

How to Create a Specific Exercise Program for Athletes with Disabilities

Developing an Individualized Sports Program

What elements should be included in an exercise program? The question seems straightforward enough, but the answers that I have heard in my 30 years of teaching and coaching range from the helpful to the bizarre. I have benefitted from a running program carefully designed to develop speed, strength, and flexibility, but I was also once advised to fill a backpack with heavy rocks and sprint downhill so as to "stress my bones." That advice provided a new application for the theatrical phrase: "Break a leg!"

When it comes to sports, many people have an opinion on how the team should play, mistakes the coach is making, etc. Such dialogue allows fans to be engaged and for me, it is no different than discussing the merits of a movie, or the latest novel in a book club. When it comes to designing an exercise program - especially one for a athletes with disabilities - not every opinion is an informed one, and some opinions, like my "stress the bones" advisor, can actually be harmful. If you are designing an exercise program that considers the unique needs and interests of your athletes with disabilities, you may wish to incorporate some of the following elements:



First, develop an Individualized Sports Program (ISP). Classroom teachers regularly work with students, parents, counselors, and other education specialists to design Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). These are plans that identify the interests, strengths and areas of need for the student. Goals for the school term are set and the learning and social experiences of the student are then created. An ISP uses the same principles. The athlete works with the coach, parent, and support worker (if he

or she has one) to set achievable goals. The plan is unique to the athlete and should include these basic exercise principles:

- **Exercise frequency** - how often does this athlete want to practice? Are there any health risks for this athlete associated with too little or too much practice?
- **Exercise duration** - how long is this athlete able to engage in practice or competition?
- **Exercise specificity** - When we exercise, we challenge various physiological systems with the purpose of making them more efficient and thus we improve physical fitness. Well-developed exercise programs may include elements that focus on speed, strength, balance, flexibility, and aerobic and anaerobic energy production. The unique physical capabilities of athletes with disabilities may require a coach to adapt or modify his or her activities to support the elements in this athlete that may be under-developed.
- **Exercise intensity** - How hard should the athlete work? This is not an easy or quick question to answer, but the answer will be unique to the skills, motivation, and challenges of the unique athlete. Some athletes may be capable of a sustained level of intense exercise (high heart rate, etc.), while others may require a low-level, gentle exercise stimulus in respect of their needs.
- **Exercise progression** - As the athlete improves his or her fitness and achieves his or her goals, the program will almost certainly need to adjust goals so as to maintain the degree of challenge.

Incorporating these elements into an exercise program will not only enhance these athletes' physical, social, and emotional well-being, but it will also help them to achieve their athletic goals.



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