

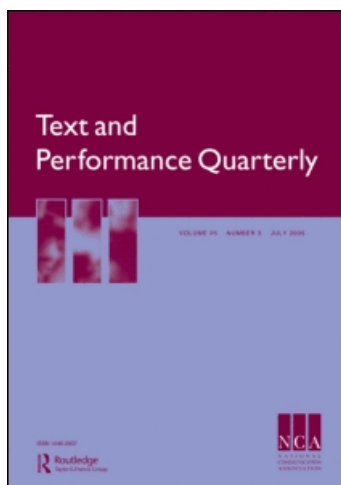
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“I Can’t Be Standing Up Out There”: Communicative Performances of (Dis)Ability in Wheelchair Rugby

Kurt Lindemann

Sport and performance theory have several important yet underdeveloped intersections. Locating these intersections in the properties of play, both areas are particularly useful in examining displays of the disabled body. Wheelchair rugby is one of the fastest growing and most visible wheelchair sports in the world. Participation in the sport offers many benefits for physically disabled persons. However, these benefits may be undercut by the sport’s classification system, which determines who will compete and at what level. This paper highlights tactical performances of disability that challenge ableist assumptions. In these performances, athletes engage in sandbagging, performing more disability to receive a favorable classification from physical therapists. While these fluid, malleable performances of play resist the medicalized gaze that Others disabled persons by affixing disability as a static marker of identity, these performances also ironically foster a form of surveillance that imitates the ableist gaze and reifies traditional notions of ability.

Keywords: Disability; Performance; Sport; Play; Gaze; Impairment

Two men in tank-like wheelchairs race toward each other. One man dribbles what looks like a volleyball with his tree-trunk arms. The other man, trying to prevent a score, adjusts the angle of his speeding chair and smashes into the side of the oncoming chair, sending the first man and the ball toppling to the floor. The crowd cheers as two able-bodied assistants rush from the bleachers. Still strapped into his

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wheelchair, the second player is dragged up as the assistants right his chair. Back on the sidelines, the first player realizes he has to change his axle as it is broken from the on-court collision. He glances around briefly, stands up on his thin, corkscrew legs, tips over his wheelchair, sits down on the floor, and gets to work. The spectators and other players who appear to notice do not look twice; they do not seem surprised.

This scene, culled from over 100 hours of fieldwork, captures the seemingly incongruous performances in quad rugby,¹ one of the fastest-growing disabled sports in the world (DePauw and Gavron), and recently featured in the Oscar-nominated documentary *Murderball* and in the critically-acclaimed NBC television series *Friday Night Lights*. Quad rugby was intended to serve as a recreational outlet for persons with quadriplegia: those who have suffered severe trauma to the upper part, or cervical area, of their spinal cord. This trauma may be the result of an injury or a disease; games and practices often include “injuries” and “diseases” (in rugby lingo) competing side-by-side, and amputees (“amps”) playing against quads who have limited use of all four limbs. Regardless of their injury, in quad rugby all players are held to the same classification system. A classification system is common in organized wheelchair sports (Brasile and Hedrick; DePauw and Gavron). However, within the classification system of wheelchair rugby athletes play with—perform—varying levels of physical ability. Interestingly, these performances take place under the auspices of competition. It behooves teams to get their players classified as more immobile than the players might actually be, as a team will then be able to use a greater number of mobile players—and, presumably, more skilled players—on the court at one time. As such, these performances have potentially broad-ranging consequences for players and their teams.

Sport can be framed, as Roger Callois and Johan Huizinga argue, as a theatrical experience. Athletes, like actors, engage in play, displaying behaviors that may “key” (Goffman *Frame Analysis*) particular meanings about what is happening. And on both the front and back stages of wheelchair rugby games, definitions of disability are played with and strategically enacted. While the on- and off-court performances of wheelchair rugby players, like theatrical performances of disabilities, may potentially challenge and subvert the medicalized gaze (Foucault; Koppers), such performances may also reify ableist notions of competitiveness, athleticism, and the body.

