

## Factors Influencing the Professional Pathway of Athletes with Disabilities (A Study on Sports Policies and the Role of Stakeholders)

Received: 2025-04-27

Accepted: 2025-08-09

Vol. 6, No.4.2025, 27-39

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DOI :

[10.22098/rsmm.2025.17309.1472](https://doi.org/10.22098/rsmm.2025.17309.1472)

### Abstract

**Purpose:** The professional pathway of athletes with disabilities is influenced by a set of structural, individual, and social factors. Macro-level sports policies, the role of federations and executive bodies, family support and the social environment, the competence of coaches, appropriate sports infrastructure, and media representation are among the factors that can either facilitate or hinder the development of this pathway. The aim of this study is to identify and analyze these factors through a qualitative and explanatory approach.

**Method:** The objective of this research is to explore the factors influencing the professional pathway of athletes with disabilities (a study on sports policies and the role of stakeholders). This study was conducted using a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. The research sample included senior managers of the Ministry of Sports and Youth, specialists in disability sports, and current and former Paralympic and Para-Asian athletes. Fifteen participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods. Data collection was performed via semi-structured interviews, and data analysis was carried out using MAXQDA version 20 software.

**Results:** The findings revealed that the professional pathway of athletes with disabilities is affected by factors such as the presence or absence of macro-level supportive policies, the performance and level of support provided by federations and executive bodies, emotional and financial support from families and the social environment, the effective role of coaches and sports facilitators, the quality and accessibility of specialized sports infrastructure, and the extent and manner of media representation. Each of these factors can create either significant opportunities or barriers to the professional advancement of athletes with disabilities.

**Conclusion:** The results of this study indicate that the development of the professional pathway for athletes with disabilities requires clear supportive policies, active federations, supportive families, specialized coaches, adequate infrastructure, and effective media presence. The absence of long-term planning, weak inter-institutional coordination, and lack of financial resources were identified as major obstacles. Therefore, to enhance the professional career pathways of athletes with disabilities, more comprehensive policies must be developed, the role of executive bodies should be strengthened, and public awareness and attitudes toward disability sports must be improved.

**Keywords:** Professional Sports – Athletes with Disabilities – Sports Policy.

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## Introduction

Today, it can be safely said that professional

Sport for individuals with disabilities is recognized as one of the key components of sustainable social development and as a means of enhancing the quality of life for persons with disabilities in various societies (De Bosscher et al., 2015). Beyond its physical benefits, this domain plays a critical role in improving the psychological, social, and economic dimensions of the lives of athletes with disabilities (Misener & Darcy, 2014).

The professional pathway of athletes with disabilities is a complex process influenced by various factors, including individual characteristics, access to educational and specialized resources, family support structures, macro-level sports policies, and the engagement of relevant stakeholder organizations (Jaarsma et al., 2014).

Despite significant progress in recent decades and the improved status of disability sports at the international level, major challenges remain in the development of the professional careers of these athletes. These challenges include a lack of specialized sports infrastructure, weaknesses in talent identification systems, absence of comprehensive support programs, and persistent discriminatory social attitudes (Shapiro & Pitts, 2014).

Effective sports policies can play a crucial role in facilitating the professional pathways of athletes with disabilities by formulating supportive strategies, developing facilities, enhancing access to financial resources, and creating equal opportunities (Legg & Steadward, 2011).

However, in many countries, including Iran, such policies often lack the necessary coherence, continuity, and comprehensiveness, facing issues such as resource fragmentation, poor coordination among executive bodies, and insufficient attention to the individual and

social diversity of athletes with disabilities (Brittain, 2016).

In addition to macro-level policies, the active involvement of families, experienced coaches, non-governmental organizations, the media, and financial sponsors—as key stakeholders—is critically important in shaping and guiding the professional pathways of athletes with disabilities (Fitzgerald et al., 2012).

