Disability and Sport: (Non)Coverage of an Athletic Paradox

Marie Hardin
Pennsylvania State University

In sit volleyball, the players pivot and lunge, dive and spike, many of them with legless torsos supported by strong, agile arms. There's also wheelchair rugby, which sounds like a contradiction in terms until you see it. It's the down-and-dirty wheelchair sport, the roughest and most aggressive of them all. The players—all quadriplegics—crash and smash it up in the rugby tradition, though the game is played in a gym. Think rugby by way of bumper cars.

—Sportsjones.com (2001, August 24, para. 1)

Under the glare of an international media spotlight, thousands of able-bodied athletes from all over the globe vied for gold and glory during the August 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. When they left, they cleared the way for another elite sporting competition—second in size only to the Olympics—just days later at the same venue.

The biggest difference between the two events was not in the intensity of sport, the level of competition, the degree of nationalist pride, or even the occurrence of scandal (Golden, 2002; Nash, 2001). Instead the marker lay in awareness and publicity for the events. NBC, which owned exclusive broadcast rights to the Olympic Games in the United States, provided coverage 24 hours per day on its various networks. The network provided not even 1% of that level of coverage to the Paralympics, which followed in September and showcased 4,000 athletes from 140 countries (Paralympics, 2004). Americans interested in the Paralympics were forced to follow the Games on the Web, using mostly foreign media sites.

The blackout of Paralympic coverage continues an American media tradition that stretches back to the beginning of televised sports coverage. Even when the Paralympics took place in the United States, American journalists did a far poorer job...
of covering them than do foreign journalists (Golden, 2002). Witness the 2002 Games in Salt Lake City: Although NBC paid hundreds of millions of dollars for the rights to air the Olympics in prime time each night during the Games, the Paralympic Games garnered one hour of coverage by NBC: the opening ceremonies—two days after they occurred. For eight days, A&E aired a one-hour segment that highlighted the day’s events; there was no comment from A&E on the money involved. National Public Radio did a segment prior to the Paralympic Games and interviewed the president of the International Paralympic Committee, Phillip Craven. Meanwhile, the nation’s major newspapers (including USA Today, The New York Times, and The Washington Post) each ran hundreds of articles about the Olympics but a collective total of 13 about the Paralympics (Golden, 2002; Hardin & Hardin, 2003).

Noncoverage of the Paralympics is typical of the treatment afforded elite disabled athletes in general; it is as difficult to find serious mainstream coverage of disability sport as it is to find a hair on ESPN commentator Dick Vitale’s head (Wasenius, 2003). Although participation by disabled athletes in elite competition is growing, mainstream media have persisted in their usual approach of exclusion and stereotyping (DePauw & Gavron, 1995; DePauw, 1997). For instance, marathoner Jean Driscoll’s seventh win in the Boston Marathon’s wheelchair division was framed as a social event in a 1996 edition of Runner’s World; CBS aired six of seven events at the 1997 “World’s Fastest Man” competition, opting not to air the race for the world’s fastest amputee athletes (DePauw, 1997). It is easier to find a poker or billiards game on ESPN than to find coverage of disability sporting competition.

Organizers and promoters of disability sports events are constantly challenged to prove their legitimacy and must struggle to get coverage (Botelho, 2000). “The biggest challenge is the whole credibility and legitimacy issue. The reality is that the disabled sports movement is 15 years behind women’s sports,” said consultant and Paralympian Eli Wolf (Botelho, 2000, para. 9).

