.3) view on the acquisition of  
328 coaching knowledge. This view downplays the broader sociocultural context including  
329 disability, while overplaying the autonomous agency of the learner as an individual at the  
330 heart of a learning process (Blackett et al., 2015; Hassanin & Light, 2014; Townsend &  
331 Cushion, 2015). This is perhaps understandable when recognising that the coach occupies a  
332 position of centrality, power and influence within a sporting context (Cushion, 2011), but this

333 perspective overlooks the wider social, cultural and historical structures that predispose  
334 coaches to certain ways of knowing and doing. Indeed, such a position runs contrary to an  
335 understanding of how agency (e.g. coaches and their beliefs, experience and decisions) and  
336 structure (e.g. cultural norms, social pressures and contextual constraints) function in the  
337 intersection of people, culture and context, and constitute action, knowledge and practice.  
338 This interplay is an important issue to address in terms of the construction of coaching  
339 dispositions (Hassanin & Light, 2014; Townsend & Cushion, 2015). Instead, coaches are  
340 represented as generic learners that function instrumentally in the field of disability, along a  
341 continuum of practice (Cushion, 2011), located outside of context, with disability forced into  
342 the background (e.g. Cregan et al., 2007; Duarte & Culver, 2014; Hanrahan, 2007; McMaster  
343 et al., 2012; Tawse et al., 2012).

344         As Cushion and Partington (2014) argue, such an abstract view of coaching is  
345 reflective of a psychological approach to learning that dominates current research in coaching.  
346 The humanistic discourses that underpin such an approach align implicitly with the  
347 individualised assumptions that underpin the medical model of disability. In turn, this  
348 approach creates a number of assumptions about coaching disabled athletes that remain  
349 unchallenged. These include: the assumption that disability problematises coaching practice;  
350 coaching knowledge as well as skills and judgements about athletes are neutral, rather than  
351 socially and culturally weighted, and coaching practice is unbiased, aligned and passive  
352 (Cushion & Partington, 2014). Put simply our understanding of disability sports coaching  
353 remains partial at best, yet dominated by the assumptions of medical model discourse. The  
354 value of the social relational model is that it allows for a nuanced and layered understanding  
355 of the assumptions that guide explorations into coach learning, to move beyond current  
356 conceptualisations that, whilst useful, limit further explorations. Furthermore, it places  
357 disabled people at the heart of coaching. It provides important insights into how disabled



358 people are socially oppressed within sport coaching contexts and the ways in which this can  
359 be reversed to not just improve coaching, but the lives of disabled people. The social  
360 relational model also encourages research *with* disabled people, rather than *on* them.

### 361 **Human Rights Model: A meta-model for coaching and coach education**

362 The human rights model was drawn from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of  
363 Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This international treaty was the first to address the rights  
364 of disabled people, recognising both equality *and* diversity (Ollerton & Horsfall, 2013; Rioux  
365 & Heath, 2014). Underpinned by a strong activist ideology, the human rights model builds on  
366 the foundations of the social model of disability, and places people with disabilities as subject  
367 to the disabling practices of society (Harpur, 2012).

368         The human rights model entails a move away from viewing people as passive objects  
369 without rights, and towards an understanding of the various economic and social processes  
370 that constitute disability (Quinn et al., 2002; Rioux, 2011). The significance of this shift  
371 towards a human rights perspective is in promoting the importance of facilitating access to  
372 basic freedoms for people with disabilities that are mostly taken-for-granted (Quinn et al.  
373 2002). Under the banner of the human rights model, participation in disability sport is a  
374 fundamental human right. Article 30 of the CRPD, which addressed ‘Participation in Cultural  
375 Life, Recreation, Leisure and Sport’ clearly outlines how people with disabilities are entitled  
376 to participate in sport on an equal basis with others (Hassan, McConkey & Dowling, 2014).  
377 This highlighted the need to provide inclusive policies and practices that support the  
378 involvement of people with disabilities in sport. Such measures include appropriate training  
379 and education for coaches to create more inclusive and high-quality coaching environments.  
380 Thus, the disability rights movement necessitated a shift in how disability is positioned within

381 cultural life and provides a compelling context for the exploration of disability sports  
382 coaching.

383         Despite its potential to engage with people of all ages and abilities, sport can indeed  
384 reaffirm and reproduce feelings of marginalisation (Hassan, McConkey & Dowling, 2014).  
385 As Bundon and Hurd Clarke (2015) argued, in the case of disability sport, whilst it is possible  
386 for athletes with disabilities to be included in mainstream sport, some athletes may still be  
387 excluded by attitudes, practices and policies that privilege able-bodied athletes and reproduce  
388 ableism within the structure of coaching (e.g. Conatser, Block & Gansneder, 2002; Conatser,  
389 Block, & Lepore, 2000). Clearly, sport can and regularly does marginalise disabled bodies  
390 (Bundon & Hurd Clarke, 2015; Hassan, Dowling, McConkey & Menke, 2012).