Establishing effective support networks, raising public awareness, fostering a culture that recognizes the abilities of athletes with disabilities, expanding opportunities for sports participation, and facilitating access to national and international competitive arenas are among the strategies that can help enhance the status of these athletes (Swartz et al., 2016).

Accordingly, a thorough analysis of the different dimensions affecting the professional pathways of athletes with disabilities, along with the identification of the key roles played by each stakeholder, can provide the foundation for developing improved models and policies. The main objective of this study is to scientifically and systematically examine the factors influencing the professional pathway of athletes with disabilities, with a special emphasis on the role of sports policies and related stakeholders, and to propose a conceptual framework for developing these pathways at both national and international levels.

Sport for athletes with disabilities serves as an effective platform for enhancing the quality of life, empowering individuals, fostering social development, and ensuring equal participation for people with disabilities, playing a vital role in modern societies (Brittain, 2016). The professional pathway of athletes with disabilities is influenced by a wide range of individual, social, structural, and policy-related factors, which interact to either foster or limit their potential (Misener & Darcy, 2014). Despite global and national efforts to promote

disability sports, numerous challenges still exist along the professional paths of these athletes. These challenges include the lack of specialized infrastructure, insufficient sustainable financial support, weak talent identification systems, social and cultural discrimination, and the limited presence of supportive organizations (Swartz et al., 2016).

National sports policies, which should systematically provide the groundwork for the growth and advancement of athletes with disabilities, often lack sufficient coherence in many countries. At times, due to the misallocation of resources, poor coordination among relevant organizations, and the absence of long-term strategic programs, these policies have proven ineffective (Legg & Steadward, 2011). Moreover, various stakeholders such as families, coaches, sports federations, the media, and financial sponsors can play a significant role in supporting or limiting the professional pathways of athletes with disabilities (Jaarsma et al., 2014).

Given the fact that the professional development of athletes with disabilities requires a multidimensional support ecosystem, a deep understanding of the role of sports policies and relevant stakeholders is essential. The absence of localized models and frameworks in the professional pathway of athletes with disabilities, particularly in countries like Iran, makes it even more crucial to conduct scientific and practical research to comprehensively analyze this phenomenon (Shapiro & Pitts, 2014).

Therefore, the main research question of this study is how existing sports policies and the roles of various stakeholders can impact the professional pathways of athletes with disabilities, and which model could be effective in improving this pathway.

Disability sports are not only recognized as a tool for enhancing the physical and mental health of individuals with disabilities, but also

serve as a means to achieve social rights, ensure equal participation, and break negative stereotypes about disability in societies (DePauw & Gavron, 2005). In this context, the professional path of athletes with disabilities plays a key role in redefining their individual and social identities and can inspire other individuals with disabilities to engage more actively in social spheres (Berger, 2008). However, despite the remarkable growth of events like the Paralympic Games and the increasing global attention to disability sports, in many countries, especially in developing countries, this field still faces serious structural and managerial challenges (Purdue & Howe, 2012). The lack of targeted sports policies, weak technical and supportive infrastructure, limited financial opportunities, and failure to identify talent in a timely manner have led to numerous obstacles in the professional path of athletes with disabilities.

The need for the present study arises from the necessity to provide a scientific and realistic analysis of the role of sports policies and stakeholders in facilitating or hindering the professional path of athletes with disabilities, and to suggest effective and localized solutions for improving this situation by identifying existing strengths and weaknesses (Howe, 2008). Furthermore, a deep examination of the roles of stakeholders such as families, sports federations, media, educational institutions, and financial supporters can help in the formulation of more cohesive and effective policies, ultimately paving the way for the sustainable development of disability sports. Another importance of this research lies in its potential to expand the theoretical literature related to disability sports management in the academic field of the country, filling the existing gap, and its results could be utilized in designing talent identification programs, financial support strategies, and policymaking for disability sports at the national level (Misener et al., 2013).

## Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a descriptive phenomenological method to explore the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals involved in the professional development of athletes with disabilities. The phenomenological approach was chosen to provide a deep and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon by capturing the meanings participants assign to their experiences. The research sample consisted of 15 participants, including senior officials from the Ministry of Sports and Youth, experts in disability sports, and current or former Paralympic and Para-Asian athletes. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement with or substantial experience related to the subject of the study. A purposive sampling strategy was used in combination with snowball sampling to identify individuals who could offer rich and relevant data. The criteria for selection included professional, academic, or lived experience with the topic, willingness to participate, and the ability to clearly communicate their insights. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes or concepts emerged from the data. Although saturation occurred after the twelfth interview, the process continued until the fifteenth interview to ensure completeness and robustness.

Data collection was carried out using semi-structured interviews, allowing for both consistency across participants and flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes. All interviews were conducted with the participants' consent, recorded, and transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy and richness of the data. The interview transcripts were

analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method, which involves several systematic steps: familiarization with the data, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, organization of these meanings into thematic clusters, development of an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, identification of its fundamental structure, and validation through member checking. To manage and code the qualitative data effectively, MaxQDA software version 20 was used throughout the analysis process.

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied the four established qualitative criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through member checking and expert validation; selected participants and professors in sports management reviewed the interview transcripts and coded data, and their feedback was incorporated. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed account of the research procedures, participant characteristics, and contextual information, enabling others to assess the applicability of findings in similar contexts. Dependability was achieved through careful documentation of all research steps, allowing for consistency and potential replication. Confirmability was strengthened by using inter-rater reliability methods: two researchers with doctoral degrees in sports management and expertise in qualitative research independently coded the interviews. A high level of agreement between the two coders confirmed the objectivity and reliability of the coding process and thematic analysis.

## Results

Table 1 presents the information of the participants in the study.

**Table 1. Information of the Study Participants**

| Expert | Position                  | Years of Experience | Education Level   | Gender |
|--------|---------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------|
| 1      | Senior Officials          | More than 5 years   | PhD               | Male   |
| 2      | Senior Officials          | More than 10 years  | PhD               | Male   |
| 3      | Senior Officials          | More than 5 years   | Master's Degree   | Female |
| 4      | Senior Officials          | More than 10 years  | PhD               | Male   |
| 5      | Senior Officials          | More than 10 years  | Master's Degree   | Male   |
| 6      | Disability Sports Experts | More than 10 years  | PhD               | Male   |
| 7      | Disability Sports Experts | More than 5 years   | Master's Degree   | Male   |
| 8      | Disability Sports Experts | More than 5 years   | Master's Degree   | Male   |
| 9      | Disability Sports Experts | More than 5 years   | Bachelor's Degree | Male   |
| 10     | Disability Sports Experts | More than 5 years   | Bachelor's Degree | Female |
| 11     | Athletes                  | More than 10 years  | PhD               | Male   |
| 12     | Athletes                  | More than 10 years  | PhD               | Male   |
| 13     | Athletes                  | More than 10 years  | Master's Degree   | Male   |
| 14     | Athletes                  | More than 5 years   | Master's Degree   | Male   |
| 15     | Athletes                  | More than 5 years   | Bachelor's Degree | Female |

**Table 2. Factors Affecting the Professional Path of Athletes with Disabilities****Main Theme | Sub-theme****The Role of National Sports Policies in the Development of the Professional Path of Athletes with Disabilities**

- Existence of national programs supporting athletes with disabilities
- Allocation of special budgets for disability sports
- Lack of structured and long-term policies
- Disintegration between relevant sports organizations
- Positive or negative discrimination in supportive policies
- Lack of talent identification strategies in disability sports
- Low prioritization of disability sports in national policies
- Impact of managerial changes on the stability of support
- Influence of international policies (such as IPC) on national policies