While many athletes—or “ruggers” as they call themselves—cannot walk, it is not surprising to see some get out of their wheelchairs and stand up under their own power. These quads’ injuries are “incomplete” and have left them with some sensation and mobility below the waist. This mobility often translates to greater skill on the court, provided players can be classified low enough to play. As a result, players often navigate the classification system by “faking” more immobility to receive a favorable classification from physical therapists. Impairment is often conceived as a physical fact—the inability to walk or having one leg or one arm—while disability is considered a socially constructed category (Davis). These performances further destabilize what Lennard J. Davis characterizes as the already unstable category of disability by calling into question the idea that physical

impairment is fixed and static. An examination of these performances, which are similar to what Petra Kupperts calls tactical performances of disability, promises insight into the ways disability is and can be performed in everyday life.

These communicative performances of ability also inform notions of competition and inclusion. Quad rugby was originally conceived as an alternative to paraplegic sports, based in part on the inclusion of a wider range of participants. However, quad rugby has grown into an ultra-competitive sport (Lindemann). This ongoing push-pull relationship drives player performances. While many players appreciate the competitiveness of the sport, some may be unable or unwilling to engage in the sort of hyper-masculine displays that characterize it (Lindemann). These people may then find themselves excluded from participation, which undercuts many of the benefits of disabled sport recreation, including increased self-esteem and social networks (Martin and Smith; Taub et al.).

To address the tensions that arise in these performances, I merge the seemingly disparate scholarly literatures of performance, therapeutic recreation, and sport communication. In doing so, I argue that an ethnographic examination of quad rugby offers insight into the communicatively constructed nature of disability and extends thinking about the problematic notions of inclusion and participation in therapeutic recreation. I follow this argument with an analysis of players' performances drawn from a three-year ethnographic study of wheelchair rugby athletes. This study has implications not only for performance and disability scholars, but also for recreation sport scholars and practitioners.

Performance, Sport, and Disability: Tense Intersections, Intersecting Tensions

Recent media coverage of the sport glosses over its complexities and its place in the history of disability recreation. The sport was founded by quadriplegic athletes in the 1970s as an alternative to existing wheelchair sports (United States Quad Rugby Association [USQRA] *All About*), most of which were dominated by the often more mobile and physically stronger paraplegics. The sport is a combination of able-bodied football, soccer, and hockey. In it, players attempt to carry a volleyball-sized ball across one end of a basketball court (USQRA *All About*). Players smashing into each other, as described at the beginning of this essay, are common occurrences in quad rugby. The mostly male athletes, some extremely limited in mobility, participate with reckless abandon in physical displays of ability. That these displays are inextricably linked to their seemingly cumbersome wheelchairs make their hyper-aggressiveness all the more jarring. These displays are integral to the sport's mission of "smashing stereotypes, one hit at a time" (USQRA *All About*). Participation in wheelchair sports is empowering, in part, because it communicates an image of disabled persons that resists ableist perceptions of disability (Taub et al.). In this sense, then, the jarring physicality of the game is a performance, a theatrical display for an audience.

Sport as Play, Playing at Sport

Most research into the performance of disability focuses on theatrical performance rather than performance of self in everyday life. However, the performance of identity in sport serves as a conceptual bridge between these two areas. There are many parallels between sport and the theatre (Schechner *Performance Theory*; Schechner and Appel). Despite the strong link of sport to our everyday lives—in the media, in our consumption of sport, and in the messages we receive about exercise and nutrition (Kassing et al.)—sport has been and still is viewed as separate from the ordinary, as set apart from “real life.” In this sense, sport is play (Blau; Huizinga; Turner).

While sport is usually bracketed off from “real life” as a game, the playing of sport can have very real consequences for its participants. For Huizinga, the importance of play reaches back into history, “for play is older and more original than civilization” yet possesses a “civilizing force” (73). Sport still has this “civilizing force,” as it often serves a normalizing function for participants, socializing them into traditional gender roles (Kassing et al.; Messner *Power*; Messner *Taking the Field*; Whitson “Social Construction”). Participants learn to display normative behavior on and off the playing field or court, and are often verbally sanctioned or physically punished if they do not (Pronger; Whitson “Embodiment”). In sport, just as in play, communicative displays are paramount to smooth-functioning interactions.