391         Thus, to research disability sport is to argue for political, social and cultural change.  
392 For coaching researchers, the human rights model can be conceptualised as a meta-model for  
393 framing research into disability sport. As King (2004) noted, meta-models are not theories  
394 which provide specific questions to guide research and practice. Rather, meta-models seek to  
395 guide thinking and understanding by conveying key ideas about a phenomenon and outlining  
396 higher order principles to guide practice (King, 2004). There is a need for an overarching  
397 meta-model of disability sport coaching that is transdisciplinary and serves to integrate  
398 knowledge (King, 2004). We have proposed the medical, social and social relational in order  
399 to explain the ontological basis of disability, but a meta-model provides a powerful rationale  
400 for researching disability sport in order to uncover and address inequality in sport. Through  
401 this meta-model, disablism is placed on a par with homophobia, sexism, racism and other  
402 forms of discrimination.

403         Furthermore, the human rights model may help coaches, coach educators and  
404 researchers to compare theories from a wider vantage point and can facilitate dialectic

405 between perspectives that can provide new and important transdisciplinary insights into  
406 disability sports coaching. For instance, as a meta-model, in conjunction with the social or  
407 social relational model, researchers can begin to explore the enabling and disabling  
408 tendencies of coaching structures, and provide a framework to challenge dominant medical  
409 discourse in coaching. Indeed, a recent report from Sports Coach UK (see Vinson et al., 2015)  
410 called for more research to understand the various ways through which disabled people  
411 engage with, and are excluded by the structure of coach education, alongside other  
412 marginalised groups such as women and ethnic minorities. A meta-model allows for an  
413 exploration of the underlying assumptions of coach education programmes that serve to  
414 exclude certain oppressed groups.

415         However, in the extant literature, questions exploring disabled athletes' experiences of  
416 coaching and coach education are not addressed. Thus, research misses an important human  
417 rights issue in relation to barriers and opportunities for disabled people to engage in  
418 formalised learning structures in coaching. Instead, conceptualisations of "inclusive" and  
419 "mainstream" coach education remain dichotomous and unquestioned (Bush & Silk, 2012).  
420 Understanding exclusion, oppression or emancipation in coaching through the human rights  
421 model can be an important and powerful step in recommending policy change. However,  
422 with this comes a critical dimension in that whilst social inclusion is desirable, it is poised on  
423 the very contradiction of including individuals and groups in a set of established social  
424 relationships that are responsible for excluding them in the first place (Labronte, 2004;  
425 McConkey, 2014). Thus, for coaches, the human rights model looks beyond efforts at social  
426 inclusion - in research and practice - to challenge the hierarchies that create exclusion  
427 (Labronte, 2004).

## 428 **Discussion**

429 Holding current literature related to coaching and disability to the light of the models of  
430 disability reveals that the medical model and its assumptions is the dominant mode of  
431 framing and conceptualising disability coaching – the assumptions of which are frequently  
432 implicit in the research and its findings. Arguably, the existing research has offered little in  
433 the way of critical insight into disability or coaching with little to say about the complex  
434 production of coaching discourse regarding disability. In mirroring some of the wider  
435 coaching literature that ignores issues of power, ideology and intersectionality (Crenshaw,  
436 1989; Cushion & Partington, 2014) that contribute to the simultaneity of oppression,  
437 domination and discrimination of certain groups, disability sport coaching remains  
438 underdeveloped. Disability is simply taken-for-granted. The potential of disability studies to  
439 gain theoretical traction in the field of coaching is considerable, yet to date a critical  
440 understanding of disability sports coaching remains “beyond our intellectual grasp” (Moola  
441 & Norman, 2012, p.285). As Smith and Perrier (2014a) insisted, as researchers and  
442 practitioners, it is our moral responsibility to “grapple with difficult yet important ideas” (p.  
443 95) expressed in other fields. Consequently, if researchers and practitioners are to make  
444 informed, reflexive and responsible choices regarding when and why they might choose to  
445 engage with disability, then a sound theoretical understanding must be established. This is  
446 especially so if we want to play a part in working with disabled people so that oppression is  
447 challenged and their experiences within coaching are enhanced.

448         The growing literature in disability coaching, though valuable in illustrating the  
449 complexities of practice in disability sport, is currently reflective of a wider dominant  
450 psychological and bio-scientific paradigm that implicitly aligns with the assumptions of the  
451 medical model of disability. Such positions need to be recognised, problematised and  
452 unpacked further, because assumptions that underpin research about coaching disabled  
453 athletes have important consequences for coaching practice and coach education. The

454 reproductive nature of coaching shows that unless new, critical perspectives are offered as a  
455 basis for unpacking coaches' beliefs and values, coaching practice in the field of disability  
456 will remain unchanged. Coaching is a complex, contextual, dynamic, relational and  
457 pedagogical activity and to understand the practices of coaches we need to make explicit, and  
458 challenge the deeply held and traditional definitions of what it means to be a coach in  
459 disability sport (Bush et al., 2013). The models of disability can help to ground coaching  
460 knowledge in the historical, social and discursive construction of disability (Hamraie, 2015),  
461 and provide an ontological framework that can be operationalised to frame diverse research  
462 questions. Furthermore, the models of disability can help researchers to frame coaching as  
463 ideological and historical practice, unearthing its constructed nature through an understanding  
464 of the epistemological workings of ideology and power in nuanced ways (Hamraie, 2015).  
465 The models of disability are a lens through which these constructs can be explored, thereby  
466 helping to advance the field of disability sport coaching.