- Relationship between national laws and the career paths of athletes with disabilities
- Government incentives for athletes with disabilities to participate in international competitions
- Impact of education policies on the development of student-athletes with disabilities
- Lack of attention to female athletes with disabilities in sports policies
- Absence of legal support for the retirement and future career of athletes with disabilities
- Insufficient programs for marketing and promoting disability sports

**The Role of Federations and Executive Bodies in Supporting Athletes with Disabilities**

- The level of attention and financial resources allocated to athletes with disabilities
- Development and implementation of specialized training programs for coaches and athletes with disabilities

- Creation of equal opportunities for participation in national and international competitions
- Support for organizing special competitions for athletes with disabilities
- Development of suitable sports infrastructures for people with disabilities
- Lack of clear and structured programs for supporting athletes with disabilities
- Communication between federations and executive bodies with international organizations
- Legal and rights support for athletes with disabilities at the domestic level
- Development and implementation of marketing and promotional programs for disability sports
- Support for employing experienced coaches in disability sports disciplines
- Assisting athletes with disabilities in joining professional leagues
- Lack of coordination between federations and executive bodies in financial support and planning
- Education and training of human resources to develop disability sports activities
- Establishment and expansion of specialized centers for training and skill development for athletes with disabilities
- Creation of a supportive culture among governmental and private institutions for the promotion of disability sports
- Empowerment of federations to pursue the rights and interests of athletes with disabilities

- Encouraging and supporting the organization of specialized training programs for the development of athletes with disabilities' talents

### **Family Support and Social Environment**

- Role of emotional and psychological support from family in the professional path of athletes with disabilities
- Impact of family financial support for securing equipment and sports expenses
- Social environment and the community's attitude towards athletes with disabilities
- Creation of social support networks for athletes with disabilities
- Moral support and encouragement from family to maintain motivation of athletes with disabilities
- Importance of family relationships in creating a sense of independence and self-confidence for athletes with disabilities
- Role of the social environment in facilitating or limiting access to sports resources and facilities
- Impact of friends and sports colleagues on the professional success of athletes with disabilities
- Educating families for better support of athletes with disabilities
- Role of social institutions and charities in supporting athletes with disabilities
- Social acceptance and encouragement in public spaces and media for athletes with disabilities
- Impact of social institutions like schools and local organizations on the career paths of athletes with disabilities
- Creation of equal opportunities within

family and society for athletes with disabilities

- Family support for athletes with disabilities in overcoming psychological and social barriers
- Cultural and social barriers that families and society may impose on the path of athletes with disabilities
- Growth of social support for athletes with disabilities in various communities

### **Role of Coaches and Sports Facilitators**

- Empowering coaches to work with athletes with disabilities and providing specialized training
- Role of coaches in motivating and maintaining the motivation of athletes with disabilities
- Understanding and accepting the specific needs of athletes with disabilities by coaches
- Teaching specific techniques and strategies for athletes with disabilities
- Facilitating access to sports resources and necessary facilities by coaches
- Developing social and psychological skills for athletes with disabilities by coaches
- Coaches' impact on building confidence and independence in athletes with disabilities
- The process of identifying and nurturing the talents of athletes with disabilities by coaches
- Coaches' impact on creating a positive and inclusive atmosphere in disability sports teams
- Support and guidance from coaches in addressing psychological and social challenges faced by athletes with

disabilities

- Role of coaches in correcting negative societal attitudes towards athletes with disabilities
- Role of coaches in creating equal opportunities for athletes with disabilities
- Advancement in coaching methods for athletes with disabilities and the importance of specialized training for coaches
- Role of coaches in encouraging families to support athletes with disabilities
- Facilitating and improving communication between coaches and other team members for the success of athletes with disabilities
- Importance of coaches in transmitting ethical and educational values to athletes with disabilities
- Impact of coaches in providing access to competitive opportunities for athletes with disabilities