THE PARADOX PRESENTED BY DISABLED SPORT

In light of the lack of coverage, it is not surprising that many people who consider themselves die-hard sports fans are not aware of disability athletics. The thought of an athlete with a disability competing in mainstream sports may seem unimaginable—even ludicrous—to sports fans accustomed to the ideal body standard so prized in U.S. culture (DePauw, 1997). “Disability sport has not been viewed as legitimate sport, but rather as something less...Opportunities, rewards, public recognition and the like have not been afforded athletes with disabilities” (DePauw & Gavron, 1995, p. 10). Because of cultural norms regarding the body and athleticism in U.S. culture, the notion of disabled sport may be likened to the ideological paradox also presented by the notion of lesbian mother (Cherney, 2003; DePauw & Gavron, 1995; Golden, 2002; Hardin, Lynn, & Walsdorf, 2003; Thompson, 2002).

Because of an overwhelming emphasis on physicality in sport, athletes with disabilities are an especially marginalized group, and among the most recent (along with gay and lesbian athletes) to begin fighting for front-gate entrance to athletic halls and fields (Hardin & Hardin, 2003). Many individuals with disabilities do not view their bodies as entirely weak, frail, and imperfect, perhaps explaining the increase in their sports participation and the development of a national, thriving network for disabled sport (DePauw, 1997; Hoffer, 1995). A number of organizations in the United States, including Disabled Sports USA, Wheelchair Sports USA, and the National Disability Sports Alliance, support competitive disabled athletes who compete in adapted versions of virtually every sport. Another nod to athletes with disabilities came in 2002, when the ESPY Awards added that category to its roster of annual honors for athletes. Visually impaired climber Erik Weihenmayer won the first ESPY award for a disabled athlete. Another boost to disability sport in the United States came when the U.S. Olympic Committee created the U.S. Paralympics division in May 2001 to focus efforts on enhancing programs, funding, and opportunities for people with physical disabilities to participate in Paralympic sport.

Sports Illustrated writer Hofer (1995), in one of the few mainstream sports articles written on the disability sports movement, acknowledged the “explosion in participation and the competitive legitimacy: “Really, the distinction between wheelchair racers and the Olympians is fading at these high levels” (p. 65). A look at the records for able-bodied and disability sports clarifies his point. Donovan Bailey’s Olympic record in the men’s 100 meters is 9.84 seconds; the Paralympic record, set by Nigerian arm amputee Adjibola Adeoye, is 10.72 seconds. In four powerlifting categories, Paralympic records exceed world records for able-bodied competitors (Sports, 2004). Participation in sport “demonstrates that individuals with disabilities are more able and similar to their non-disabled peers than stereotypes suggest” (Taub, Blinde, & Greer, 1999, p. 1469).

SPORT, THE BODY, AND U.S. CULTURAL HEGEMONY

Yet scholars argue that athletes with disabilities are perceived as weak and dependent, thus not valid in terms of sport. Disabled athletes report high levels of stigma—being stared at or having their entire identities constructed in terms of their disabilities (Ashton-Shaeffer, Gibson, Autry, & Hanson, 2001).

In many ways, people with disabilities who participate in the world of sport provide prima facie contradictions to accepted societal norms regarding disability (Hardin & Hardin, 2003). Those who dare enter the realm of sport, in a sense, participate in resistance to cultural hegemony by the very act of picking up a ball or a barbell. Their active participation in sport appears as a contradiction, because sport (like life in U.S. culture) has been constructed as an able-bodied activity (DePauw, 1997).

U.S. Cultural Hegemony, Media, and Sport

The theory of cultural hegemony, rooted in the writings of Antonio Gramsci, may help explain cultural resistance to disability sport in the United States. Hegemony may be defined as the perpetuation of ideological norms that serve the most powerful groups in a culture; in other words, ideas presented in the culture as common sense serve some groups while oppressing others (Altheide, 1984; Condit, 1994; Croteau & Hoynes, 2000; Holtzman, 2000). Social structures and relationships that help some but disadvantage others are presented as natural. Social relations and political policy are framed within a worldview that serves the powerful but has gained passive acceptance (“that’s the way it is”) from other groups oppressed by it.
Mass media are crucial to the function of cultural hegemony in the United States (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Holtzman, 2000). Media inculcate individuals with values essential to institutional structures in society by adopting dominant assumptions and framing content within them (Croteau & Hoynes, 2000). Hegemonic ideas are presented as universally valid, and alternative views are appropriated into the dominant frame (Artz & Murphy, 2000; Condit, 1994).