In the work of scholars like Huizinga and Callois, the intersections of play and sport lie primarily in such displays. These scholars conceptualize sport as athletic displays of physically competent bodies in front of spectators who hold certain expectations about what they witness based on an understanding of the general rules of sport (Schechner *Performance Theory*; Schechner *Performance Studies*). For example, in professional able-bodied ice hockey, players may throw off their gloves and begin punching each other, much to the crowd’s delight. Although in hockey there are penalties for “roughing” other players, fighting is not only common but tolerated and expected. Fighting in hockey, then, has certain metacommunicative characteristics (Bateson); while the hitting is real, the context for the hitting—in front of a crowd with officials looking on—helps communicate that such displays are all “part of the game.” In this way, sport, like play, requires its participants to align frames of meaning about “what is going on” (Goffman *Frame Analysis*). What does this mean for disability in sport? Through participation in sport, physically disabled persons arrive at shared meanings about disability, gender, and masculinity. Ironically, such frames of meaning may reinforce conventional understandings of gender and ability even as they resist traditional notions of disability.

Dis-Playing the Disabled Body in Sport

One way in which participants neutralize negative perceptions of physical disability is by building muscle and developing more control over the movement of their bodies. By gaining strength and mobility, though, participants may emulate an idealized

(read: able-bodied) athletic body. Diane E. Taub et al. found that disabled males strove for characteristics commonly associated with traditional masculinity in sport, including a well-muscled and conventionally attractive body. While male participants felt they were challenging stereotypes of the disabled as sick or weak, they also expressed internalized perceptions of conventional beauty that reinforced “norms that are oppressive for individuals with disabilities” (1481).

Displaying the physical competence of one’s body enables participants to show the able-bodied world that they can still “do things” (Ashton-Shaeffer et al. 107; Brittain). Physically impaired persons may take pride in demonstrating that they can still participate in sport activities—something traditionally associated with able-bodied people (Taub et al.). This sense of pride, tied as it is to ableist perceptions, invokes a sort of self-surveillance, mimicking the way society disciplines the disabled body through surveillance (Kuppers). Importantly, such (self-)surveillance may also empower sport participants.

By participating in a sport that displays the disabled body as wheelchair rugby does, participants are able to judge their own physical ability against that of other disabled persons. Candace Ashton-Shaeffer et al. found that participants at a disability sport camp frequently compared their own disabilities to those of others at the camp. The authors explain that such comparisons often prompted less physically impaired participants to try a more difficult sport. These comparisons also allow disabled persons to use their experiential knowledge to locate themselves within the larger discursive formations of disability. In other words, they begin to formulate their own definitions of disability, which may or may not coincide with medical classifications. Unfortunately, any resistance to medicalized definitions of disability may be diffused by the dynamic of empowerment and constraint that characterizes the debate over inclusion in recreation programs for the disabled. In theatrical displays, such irony can be highlighted and played with (Kuppers; Manderson and Peake). In sport, this figurative, knowing wink is considerably more difficult to locate. Performance theory, however, offers an avenue for such exploration.

Self-comparisons of disabled bodies are foregrounded in the debate over inclusion. Classification systems in competitive disabled sport consist of categories based on medical diagnoses of injuries, and these classifications are often contested by players and officials (Brasile and Hedrick; Sherrill). Some claim that including more severely impaired persons in the same category as less severely impaired persons dilutes the competitive quality of sport participation (Brasile and Hedrick). Others, however, argue that inclusion must be re-conceptualized to provide opportunities for all to experience the transformative qualities of sport.

Current conceptualizations of sport, tied as they are to ableist notions of ability, may not offer room for such radical re-visioning (DePauw). Instead, disabled sport participants may only be able to navigate the socio-political complexities of sport in ways they uniquely develop themselves through their sport participation. In other words, the transformative capabilities of sport participation seem to lie in the incongruity of a disabled body in sport (Taub et al.), an activity usually populated by traditionally able bodies. This juxtaposition is an embodied paradox (Sparkes and

Smith), in which a body with relatively limited mobility and strength engages in activities that require a lot of mobility and strength. The current therapeutic recreation literature does not directly address the incongruity of the display of these bodies. Performance studies theory, with its focus on embodiment and enactment, can offer a more complex and thorough understanding of the role of this display in therapeutic recreation.