### **Specialized Infrastructure and Facilities for Athletes with Disabilities**

- Accessibility and adaptation of sports facilities for athletes with disabilities
- Standards for designing and building sports centers for individuals with disabilities
- Geographical location and access to sports facilities for athletes with disabilities
- Availability of specialized and accessible equipment for athletes with disabilities
- Facilitating access to assistive sports technologies (such as sports wheelchairs, specialized training

equipment)

- Role of the government and private sector in providing and developing infrastructure for disability sports
- Training programs for coaches and administrators to optimize the use of disability sports infrastructure
- Multi-purpose and flexible sports spaces for athletes with disabilities in various sports
- Role of technology in improving and innovating disability sports infrastructure
- Availability of welfare facilities such as access to restrooms, parking, and restaurants for athletes with disabilities
- Importance of proper monitoring and maintenance of infrastructure to ensure quality and safety for athletes with disabilities
- Collaboration between governmental and private sectors in providing financial resources for infrastructure development
- Increasing public awareness and education about the importance of appropriate sports infrastructure for athletes with disabilities
- The process of providing and distributing sports facilities for athletes with disabilities across different regions
- Improving the quality of sports spaces in terms of lighting, ventilation, and general conditions for use by athletes with disabilities
- Ongoing evaluation and feedback from athletes with disabilities regarding the quality of existing facilities
- Impact of government policies and national planning on the development of

sports infrastructure for athletes with disabilities

### **Role of the Media and Representation of Disability Sports**

- Media coverage of disability sports events on mass media
- Role of social media in raising awareness and public participation in disability sports
- The portrayal and representation of athletes with disabilities by the media
- The role of national and international media in promoting human values and equality in disability sports
- The impact of media coverage on attracting financial support and investors for disability sports
- Role of media in changing societal attitudes towards athletes with disabilities and their challenges and opportunities
- Coverage of success and inspiring stories of athletes with disabilities in the media
- Critique and analysis of current media coverage and the need for improvement in the representation of disability sports
- Impact of media on promoting a culture of participation and equality in disability sports
- The role of digital and online media in direct communication with the disability sports community
- The impact of advertising and special programs on television, radio, and the internet in attracting attention to disability sports
- Role of media in highlighting the specific challenges faced by athletes

with disabilities and their access to sports facilities

- Opportunities for the growth and development of disability sports through promotion in large media outlets
- Using media to change negative and stereotypical societal perceptions of disability in sports
- Media's role in promoting support programs and various collaborations in supporting disability sports
- Developing comprehensive and effective reporting approaches in covering disability sports events
- Media coverage and its impact on policy-making and decision-making regarding support for disability sports

## Discussion

In recent years, the professional paths of athletes with disabilities have emerged as a critical area of focus in sports policy-making. Existing literature indicates that macro-level sports policies play a fundamental role in either fostering or hindering the professional development of these athletes. Successful countries in this field typically implement comprehensive national programs to support athletes with disabilities, allocate special budgets, and employ targeted talent identification strategies. In contrast, many other countries face challenges due to the lack of formal and long-term policies and the lack of coordination among relevant organizations, preventing athletes with disabilities from pursuing an appropriate professional career path. Positive or negative discrimination in support policies, the low prioritization of disability sports in macro-level policies, and frequent managerial changes are factors that have posed challenges to the stability and growth of the professional paths for these athletes. In this context, the role of international organizations, such as the IPC, in guiding

national policies has become increasingly significant, and many countries have been compelled to review their policies in alignment with international standards. The impact of national laws, government incentives for participating in international competitions, and the role of educational policies in the development of student-athletes with disabilities are also among the areas that have garnered attention in recent research.

Alongside macro-level policies, the role of federations and executive bodies in facilitating or restricting the professional paths of athletes with disabilities is of significant importance. Recent studies indicate that in countries where federations have organized specialized training programs for coaches and athletes with disabilities, there has been higher participation and success among disabled athletes. The lack of transparent support programs, weaknesses in organizing special competitions, and the lack of coordination between federations and executive bodies are still major barriers in many countries. Legal support, the development of specialized sports centers, and the creation of marketing opportunities to better promote athletes with disabilities domestically and internationally are among the measures emphasized in successful practices.