Sport is also considered by scholars to be a powerful hegemonic institution in the United States (DePauw, 1997). Sport reflects the dominant values, norms, and standards of the culture in which it operates; the inequity in sport is reproduced in the form of social inequalities, and vice versa (Hardin & Hardin, 2003).

**Moral Order of the Body**

Sport media are ideal sites to reinforce American cultural values, such as respect for authority, individualism, sacrificing for the team, and hard work. American culture stories tales of the rugged individualist by rejecting interdependence as weak and undesirable (Barr, 2000). Autonomy and physical fitness are valued, and physical dependence is generally viewed with disdain (Ashton-Sheafer, et al., 2001). The sport-media complex reinforces this dominant ideology as common sense through its obsession with the ideal body, one that is fit and able to contribute to economic production (Hahn, 1988; Hargreaves, 1994). Sports deemed most popular in U.S. culture are those that reinforce male hegemony through emphasis on strength, power, height, and weight (Sage, 1990). Bodies deemed most valuable (male, able-bodied) are placed at the top of a "moral order" of the body; gender/sexuality, race, and able-bodiedness are factors in what is deemed the norm versus the deviant (Hahn, 1988; Hall, 1996, 1997).

Because they fall outside the norm—what is culturally desirable—people with disabilities are rendered invisible. The ideal body is one that fits an environment that excludes the majority; people with disabilities are a liability for their inability to navigate that environment (Davis, 1999). This is especially true in sport, where the ideal body is idolized and anything less is viewed with disdain. Murphy wrote (1995), "We are subverters of an American Ideal, just as the poor betray the American Dream. And to the extent that we depart from the ideal, we become ugly and repulsive to the able-bodied" (p. 143).

Perhaps the most literal case of disability as liability in sport during recent years has been in coverage of Casey Martin, a PGA golfer who appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court for the right to use a golf cart. Casey was sometimes vilified by media columnists and commentators who believed he should not have received accommodation from the PGA (Jenkins, 2001).

**COVERAGE OF DISABILITY SPORT**

Despite the continuing progress in technology, legal rights, and sports participation, athletes with disabilities continue to be stigmatized because their bodies do not reflect the socially constructed norm (Shapiro, 1993; Taub, et al., 1999). People with disabilities have historically been excluded from the sport-media complex because of their failure to meet hegemonically prescribed ideals of physicality (DePauw, 1997).

Thus, noncoverage of athletes with disabilities is the norm for American media. Research on visual representations of people with disabilities and sport shows a pattern of almost complete exclusion. A study by Maas and Hasbrook (2001) examined photos in golf magazines and found no representation of golfers with visible disabilities. Studies of women's sports magazines in 1999 and in 2003 found the same results: Female athletes with disabilities were shut out (Hardin, et al., 2003; Schell, 1999). A study of the only major children's sports magazine in the United States, *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, found that children with disabilities are virtually invisible in that magazine, reinforcing to young readers the hegemonic notion that sport is a realm for the able bodied (Hardin, Hardin, Lynn, & Walsdorf, 2001).

Coverage of the Paralympic Games, which officially began in 1960 with 400 athletes from 23 countries, has historically been sparse (History, 2004). Coverage of the Salt Lake City Paralympics in 2002, which drew disabled athletes from all over the globe, was virtually nonexistent in U.S. media except for coverage by the A&E Network (Golden, 2002). Golden, who interviewed sports reporters at the Olympics and the Paralympics, found that many American journalists did not view disabled sports as valid because the journalists believed the disabled athletes could not be competitive. Golden (2002) quoted an American broadcast reporter who said about disabled athletes and the Paralympics: "They can't compete on the same level as the Olympic athletes, so it's a cheat they throw to them to make them feel better. It's not a real competition, and I, for one, don't see why I should have to cover it" (p. 13).