When weaving together the literatures of performance studies, disability sport, and disability studies, certain questions are left hanging like stray threads. Pulling at these threads prompts questions that threaten to unravel the tapestry of potential benefits touted in most research on disability and recreational sports. These questions include: How are the tensions between inclusiveness and competitiveness embodied by players? How does the display of the disabled body in sport communicatively construct disability? How do the communicatively constructed meanings of disability inform quad rugby participation? To address these questions, I employed ethnographic methods, which I detail below.

Examining the Disabled Body in Sport Participation

Research into disabled recreation participation consists primarily of survey research and self-reports. Ethnographic methods, participant observations and interviews that check “native” understandings of local practices (Lindlof and Taylor), texture this current picture by focusing on *in situ* enactment and embodiment. As this study incorporates participant observations, it is unique in that it offers ethnographic snapshots of how social talk—sideline conversations about players’ displays of athleticism—constructs understandings of disability. This is because participant observations enable researchers to examine social talk as it is embedded in the “accomplishment of episodes” (Lindlof and Taylor 135) and to maintain a sense of “bodies in the field” (134). Adopting the social model of disability, which posits that disability is constructed through interaction (Brittain; Davis; Thomas), social talk enables players to constitute their disabilities communicatively in meaningful ways by enacting varying levels of impairment. The accomplishment of social meanings can be framed as performance (Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo; Turner). And so, episodes of on- and off-court interactions embedded in such talk can be taken as part of players’ performances.

I conducted participant observations of these performances for approximately three years, from January 2003 until February 2006, totaling 124 research hours and 496 single-spaced, typed pages. During my participant observations, I made scratch notes (Emerson et al.; Lindlof and Taylor) in the field or immediately after leaving the field. When I typed up these scratch notes, usually 24 hours later, I expanded upon them, inserting short memos and asides (Lindlof and Taylor) in places that exemplified communication and performance theory and that pointed toward potential coding categories. As an able-bodied researcher who grew up with a physically disabled father (who was himself a wheelchair athlete), I was reflexive about my assumptions and interpretations and recorded these thoughts in field notes.

This analysis also draws on 25 interviews. During the course of my fieldwork I conducted 13 ethnographic interviews, also called situational interviews (Lindlof and Taylor). These interviews totaled six hours and resulted in 47 pages of transcription; interviewees were seven players, four family members and friends, and two referees, one of whom also served as a classifier. In addition to ethnographic interviews, I conducted 12 formal, semi-structured interviews, all tape-recorded. These semi-structured interviews totaled 16 hours and resulted in 86 single-spaced pages when transcribed. Each interview informant and participant mentioned in field note excerpts either selected or was given a pseudonym.

The third data gathering procedure I used was document analysis. In January 2003, at the beginning of my data collection, I gathered publicly accessible press materials, rules, and information on classification from the USQRA website, located at <http://www.quadrugby.com>. Here, coaches and players can find out about upcoming tournaments, leave messages on a discussion board called “Rugby Talk,” and access the rules of the game and the USQRA constitution. This website also offers information on classification clinics and certification for officials. On the discussion board, players ask for medical advice about injuries, seek advice on sports equipment, and generally engage in a dialogue indicative of what Stephanie Coopman calls “disability as community,” or online social practices that form connections and relationships. I used this material as background for my research as it helped me make sense of player shorthand and lingo used in sideline talk. The text obtained from this website also offered additional insight into the meanings of the game and the rules and procedures addressed by respondents.

Drawing on my observations, interviews, and document analysis, I now turn to a closer examination of the performances of disability enacted by quad ruggers. I begin by locating the sport’s classification system at the crux of such performances. I then discuss strategic performances of “sandbagging,” or performing more impairment in order to receive a favorable classification. Linking sandbagging to the surveillance and the Othering of the disabled body, I finally explore the implications of such performances for notions of ability and disability.