467         Importantly, we do not wish to privilege one model over another. Moreover we wish  
468 for coaching scholars to understand the historical conditions in which disability has been  
469 understood, categorised and constituted in order to make explicit the assumptions that  
470 underpin current research and practice. In connecting with disability studies, coaches and  
471 researchers can demonstrate an informed and rational approach to research and practice that  
472 moves beyond an understanding of disability as a variable in research, or another context to  
473 be explored (e.g. Cregan et al., 2007; Duarte & Culver, 2014; MacDonald et al., 2015;  
474 McMaster et al., 2012; Tawse et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2015). Though  
475 not a panacea, and open to claims of reductionism, essentialism or determinism (Bhaskar &  
476 Danermark, 2006) the models of disability are spaces in which coach learning, knowledge  
477 and practice can be interrogated so that enabling sport coaching environments are created and  
478 maintained. The models described above have conceptual utility for various audiences in the

479 coaching field, with respect to broadening perspectives, providing new vantage points, and  
480 exploring practice. The models also have important practical implications for the design and  
481 delivery of coach education and development. This first step is critical to reveal, and to  
482 challenge the complex, power-ridden, sociocultural and historically constructed field of  
483 disability sports coaching. The next step is to consider other, critical ways of researching  
484 disability in sport that can build on current research to further inform and transform coaching  
485 practice.

## 486 **Conclusion**

487 Coaching and disability studies have traditionally occupied very different theoretical spaces.  
488 This is an important disciplinary divide to bridge, because how we explain and understand  
489 disability, as a way of developing practice, matters for coaches (Smith & Bundon, in press).  
490 The arguments here evidence the need for researchers, coach educators and coaches to  
491 examine critically their assumptions about coaching disabled athletes and the consequences  
492 for coach learning, education and practice. Engaging with disability studies may help  
493 researchers offer interpretations as to “why particular ways of knowing have become  
494 privileged over others” (Andrews, 2008, p.48) within particular social and historical contexts.  
495 For coaches, the way they position themselves and disability has implications for practice, as  
496 the assumptions they hold are implicitly, and explicitly manifested in their philosophy,  
497 behaviour, discourse, constructed coaching outcomes, practice-types, beliefs about talent and  
498 skill development, and judgements about disabled athletes (e.g. Cregan et al., 2007). For  
499 researchers, the assumptions they hold about disability influence the questions, methods and  
500 analyses they use to describe disability sports coaching.

501           Using a critical disability studies lens, we have argued that to set these assumptions  
502 aside and treat disabled people as a homogenous group is to risk perpetuating “an apolitical,

503 individualistic, neo-liberal, disembodied, and simplistic” position in coaching disability sport  
504 (Smith & Perrier, 2014a, p.16). By understanding how and why individuals and groups  
505 became and continue to become excluded and oppressed, coaches are able to reflect on their  
506 practices to uncover and deconstruct some of their deeply held assumptions about coaching  
507 disabled athletes. The lens of disability allows the socially constructed nature of coaching to  
508 be problematised providing alternative constructions, actions and solutions in context, to  
509 challenge dominant norms according to the needs of the athlete. Furthermore, the models of  
510 disability can be used to build upon the current research in coaching in powerful ways, to  
511 generate policies and practices to eradicate the exclusionary barriers (both individual, cultural  
512 and political) that may limit disability sport coaching (Barnes, 2012).

513           We have endeavoured to highlight the potential for coaching to connect with models  
514 of disability to shed new, critical light on how disability is constructed within coaching  
515 research. Whilst we cannot assume that any model of disability can explain disability in its  
516 entirety (Oliver, 1996), they provide a framework for understanding and grasping the  
517 complexity of coaching disabled athletes. The models of disability provide a critical vista  
518 whereby dominant, taken-for-granted or dogmatic beliefs regarding disability and coaching  
519 can be critiqued as a basis for research and development (Smith & Perrier, 2014a). Thus,  
520 engaging with disability studies may help to turn a critical gaze on disability coaching  
521 practice.

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526 **Acknowledgements**

527 Thanks must go to Dr Nick Caddick, Dr Andrea Bundon, Dr Toni Williams and Emma  
528 Richardson for the invaluable discussions throughout the development of this paper.

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