

PARTICIPATION ACCESSIBILITY FOR ATHLETES WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL SPORT COMPETITIONS

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Abstract: *Athletes with an intellectual disability (ID) have many possibilities to participate in international sports events. However, the existence of four major international sports events can lead to confusion for athletes and coaches due to the possible overlap of eligibility and sports disciplines and prevent them from making the most of their potential. We analyzed the main characteristics of four major international events: Special Olympics World Games, Trisome Games, Virtus Global Games and Paralympic Games. We designed a framework with five parameters: Athlete eligibility, classification, Minimum Qualifying Standards, number and type of sports available and tradition (number of previously held events) relevant to competition accessibility of these events and ranked them based on existing data in order to assess overall competition accessibility of these events. The analysis showed that the Special Olympics is the most accessible competition considering all five characteristics, while the Paralympics are restrictive in terms of available sports and classification. Special Olympics World Games, Virtus Global Games and Trisome Games overlap to a certain extent when it comes to the classification of athletes with Down syndrome. Given the relatively short history of international sports for people with intellectual disabilities, further efforts, analysis and research is necessary in order to develop sports competitions both in terms of inclusivity on the one hand and competitiveness on the other.*

Key words: *sports, intellectual disability, eligibility, classification*

Introduction

Participation in sports activities provides significant benefits to people with intellectual disabilities (ID). Positive physiological effects are similar to those of the standard population and include: Improvement of general health, functions of the cardiovascular and respiratory systems, prevention of obesity, better bone and muscle metabolism [1]. The benefits of sport also relate to the improvement of social skills as well as psychological well-being. However, studies show that a large part of the population of people with intellectual disabilities does not meet the guidelines of the World Health Organization in terms of physical activity [2, 3, 4, 5] and their level of physical activity is significantly lower compared to the general population [6]. One of the reasons why this problem occurs is the existence of barriers that significantly affect reduced physical activity and number of people involved in sports activities. Jacinto et al. [7] grouped these barriers into five groups: personal, family, social, financial and environmental. Some of these barriers relate to lack of understanding

and awareness of how to include people with a disability in sport [8], lack of information about adequate and inclusive activity [9, 10]. Athletes with an ID have many possibilities to participate in international sports events. However, the existence of four major international sports events can lead to confusion for athletes and coaches due to the possible overlap of eligibility criteria and sports disciplines and prevent them from making the most of their potential. An important factor in directing athletes to one of these four major events is the status/popularity of that event in a particular country [11] as well as sports facilitators, coaches, parents, national sports federations, etc. which should provide an adequate framework for sports competition at the basic level.

At the international level, there are four major events for people with intellectual disabilities: Special Olympics World Summer Games (SOWSG), Trisome Games (TG), Virtus Global Games (VGG) and Paralympic Games (PG). The aim of the research is to analyze and assess overall competition accessibility based on the following parameters: Athletes eligibility, Classification, Minimum qualifying standards, Number and type of sports available and Tradition.

Method

The method of theoretical analysis was used to create a framework and define parameters important for overall participation accessibility for athletes with ID at the international level sport competitions. Academic articles, brochures, rule books, documents and other written sources were used for the theoretical analysis. After the analysis, we identified five parameters relevant for competition accessibility: Athlete eligibility, Classification, Minimum qualifying standards, Number and type of sports available and Tradition (number of previously held events). We evaluated and ranked four international level events for each of the above parameters. For each parameter, these events are rated so that the event that is the most accessible to athletes is rated 4 and the least accessible is rated 1. The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to determine if there are significant differences in rankings between multiple groups and a post-hoc Dunn's test to identify which specific groups differ from each other in medians.

Results and Discussion

ATHLETE ELIGIBILITY is defined as suitability to be chosen, selected, or allowed to participate in sporting event.

Special Olympics World Summer Games - allows the participation of athletes who are at least 8 years old and identified by an agency or professional as having one of the following conditions: ID, cognitive delays as measured by formal assessment, or significant learning or vocational problems due to cognitive delay that require or have required specially designed instruction [12].

Trisome Games are designed for individuals with Trisomy 21 Down syndrome and Mosaic Down syndrome. Eligibility is determined by taking Blood test for

Cytogenetic Analysis. If any other evidence is presented which in the opinion of Medical Advisory Group is not conclusive, SU-DS (Sports Union for athletes with Down Syndrome) retains the right to request the athlete to submit to a Cytogenetic Analysis [13]. The athlete must be at least 13 years old before the first day of competition for swimming and judo and at least 14 years old for Synchronised Swimming. The athlete must also undergo screening for atlanto axial instability (AAI).

Virtus Global Games - Eligible impairments within Virtus competition are: ID, intellectual disability and significant additional impairment and Autism [14].

