CLASSIFICATION IN SPORT FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

Classification exists to provide a structure for competition among athletes with different kinds and degrees of disability

What is classification?

Forms of classification are used all the time within sport (for example, gender, age and weight).

The golf handicapping system is a good example of how players can be grouped based on ability, thereby allowing players of varying ability to compete against one another. In this sense classification is geared to allow a greater number of people to take part. Classification is also used to create a structure for competition between athletes with disability and is no different in this respect: it is simply the process of putting athletes into groups for the purposes of competition.

Just as gender classification is used to minimise the effect gender has on competition, disability classification is used to minimise the effect that disability has on competition. All Paralympic sports use classification and a growing number of non-Paralympic sports are developing classification systems to give people with disability the option of competing in a greater variety of sports.

Creating a structure for competition

It is sometimes said that classification in sport for people with disability is to ensure fair competition and to create a level playing field. In modern sport for people with disability, this is no longer the case. Completely equal competition cannot exist as there will always be a range of abilities (both within sport for people with disability and sport for people without disability). Rather, the classification system exists to minimise the effect an individual's impairment has on the outcome of competitions. The impairment should not be a determining factor in performance (for example, that someone uses a wheelchair or has a vision impairment). It should be their training, motivation, strength and timing.

Competition is more meaningful and enjoyable when it is close, and this is the aim of classification. While not every game can be competitive, the goal is to ensure that disability does not have a bearing on this.

Who are classifiers?

Classifiers are people who determine the class an athlete should be in. They are trained officials who are able to apply the guidelines and processes of classification on a sport-by-sport basis. Classifiers come from a range of backgrounds but, generally speaking, they will either have medical experience (for example, doctors or physiotherapists) or will be technical experts within their sport (for example, coaches or ex-athletes).

Classification is not just an international competition issue. It is also applicable to national, state and local-level competitions. However, if an athlete wants to compete at international level they must be classified under the international sports federations' classification system. It is crucial for athletes, coaches, teachers, parents and anyone with an involvement in sport for people with disability to know about classification. Needless to say, the role of the classifier is vitally important.

What are the systems used for?

Early forms of classification were based on grouping people together who had the same or similar impairments. In recent years classification systems have become more sport specific, grouping competitors based on their functional ability to do a sport. There are exceptions to this (for example, athletes who are vision impaired only go through an eye test).

Classification groupings also vary between sports. An athlete who has a single leg amputation will be classified in different groups for swimming and for athletics.

There are other systems used to classify athletes with disability that are based on factors such as time, average score or IQ. The Special Olympics 'divisioning' system groups competitors by age, gender and ability. It is designed to create opportunities for the greatest number of people though a competitive and meaningful system, similar to golf handicapping.

How are people classified?

Classification is a way of providing a structure through which people with disability can compete against their peers. It aims to minimise the effect of impairment on the outcome of competition and works best when it is sport specific. Functional classification involves a series of tests carried out by classifiers to establish that an athlete meets the necessary criteria. This includes:

- assessing the minimum impairment — is the athlete actually eligible for disability sport?

- observing the athlete as they participate in their sport in order to establish the optimum classification group to compete in

- the Australian Paralympic Committee, which works with the national sporting organisations responsible for the training of classifiers in Australia.

The classification process can often be controversial. Athletes will want to be in the class that gives them the best chance of winning, and classifiers have to take into account factors such as the effects of training on athletes' impairments, to ensure that the athletes are treated fairly.