Another reporter, from a large-circulation newspaper, said he didn't see the Olympics and Paralympics as equitable: "It's [the Paralympics] is not a real competition. You wouldn't hold a high school tournament in Yankee Stadium. You wouldn't hold an amateur competition at Madison Square Garden" (Golden, 2002, p. 13).

Golden (2002) found that major American newspapers published from zero to five articles apiece on the 2002 Paralympics, compared with hundreds of stories during the Olympics. Although newspapers in other countries, such as Britain, Canada, and Germany, publish more articles covering the Paralympics, scholars say the coverage reflects emphasis on an able-bodied ideal for Paralympic athletes (Thomas & Smith, 2002) or an undue emphasis on national success and medal rankings (Schantz & Gilbert, 2001).

Disabled athletes who train and compete at the highest levels express frustration at their systematic exclusion. One athlete, a wheelchair basketball player who often calls in game scores to a local newspaper, said he is shut out by sports editors: "They put in pages of high school sports, and yet they refuse to put [us] in... That's so stupid! We're athletes... One thing people probably don't realize is that there's 53 million disabled people out there. We're probably the largest single group in the country" (Hardin & Hardin, 2003, p. 225).

**The "Supercrip"**

Over the past decade, coverage of disability sports has increased ever so slightly (Schantz & Gilbert, 2001). However, authors of the most recent studies acknowledge that the type of coverage has not improved. Reporters still focus primarily on the "disabled" instead of the "athlete"; when athletes with disabilities are covered, they
are usually covered as feature stories instead of sports stories (Schantz & Gilbert, 2001; Shapiro, 1993). This de-emphasizes the athlete’s sporting accomplishments. One wheelchair basketball player, ranked as a top player in the world during the 1990s, said he’d rather not see coverage of disabled athletics if it is “going to make the general public say, ‘Ah, wow, the poor pitiful soul’:

Talk about that person’s athletic abilities or the team’s athletic accomplishments, and it’s OK to mention a disability because that’s what makes the person who he or she is, but you don’t focus in. The interest should not be that person’s disability. . . . Maybe the people in the media need to have an in-service or a memo that says, ‘These guys would rather be treated as athletes when you’re dealing with a sporting event, so let’s put the emphasis there’ (Hardin & Hardin, 2004).

When athletes with disabilities do break into mainstream sports pages, it is either in a story of the “supercrip” mold or a story involving controversy over the disabled athlete (Schantz & Gilbert, 2001; Schell & Rodriguez, 2001; Stone, 2001). The supercrip model, which emphasizes the person with a disability as overcoming a disability to lead a normal life (Ciogston, 1991; Shapiro, 1993), is common. The supercrip model supports cultural hegemony in that it rests on the common-sense assumption that disability is an individual condition, one for which the larger society has no obligation for accommodation. Thus, media use of the supercrip model assumes that people with disabilities are pitiful (and useless), until they overcome their disabilities through rugged individualism and pull off a feat considered heroic by the mainstream (Iwakuma, 1997; Schell & Rodriguez, 2001; Shapiro, 1993). Perhaps the feat is climbing Mt. Everest as a blind person or playing basketball in a wheelchair (Hardin & Hardin, 2003).

Erik Weihenmayer, a 32-year-old blind mountain climber who conquered Everest in 2001, was framed as a supercrip in extensive media coverage (Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Kahn, 2001). He was hailed as a hero in media accounts and compared to blind pioneers like Helen Keller. “His Everest trip has that historic feel to it,” read a story in The Boston Globe (Ingold, 2001, p. B2).