Paralympic Games - Athletes with an Intellectual Disability. ID is a disability characterised by significant limitation both in intellectual functioning (defined as a Full-Scale IQ score of 75 or lower), Significant limitations in adaptive behaviour as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills. ID must be registered before the age of 18.

Comparing these four events, we can conclude that the Special Olympics is the most inclusive broad platform of competitions accessible to a wide range of people with ID, while the Trisome Games are the least inclusive in terms of formal diagnosis of ID allowing only people with Down syndrome to participate. Virtus Global Games are more inclusive than the Paralympic Games because they allow participation of people with significant additional impairment aside to ID and people with Autism.

CLASSIFICATION is a measure of the impact of impairment on sports performance. The classification system classifies athletes into groups so that the winner is not decided by the level of disability but by skills, tactical abilities, fitness and similar parameters.

Special Olympics World Summer Games - Divisioning races, judged events or short team matches are held to assess the athletes' or teams' ability levels in competition. An assessment can also be based on entry score from a prior competition. Athletes or teams are then grouped into competitive divisions according to three criteria: age, gender and ability level. Special Olympics suggests a guideline of no more than 15% [15] variance between the highest and lowest scores within any division (not a strict rule but a recommendation) [12]. Because of the goals and values of Special Olympics which highlight experience and enjoyment in active participation in sport, there is no need for a strict and precise classification.

Trisome Games - The classification system mainly distinguishes two groups: T21 and Mosaic Down syndrome [13]. In team sports such as football and basketball, the participation of two athletes with mosaic Down syndrome is allowed, while in the swimming competition, both groups swim together, but they are awarded separately.

Virtus Global Games allow competition in three classes:

III1 – Athletes with an intellectual disability. ID is a disability characterised by significant limitation both in intellectual functioning (defined as a Full-Scale IQ score of 75 or lower), Significant limitations in adaptive behaviour as expressed in

conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills. Intellectual disability must be registered before the age of 18.

II2 - Athletes with an intellectual disability and significant additional impairment. A significant additional impairment is defined by Virtus as a lifelong condition that affects the functional capacity of the individual and substantially impacts on their sports performance. This includes: A formal diagnosis of Trisomy 21 or Translocation Down Syndrome, additional impairment as defined by the Virtus FAST Assessment.

II3 – Athletes with Autism. the Virtus eligibility criteria for athletes with autism is a formal diagnosis of Autism or ASD carried out by qualified practitioners, using accepted diagnostic techniques [14].

Paralympic Games - Although there is only one class, classification at the PG is mandatory to determine whether and to what extent an impairment affects performance in a particular sport. The classification procedure at the PG consists of three steps:

1. If he or she wants to compete in the ID category in PG, the athlete must have formal proof of an ID (IQ measures 75 or below, limitations in adapted behaviour diagnosed before the age of 18);
2. The Sport Cognition Test Battery which focuses on assessment of cognitive functions that are relevant to the particular sport;
3. Sport specific assessment focuses on observation during competition and/or sport specific tests [16].

Based on the above data, we can conclude that the Special Olympics allows the formation of multiple classes depending on the previous results of the participating athletes, VGG allow competition in three classes, TG allow competition in two classes and The Paralympic Games have only one class of athletes with intellectual impairment.

MINIMUM QUALIFYING STANDARDS (MQS) is a mark as good or better than the set mark which the athlete must achieve in order to be eligible to compete. MQS is a good indicator of the level of competitiveness and sports performances that we can expect at the competition.

Special Olympics World Summer Games - Athletes desiring to represent their Accredited Programs in World Games must first compete in Sub-Program Games or Accredited Program Games held or sponsored within their Accredited Program to be eligible for World Games.

Trisome games - There are clear MQS for athletics and swimming competitions while for other sports we have not found a qualifying standard [15].

Virtus Global Games - There are clear MQS for athletics and swimming competitions while for other sports each country has its own process for selecting athletes to compete at the VGG [17,18].

Paralympic Games - MQS exists for athletics and swimming competitions [19]. A National Paralympic Committee may enter a maximum of three (3) eligible athletes per individual medal event. For Table Tennis the qualification system includes several criteria such as: VGG results, regional championships, individual and doubles world ranking, world qualification tournament, bipartite invitations.