“They Try to Get Away With as Much as They Can”: “Sandbagging” as Subversive Performance

In quad rugby, double and quadruple amputees compete with other quads who have limited use of all four limbs, complicating notions of difference. The USQRA, the sport’s governing body in the U.S., claims that this system equalizes bodily differences (*Classification*). However, the labels used by players, including “low pointer” to refer to a severely disabled person and “injuries” and “diseases” to refer to the origins of one’s physical impairment, underline the significance of social interaction in defining disability and the permeable dimensions of the classification system.

Some ruggers can stand and even walk. While this may be surprising to the uninitiated spectator, it is generally accepted as commonplace in quad rugby culture.

In my initial observations, I noticed a few players walking while pushing their chairs, or getting out of their chairs to work on them or to stretch:

As I'm sitting on the sidelines watching a game between Philadelphia and Pasadena, Zucker [a player from Texas] rolls in talking to Peter [another player from Texas]. Peter is walking, pushing his chair and carrying his gear bag. He looks like any able-bodied family member I've seen at any of these games. Zucker talks to him about a jump ball decision in a previous game like nothing is askew. I look around at the other players, and no one gives Peter a second look. I've seen Doug, a player on the Demons, get out of his chair, but he walks with a noticeable crick in his leg, so much so that his leg looks like a sideways "v." Not so with Peter. Later, I notice Peter in a chair on the sidelines as if he were as physically impaired as anyone else.

Baffled, I sought out more information. I discovered that some players may be "incomplete" quads. These are people with quadriplegia who, despite suffering a cervical-level spinal injury to their neck (as opposed to a thoracic or lumbar injury to their back, which would usually render them paraplegic), retain some sensation and function in their lower extremities, which may allow them to stand or even walk (Paraplegic-Online.Com). Surprisingly, the USQRA rules say nothing about incomplete injuries, only that:

Players may have various disabilities that preclude their play in able-bodied sport competition. Players must have a combination of upper and lower extremity impairment to be considered as eligible to participate. Most of the players have sustained cervical level spinal injuries and have some type of quadriplegia as a result. (*Classification*)

While these rules for participation seem vague, the classification system for the sport is more precise.

Quad rugby's classification system rates players based on their injury level. Players are classed by certified physical therapists hired by the USQRA, and tested on arm and muscle flexibility, trunk and torso movement, and functional movements like pushing a rugby wheelchair, turning, and stopping. Classifiers assess each of these skills in classifying clinics and then observe players in games thereafter. In quad rugby's classification system, players are classed in increments of 0.5, from 0.5 (designating the least mobile player, called a "low pointer") to 3.5 (representing a more mobile player with more trunk and torso movement, often referred to as a "high pointer"). Each team can have no more than four players on the court at one time, and their classifications must total no more than eight points.

It is to a team's advantage, then, to have players with high strength and mobility classified as low pointers. For example, two players with a lot of physical skill and agility might each be classed at 3.0; if they are both playing then their team can only have two low point players totaling two points. These low pointers are less mobile and therefore slower and less agile than high pointers. As such, the competitive quality of their team may suffer. If the high pointers, however, were to perform greater impairment and each get classed as a 2.0, a practice called "sandbagging," their team could then have more high pointers on the floor, making the team more successful.

Sandbagging is possible because the relationship between a medically-diagnosed injury and a classification in quad rugby is not consistent. As B.S., a new player but physically disabled for almost 10 years, explained: “Even though you might have a lot of function, if it doesn’t correlate in the game and it doesn’t really match up with classifications, you’ll be a lower class.” This deficit-based, medical model of disability (Smith) attempts to sort and rank disability based on physical impairment. Ironically, it is the interstitial spaces between rules and classification that allow participants to perform impairment and therefore play at disability. The vagueness of the USQRA rules and their inconsistent fit with the sport’s classification system enable subversive performances of sandbagging.

