

Breaking Barriers on The Field: An Exploration of the Experiences of Para Athletes in Competitive Sports

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of para-athletes in competitive sports, focusing on their challenges, coping strategies, support systems, and overall well-being. Using a descriptive qualitative research design, six para-athletes from a Special Education (SPED) school in the 1st District of Capiz were purposively selected. Participants varied in age, years of experience, and level of competition, including regional and national events. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings revealed that para-athletes encounter significant challenges such as bullying, physical injuries, emotional stress, and academic-sport balance. Despite these barriers, participants reported strong motivation, personal growth, and a sense of fulfillment through sports participation. Support systems involving parents, teachers, and coaches were found to be critical in enhancing confidence and resilience. Participation also contributed to improved emotional well-being and provided opportunities such as financial incentives and travel experiences.

However, the limited number of participants and focus on a single institution may affect the transferability of findings. The study recommends broader investigations involving diverse disabilities, sports disciplines, and demographic backgrounds to deepen understanding of para-athletes' experiences across contexts.

Keywords: Para-athlete, competitive sports, lived experiences, descriptive qualitative design

INTRODUCTION

Competitive sports focus on performance and achievement and the pursuit of excellence through set training and organized competition. Athletes invest much time and energy in enhancing their skills, competing against competitors, and winning, with coaches and support staff attending to their physical and psychological needs. Within this challenging context, athletes with physical, sensory, or intellectual impairments-para-athletes recently received great accolades for their phenomenal talents and determination in several sporting contexts, such as those by Johnson et al. (2021). Events such as the Paralympic Games have raised their profile, but their experiences within the competitive sport system are under-investigated. When existing scholarship underlines their performances, little attention has been provided to other factors that impact their involvement in competitive sport, such as social inclusion, availability of training facilities, coaching, and general perceptions by society. This report seeks to add insight into the experiences of para-athletes to further a more inclusive and supportive competitive sports setting.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to provide a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of para-athletes in competitive sports. This approach is appropriate for exploring how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences within a social context. Through in-depth inquiry, the researchers were able to capture detailed narratives that reflect the realities faced by para-athletes.

Participants and Sampling. The study involved six (6) para-athlete students (one female and five males) from a school in the 1st District of Capiz during the School Year 2023–2024. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 25 years old and had between 3 to 15 years of experience in their respective sports. Some informants had participated in higher-level competitions such as Palarong Pambansa and the Western Visayas Regional Athletic Association (WVRAA).

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met specific inclusion criteria. Informants were required to: (1) be recognized para-athletes, (2) have participated in higher-level sports competitions, and (3) have at least three (3) years of experience in their chosen sport. Participation was voluntary, and all informants were selected based on their willingness to share their lived experiences.

While the sample size was limited to six participants, this is consistent with qualitative research approaches that prioritize depth of understanding over generalizability. The selected participants provided rich, detailed narratives that allowed for in-depth exploration of their lived experiences. Nevertheless, the researchers acknowledge that the limited sample and single-site setting may affect the transferability of the findings to broader populations.

Table 1. Profile Overview of the Informants

Informant	Sex	Age	Highest Competition Participated	Years as Para Athlete
1	Female	25	Palarong Pambansa	15 years
2	Male	23	Palarong Pambansa	10 years
3	Male	23	Palarong Pambansa	5 years
4	Male	19	WVRAA	10 years
5	Male	22	WVRAA	6 years
6	Male	14	WVRAA	3 years

Data Collection. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews using an interview guide composed of two parts: (1) demographic profile and (2) experiences as para-athletes in competitive sports. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for probing questions and enabled deeper exploration of participants’ personal experiences, emotions, and perspectives. The use of open-ended questions further encouraged participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences.

Prior to data collection, permission was secured from the school principal through a formal letter approved by the Dean of the College of Education, Arts and Sciences of Capiz State University Pontevedra Campus and the research adviser. Participants were also provided with a letter of consent before the interview sessions.

Each informant was interviewed individually in a setting that ensured comfort and convenience. Interviews were audio- and video-recorded with consent, and researchers also took written notes. The collected data were transcribed verbatim, with vernacular responses translated into English for analysis.

Data Analysis. The study utilized thematic analysis following Caulfield (2022). After transcription, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data through repeated reading. Coding was conducted by identifying significant statements and assigning labels to meaningful units of data. These codes were then grouped into patterns to generate themes.