Table 1. Example of MQS for athletic competitions at Trisome games, Virtus games and Paralympic games [15,17,18,19]

MQS Athletics- men	Trisome games (Antalya 2024)	Virtus global games II2 (Vichy 2023)	Virtus global games II1 (Vichy 2023)	Paralympics (Tokio 2020)
100m	28.00s	16.20s	12.00s	
200m	55.00s	34.30s	24.30s	
400m	2.08 min.	1.29 min	55.00s	52.60s
1500m	8.10. min.	9.10 min.	4.15.00min	4.12.00s
Long jump	1.50m	3m	5.80m	6.00m
Discus 1kg	10m	14.9m		
Shot put	5.30m (4kg)	6.50m (4kg)	10.50m (7.26kg)	11.00m (7.26kg)

Due to the Special Olympics classification system that groups athletes and teams into competitive divisions with a guideline of no more than 15% [15] variance between the highest and lowest scores within any division, we did not find MQS for sports available at the Special Olympics World Summer Games. In Table 1 there is an example of MQS for Trisome games, Virtus Global Games and Paralympic games Athletics competition. Considering the classification system, comparable groups are TG-VGG II2 class and PG-VGG II1 class. Comparing the default MQS of sports disciplines, it is evident that PG has more rigorous standards compared to VGG II1 class and that VGG II2 has in most cases more rigorous standards compared to TG.

NUMBER AND TYPE OF SPORTS AVAILABLE

At the last Special Olympic World Games held in Berlin (2023) athletes competed in 26 different sports [12]. At the TG (Antalya 2024) athletes competed in 8 different sports, at the VGG (Vichy 2023) in 13 sports and at the PG (Tokio 2020) in 3 different sports. Athletics, swimming and table tennis are the most played sports by people with ID, since they are in the official program of all four major international games. There are several possible reasons why these sports are popular with people with ID: All three sports require minimal equipment, making them easier to participate in for individuals with limited resources, each sport can be adapted to various levels of ability and all three sports relatively easy to learn with rules that are not too complicated. There is some evidence to suggest the therapeutic and health value of these sports for people with ID [20, 21]. It is also worth to note the dominance of individual sports over collective sports in the population of people with ID.

Individual sports allow athletes to progress and compete at their own pace, while in team sports it is more difficult to include people of different abilities and skill levels. Additionally, some athletes may find it challenging to follow complex team strategies or instructions from multiple teammates and coaches.

TRADITION (NUMBER OF PREVIOUSLY HELD EVENTS)

Tradition and the number of previously held competitions can significantly affect the scale and recognition of an event. Events held consistently over time build a reputation for quality and organization and this inherent significance can attract wider athletes and audience interest over time. In terms of tradition, the Special Olympics are the most established competition with 17 previously held games. The TG were most recently established with the first games held in 2016 in Florence and the second in 2024 in Antalya. The VGG and the PG are historically linked both in terms of aspiration to a high level of competition and in terms of bureaucratic ties. Virtus Sport, formerly INAS (International Federation for Athletes with Intellectual Impairment) is responsible for managing and overseeing the classification process for athletes wishing to compete within the intellectual disability sports both in VGG and PG. The PG were originally the only elite-level competition for people with ID with competitions held in Atlanta in 1996 and Sydney in 2000. After the cheating scandal involving Spanish basketball players [22] the entire intellectual disability category was suspended from the Paralympics. Following the suspension, the VGG were designed as a new competition for people with ID without the limitations imposed by the IPC [23] The first VGG were held in 2004, and five more games were held after that. At the London 2012 paralympic games, competition for people with ID was re-established through athletics, swimming and table tennis.

After the analysis, we rated the different events based on the level of accessibility for each parameter and ranked the sports events based on the results.

Tables 2 and 3 show that the SOWG is the most accessible competition for each of the analyzed parameters.

Table 2. Accessibility rating of identified parameters for four major international games

	Special Olympics World Games	Trisome Games	Virtus Global Games	Paralimpic Games
Athlete eligibility	4	1	3	2
Classification	4	2	3	1
Minimum Qualifying Standards	4	3	2	1
Number and type of sports available	4	2	3	1
Tradition (number of previously held events)	4	1	2.5	2.5

As expected, the largest difference in overall accessibility ranking was observed between SOWG and PG (Table 4). Many authors have described the difference in philosophy and approach between these two competitions, where SO emphasizes participation, personal achievement, and inclusion while PG focuses on elite competition and achieving peak performance [11, 23, 24]. The biggest similarity in overall ranking was observed between TG and PG (Table 4), which were ranked as the least accessible for athletes. However, PG lower accessibility is a result of more rigorous classification, higher MQS and fewer sports available, while in TG lower accessibility is the result of athlete eligibility rules (TG are designed only for individuals with Trisomy 21 Down syndrome and Mosaic Down syndrome) and lack of tradition since it is not yet a fully established event. The number of participants at the last held competitions confirms the high level accessibility of the SOWG, since about 6,500 athletes took part in the SOWG in Berlin 2023. A total of 161 athletes competed at the Tokyo 2020 PG, 488 athletes at the TG 2024 and around 1000 athletes competed at the VGG, hosted in Vichy 2023.