Classification is not done throughout the season but intermittently, so I was not able to observe the testing process. Instead, I looked to descriptions from those familiar with the process. Kylie, a certified physical therapist, referee, and assistant to a national championship-caliber team, explained in an interview what goes on in a function test:

They [classifiers] give them [players] the muscle test, and then they watch the muscle chord, and yeah, sure, the athlete and the classifier know. I . . . [tell] high level athletes, “When you go into a classification, do not show them all your muscle function that you have.” So they’ll [classifiers] hold their finger and say [to players], “Can you straighten that?” I say, “You don’t have to do it to the ‘t,’ to the hardest you’ve ever done it in your entire life. Why don’t you just go like, an eighty percentile there, so that it’s not overly . . .” And the classifiers know that everybody’s not going in there, “Oh my god, I got to see if I can be as strong as I ever have.”

Bill, a veteran player with over seven years of experience, explained the strategy with a simple comparison:

It’s kind of like when you’re in court. You just answer the questions they ask you. If they ask you, you know, what color of car, you don’t tell them the make or the model. Yeah, you don’t offer information.

Gelya Frank points out that disabled persons often find unique and unconventional ways to participate in life that are counter to medical opinion or advice. Quad rugby athletes navigate the sport’s classification system in a similarly unconventional manner. In doing so, these wheelchair athletes resist the medical model of disability by enacting more fluid, malleable understandings of what it means to be physically impaired.

In response to Foucault’s notion of a “grid of discipline,” Michel de Certeau argues that social space is porous and allows individuals to resist by reappropriating such space. While the “space” of the USQRA’s rules and classification system is not physical, players do claim it for themselves and use it against itself. They do so, as described by Kylie and Bill, through what Koppers calls tactical performances of disability. In such performances, disabled persons employ strategic displays of their physical ability to achieve a desired reading of disability from an audience. These performances may include “passing,” or not displaying what might be considered tell-tale signs of disability.

While disability scholars (Kuppers; Linton; Nemeth) define passing as disabled persons enacting verbal and nonverbal behaviors to seem able-bodied, quad rugby athletes seem to enact a reversal of this concept. Players enact performances to “pass” as highly impaired. In both definitions of passing, disabled persons attempt to subvert the ableist gaze that locates physical impairment as a static marker of identity. In this case, however, quad rugby players perform a reversal of passing that subverts the gaze of medical professionals who seek to affix a level of impairment with a particular athletic identity.

Performances of passing, as Simi Linton argues, can be difficult to sustain. The process of classification extends over the first year of a player’s rugby career, after which time he or she is on a three-month probationary period. If a player’s on-court performance is not consistent with his or her performance in the functional tests, classifiers may realize that something is amiss. As such, performances of sandbagging may be taxing to the player. Further, the timing of classification can be politically motivated to ensure that a player’s team wins in a big tournament. Mickey, a referee and certified exercise physiologist, laid out how this might happen:

Researcher: I’ve heard stories, and I don’t know if this is true, about some of these guys kind of faking a certain level of injury for the classifiers to get classified as a lower point when they’re really a higher point.

Mickey: Sure.

R: Do you think that’s possible?

M: Well, certainly during the testing. You know they do a lot of strength testing, the PTs [physical therapists] and docs [doctors]. They do strength testing, but what they also do is they don’t finish the classification until they see the actual player play. So, at a tournament like this [a national tournament], it would really detract from the team if the player had to play below their level to get this lower classification. Now if this was at a different tournament they might do that.

J-Man was even more direct:

That’s another thing where the politics come in. Say, you have a 3.5 and you’re going to the Olympics. “Well, hey, let’s try to get him a class down to a 3.0.” Because all the classifiers are in it for USA. All the coaches are in it, so you go up and you do a little sandbagging, and, “Yeah, he’s a three. You’re right, he is a three.” So, I mean, that happens.

Despite its taxing nature, sandbagging seems to be accepted as a common practice in the sport. Almost all my interview respondents spoke of it. Bill acknowledged:

I think it definitely goes on in the sport. I think people dub their classification vague. I think people who’ve been around and play at that level [elite and competitive], they know what the classifiers are looking for. I mean, they try to get away with as much as they can get away with.