Family and social environments, as the primary support systems for athletes with disabilities, play a significant role in their professional journey. Research has shown that emotional, psychological, and financial support from family has a substantial impact on the motivation, self-confidence, and continuity of sports activities for athletes with disabilities. Positive social environments that hold accepting attitudes toward athletes with disabilities provide an enabling platform for their professional development. Conversely, communities that are plagued by negative stereotypes or cultural indifference hinder the growth of these athletes. The importance of social support networks, the role of schools and

local organizations, and the support from charitable institutions in enhancing the social and sports status of people with disabilities have been highlighted in recent studies.

Coaches and facilitators also play a pivotal role as key players in shaping the professional paths of athletes with disabilities. Recent literature emphasizes the importance of empowering coaches through specialized training, a deep understanding of the specific needs of athletes with disabilities, fostering sustained motivation, developing social skills, and building self-confidence as essential factors for the success of disabled athletes. The processes of identifying talents, creating a positive team environment, and facilitating access to professional competitions have been repeatedly emphasized as crucial responsibilities of coaches in recent studies.

Sports infrastructure and specialized facilities for athletes with disabilities continue to be one of the major challenges worldwide. Research has shown that many sports centers face serious deficiencies regarding accessibility, standardization of spaces, and the availability of specialized equipment. The presence of supportive amenities such as accessible restrooms, designated parking spaces, and standardized training equipment plays a direct role in attracting and retaining athletes with disabilities. Recent studies have also highlighted the importance of government policies for the development and oversight of sports infrastructure, cooperation between public and private sectors, and continuous feedback from athletes to improve service quality.

Finally, the media, as a powerful tool for changing social attitudes, attracting financial support, and promoting disability sports, has an undeniable role. New research highlights the importance of mass and digital media in creating positive portrayals of athletes with disabilities, telling inspirational stories, and combating negative stereotypes. Increasing

media coverage of disability sports events, showcasing their achievements, and addressing the needs and challenges faced by athletes with disabilities can lead to changes in support policies and the promotion of a culture of sports participation.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that the professional path of athletes with disabilities is influenced by a combination of structural, individual, and social factors, each of which can either facilitate or hinder the growth and development of these athletes. Macro-level sports policies can contribute to the genuine development of the professional paths of athletes with disabilities when they are cohesive, continuous, well-funded, and have a long-term perspective, while minimizing positive or negative discrimination. The presence of targeted talent identification programs, government incentives, and alignment with international policies are other essential requirements in this regard. At the level of executive bodies and federations, emphasizing the creation of transparent support structures, the development of specialized centers, empowering human resources, and enhancing collaboration with international organizations can lead to improved professional opportunities for athletes with disabilities. Family and social support, especially in psychological, financial, and emotional dimensions, continue to play an unparalleled role in building confidence and sustained motivation in athletes with disabilities and should be strengthened through family education and the enhancement of support networks. Coaches and facilitators, as key role models and companions for athletes with disabilities, should guide the growth and professionalization of these athletes by providing specialized training and creating a positive psychological environment. The development of accessible sports infrastructure, the standardization of equipment and facilities,

and the use of modern technologies play a direct role in facilitating the sports activities of athletes with disabilities and should be given special attention as part of macro-level policies. Finally, the media, by actively portraying athletes with disabilities in a positive light, raising public awareness, attracting financial support, and changing social attitudes, can provide a strong platform for enhancing the professional status of athletes with disabilities. Therefore, to ensure the sustainable development of the professional paths of athletes with disabilities, there is a need for coordinated and cohesive interaction between policymakers, executive bodies, families, coaches, the media, and the athletes themselves, so that, through a multidimensional approach, existing barriers are removed and equal opportunities are created for all athletes.

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