Table 3. Differences in rankings between multiple groups (The Kruskal-Wallis test)

Groups:	Special Olympic World games	Trisome Games	Virtus Global Games	Paralympic Games
Skewness:	NaN	0.5122	-1.2578	0.8839
Excess kurtosis:	NaN	-0.6122	0.3125	-1.75
Normality	NaN	0.3851	0.06792	0.06366
Median:	4	2	3	1
Sample size (n):	5	5	5	5
Rank sum (R):	90	34.5	58.5	27
R2/n:	1620	238.05	684.45	145.8
MeanRank	18	6.9	11.7	5.4

Table 4. Differences between each group

Pair	Mean Rank difference	Z	SE	Critical value	p-value	p-value/2
x1-x2	11.1	3.0371	3.6548	9.6425	0.002389*	0.001194
x1-x3	6.3	1.7237	3.6548	9.6425	0.08475	0.04238
x1-x4	12.6	3.4475	3.6548	9.6425	0.0005658*	0.0002829
x2-x3	-4.8	1.3133	3.6548	9.6425	0.1891	0.09454
x2-x4	1.5	0.4104	3.6548	9.6425	0.6815	0.3408
x3-x4	6.3	1.7237	3.6548	9.6425	0.08475	0.04238

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE ACCESSIBILITY OF ID SPORTS

In the previous chapter, the parameters related to the organization of the games, the rules and regulations and the tradition of the event were analyzed. However, the national structure and policy of ID sports in each country has a significant influence on the number of athletes who participate in international competitions. Study done by Marin-Urquiza and et. al [25] points to the different characteristics of the 10 analyzed European countries in terms of collaboration between organisations involved in ID-sport, type of ID-sport providers, funding and economic resources and international sport representation of athletes with ID. Different approaches to ID sport lead to different national representation at international competitions. SO is well established in most countries, ID sport in France is mostly oriented towards VGG, while in Great Britain and Poland it is oriented towards PG. Cooperation with mainstream sports federations can significantly influence the development of ID sports. With full integration, ID athletes can use the existing infrastructure of the sports federation such as sports facilities and sports equipment, use coaching knowledge or even train with athletes and teams.

Conclusion

At the international level, there are four major events for people with ID which creates many opportunities for athletes to participate. SOWG is the most accessible competition for each of the analyzed parameters. PG are the least accessible to athletes due to rigorous classification, high MQS and fewer sports available. An overlap was observed in the competitions of athletes with Down syndrome, where competitions are held at a similar level in both VGG and TG with the MQS being more rigorous in VGG. The shortcoming of this research is that it analyzes accessibility from the aspect of politics, organization and rules of international federations that organize the competitions without taking into account the barriers that athletes encounter at lower levels (national and local) of sports organizations. Research framework that would take into account additional parameters or assign a weight to each parameter should give us more accurate data and help develop competitions for ID athletes both in terms of accessibility on the one hand and competitiveness and high level performance on the other.

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DOSTUPNOST UČESTVOVANJA SPORTISTIMA SA INTELEKTUALNIM SMETNJAMA NA TAKMIČENJIMA MEĐUNARODNOG NIVOA

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Sažetak. Sportisti sa poteškoćama u intelektualnom razvoju imaju mnogo mogućnosti da učestvuju u međunarodnim sportskim događajima. Međutim, postojanje četiri velika međunarodna sportska događaja može dovesti do zabune kod sportista i trenera zbog mogućih preklapanja sportskih disciplina i kvalifikovanosti za učešće i spriječiti ih da ostvare svoj puni potencijal. Analizirane su glavne karakteristike četiri velika međunarodna sportska događaja: Specijalna Olimpijada, Virtus svjetske igre, „Trisome Games” i Paraolimpijske igre. Dizajniran je okvir sa pet parametara: Kvalifikovanost sportista, klasifikacija, Minimalna kvalifikaciona norma, broj i vrsta dostupnih sportova i tradicija (broj prethodno održanih takmičenja) značajnih za ocjenu pristupačnosti ovih takmičenja, parametri su rangirani i procjenjena je ukupna pristupačnost ovih takmičenja. Analiza je pokazala da je Specijalna olimpijada najdostupniji sportski događaj dok Paralimpijske igre imaju najviše ograničenja u smislu dostupnih sportova i klasifikacije. Specijalna Olimpijada, Svjetske igre i „Trisome Games” imaju preklapanja u određenom obimu kada je u pitanju učešće sportista sa Daunovim sindromom. Obzirom na relativno kratku istoriju međunarodnog sporta za osobe sa intelektualnim poteškoćama potrebna su dodatna istraživanja i analize kako bi se sportska takmičenja razvila u smislu dostupnosti sa jedne i kompetitivnosti sa druge strane.

Ključne riječi: sport, poteškoće u intelektualnom razvoju, kvalifikovanost, klasifikacija