The researchers reviewed and refined the themes to ensure that they accurately represented the participants’ experiences. Each theme was clearly defined and used to interpret the findings of the study.

Ethical Considerations. Ethical protocols were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and all data were securely stored.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. The researchers also ensured that the interview process was conducted with sensitivity and respect, recognizing the personal nature of the participants' experiences. This ethical approach fostered trust and encouraged honest and open sharing of information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiences of Para Athletes. The findings revealed that para-athletes experience both challenges and fulfillment in competitive sports. Participation was described as both difficult and satisfying. Athletes encountered challenges in training, practice, and performance; however, despite these difficulties, they expressed enjoyment and fulfillment in their sports involvement. This supports the idea that positive engagement in sports enhances motivation and performance. Additionally, para-athletes reported experiencing bullying and physical injuries, which posed significant barriers to their participation. These challenges highlight the need for protective and supportive environments in sports institutions.

Another key barrier identified was a lack of concentration and stress. Athletes experienced difficulty balancing academic responsibilities and sports commitments, which affected their focus and performance. These findings suggest that para-athletes face both physical and psychological demands that influence their overall experience in competitive sports.

Coping Strategies and Support Systems. The study identified several coping mechanisms utilized by para-athletes to overcome challenges. One major strategy was risk-taking and self-assurance, where athletes demonstrated confidence in their abilities and trusted themselves in competitive situations. This self-belief enabled them to face challenges and persist despite difficulties.

Support systems also played a crucial role. Family members, teachers, and coaches provided emotional encouragement, guidance, and motivation, which helped athletes cope with stress and maintain a positive mindset. Additionally, goal setting emerged as an important strategy, allowing athletes to stay focused, motivated, and committed to improving their performance.

Strategic planning was also identified as a key factor in enhancing performance. Athletes developed techniques and strategies to improve their gameplay, demonstrating adaptability and critical thinking in competitive situations.

Impact on Mental and Emotional Well-Being. The experiences of para-athletes had both positive and negative effects on their mental and emotional well-being. On one hand, participation in sports contributed to a positive mental state, helping athletes manage stress, build confidence, and maintain emotional stability. On the other hand, athletes also experienced emotional instability, including stress, anxiety, and fatigue, particularly when dealing with academic pressures and physical exhaustion.

Despite these challenges, athletes demonstrated strengthened mental and emotional resilience. They developed coping mechanisms such as maintaining a positive outlook, focusing on goals, and practicing discipline. These findings indicate that while para-athletes face psychological challenges, their experiences also contribute to personal growth and emotional strength.

Opportunities Gained in Competitive Sports. The findings revealed that participation in competitive sports provided para-athletes with various opportunities. Financial opportunities were identified, including allowances, incentives, and potential sponsorships, which helped support their personal and family needs.

Participation in sports events also allowed athletes to travel and experience different places, contributing to cultural exposure and personal development. Furthermore, involvement in sports fostered a sense of purpose and

personal growth among athletes. They developed discipline, confidence, and a stronger sense of identity, which positively influenced their overall life perspective.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its small sample size and focus on a single SPED institution in the 1st District of Capiz. The participants may not fully represent the diverse experiences of para-athletes across different regions, disability types, sports disciplines, or competitive levels. Additionally, variations in gender, socioeconomic background, and type of impairment were not extensively explored. These limitations may affect the transferability of the findings and suggest the need for more inclusive future investigations.

CONCLUSION

Para athletes demonstrate resilience in overcoming physical, psychological, and social challenges in competitive sports. Their experiences highlight the complexities of participation, including barriers such as bullying, injuries, stress, and limited institutional support, alongside positive outcomes such as personal growth, financial opportunities, and a strong sense of purpose. These findings underscore the urgent need for stronger institutional support systems, improved accessibility in sports and educational environments, and enhanced awareness programs to promote inclusion and equal opportunities for para-athletes. By strengthening support structures involving schools, coaches, families, and policymakers, a more inclusive and enabling sports environment can be achieved. Future research should expand the scope by including a larger and more diverse group of para-athletes from multiple schools, regions, and competitive levels. Comparative studies across different types of disabilities, sports disciplines, and gender groups are also recommended to provide a more comprehensive understanding of para-athletes' experiences. Such efforts will contribute to the development of more inclusive policies and targeted support programs that enhance both athletic performance and overall well-being.

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