Although the attention to Weihenmayer was praised, it was also criticized by disability advocates. Kathi Wolfe, a blind journalist who often writes about disability issues, wrote that after Weihenmayer’s climb, she was approached by well-meaning people and asked when she, too, would climb Everest (Wolfe, 2001). She wrote:

One of us bursts onto the cultural radar screen as a superhero, and all of us are expected to perform amazing feats . . . Supercrips are everywhere in the media. The person with no use of her arms who paints masterpieces with her feet, the guy with Tourette’s syndrome who becomes a radio announcer. Stephen Hawking explaining the universe from his wheelchair. And, of course, that blind mountain climber. . . . The supercrip exacerbates the already difficult challenges that people with disabilities face. If we hear enough such stories we may feel defeated by comparison. (p. B4)

More progressive media models recognize the social construction of disability, the rights of people with disabilities, and the roles of people with disabilities as multifaceted and unlimited (Haller, 2000). Proponents of fair and equitable coverage of disability sports prefer progressive coverage, as have disabled athletes through self-framing during media interviews (DePauw, 1997; Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Schell & Rodriguez, 2001). However, athletes who attempt to cast themselves away from the supercrip mold find resistance. Researchers who analyzed coverage of 1996 Paralympian Hope Lewellen found distinct use of the supercrip model by CBS as an overlay to Lewellen’s own attempt to frame herself as an athlete who was part of a larger, culturally diverse sport world (Schell & Rodriguez, 2001). CBS insisted on attempting to frame Lewellen as a supercrip who overcame the odds to emerge as a model of disability, instead of as a genuine athlete. Analysis of CBS’ overall coverage of the 1996 Paralympics revealed the same pattern; commentators “often dramatized the enormously difficult challenges and obstacles faced by athletes with disabilities,” and the network featured “supercrip par excellence” Christopher Reeve (Schell & Duncan, 1999, p. 43). Similar research on print sport media finds the same kinds of results. The focus of articles is on how athletes cope with their conditions, instead of on the performances of these athletes in their sports (Schantz & Gilbert, 2001).

THE FUTURE: RECASTING DISABILITY SPORTS COVERAGE

Although disability sports continue to thrive in the United States, their growth is limited unless they receive adequate media coverage. Without fair and accurate coverage, athletes are denied financial opportunities (through media exposure and sponsorships) afforded to able-bodied athletes. As Hoffer (1995) wrote, disabled athletes “have been condemned to sport’s netherworld, where most of the attention they do get is unflattering and maddening” (p. 64).

American sports media producers who dare cover competitive disability events, such as the Paralympics, know the potential of such sports coverage as exciting and entertaining, in the same spirit as able-bodied competition. Ian Furness, a commentator with the A&E Network during the 2002 Paralympics in Salt Lake City, told an interviewer: “Just because these athletes face some challenges physically doesn’t mean they’re not competitive . . . For somebody to say that these guys aren’t competitive—that’s wrong, because they are. When they say that, they [the Olympic reporters] have never seen a [Paralympic] event” (Golden, 2002, p. 19).

Furness points to the need for media producers to become educated about disability sports; many, for instance, still confuse the Paralympics with the Special Olympics, a national program of sporting events for individuals with cognitive disabilities (The Paralympic Games, 1996). However, changes in the U.S. media approach to disability sport will not take place until normative ideology about sport, competition, and the ideal body is expanded in such a way as to address the unfair, hegemonic power relations in sport and society. Coverage of disability athletics by the U.S. sport-media complex should reflect acceptance and accommodation of sporting bodies that deviate from the norm in a culture that overtly prides itself on democratic, egalitarian values.

Such a revisioning of competitive sport would open doors to a richer, more diverse array of media offerings. Further, it would help level the playing field for one of the most disenfranchised minority groups in U.S. culture. As DePauw (2003) wrote, perhaps soon “we will be better able to see individuals with a disability as
they often view themselves—not as 'deviant,' nor their bodies as weak or frail, or even imperfect" (p. 361).

REFERENCES