When I asked Larry, another experienced player, about this practice, he admitted that sandbagging was commonplace but explained why he does not do it:

Sandbagging is real common. It’s always going to [be]. . . . I believe that if you’re going to cheat, if you know that you’re cheating, that’s something that you deal

with yourself, and you'll get caught or that's how you compete. I wouldn't want to go off the court knowing that I beat someone unfairly.

That sandbagging is accepted as common practice in the sport points to the often amorphous state of play. Richard Schechner explains: "Playing creates its own multiple realities with porous and slippery boundaries" (*Performance Studies* 82). In quad rugby, the very definition of disability seems to be "slippery." This is due, in no small part, to the contested nature of impairment fostered by performances of sandbagging.

The rules and procedures of quad rugby establish particular boundaries for "proper" play, but the boundaries of the classification system appear to be under constant negotiation through players' performances. While this negotiation may resist the medical model of disability propagated by the sport's classification system, it also works to exclude some from participating. This happens in two ways. The first way is simple. If a team chooses to be competitive, it is likely to put its most skilled players on the court. Larry explained that this was unfair to the other teams. However, it is also unfair to players on the same team, as those classed lower will probably be "on the bench" for a majority of the game. The second form of exclusion is more complex. While the vagueness in the classification system enables players to subvert the medicalized gaze through tactical performances of sandbagging, these performances also constrain the empowering characteristics of therapeutic recreation, as they prompt coaches and other players to enact an ableist gaze.

"A Little *Too Mobile*": Imitating the Able-Bodied Gaze

At the 2005 National Tournament, I witnessed the play of one athlete about whom everyone seemed to be talking. While most of the buzz was about his speed, just as much of it seemed to be about his low classification and how this classification did not match up with his strength and mobility. He showed more agility and speed than I had seen in three years of observing the sport, and I attempted to capture his skills in my field notes:

A player, "Philly," cruises along the court toward an easy score. His hands are more like fins as his fingers are sined together at the ends of his shortened but muscular arms. Both legs are amputated above the knees. As he reaches the goal line, a player from the opposing team hits his chair and Philly rolls onto his two right wheels. Gravity is too much for him, however, and he tips over. Instead of stopping, though, he immediately pushes himself upright, spring-boarding onto his wheels in a somersault fashion. Players on the sidelines laugh and applaud, while others look on incredulously.

As the classification of players is closely connected with a team's chances of winning a game, it is in players' and coaches' best interests to monitor other players for evidence of sandbagging; doing so gives them grounds to file a protest with the USQRA. The on-court displays of this player did not escape the notice of coaches and players from other teams:

I'm sitting with Alan and Bill watching the fast kid play. He weaves in and out of players like he's gliding on ice. He reminds me of the Roadrunner cartoon

character, and I half-expect to see a cloud of dust behind him every time he whizzes down the court. We're sitting at one end, and he comes right toward us to score a goal. Instead of turning before reaching the edge of the 3" raised court, which he could easily do, he "hops" onto the cement, tips himself over, and does something resembling a barrel roll back onto the court.

Researcher: He's pretty mobile.

Bill: Yeah [a little sarcastic].

Alan: A little *too* mobile.

Knowing this was Philly's first year in the league and therefore that he was still within his probationary period of classification, I pressed Alan on the possible consequences of this performance:

Researcher: You don't think he should be playing? Technically, he's a quad, right? You don't think he'll get classified?

Alan: If he keeps doing that [somersaults in his wheelchair] he won't. I think they'll keep him around for a few years, learn the game. They'll try to get him classed, but he'll class out [be deemed ineligible to play].

If a player classes out, he is excluded from play. In the above excerpts, the highly skilled player seems to fit the physical characteristics (impairment in all four limbs) that qualify him to play quad rugby. The classification system that enables him to be out on the court, however, becomes a tool that other coaches and players may use against him.

Players and coaches scan a player's on-court performance for signs of "abnormality," just as doctors may scan a person's body for signs of deviation from the accepted norms of a medically-diagnosed healthy body. Physical difference may be the focus of both gazes, but the distinction between the sideline monitoring and the able-bodied gaze is how "abnormality" is defined in the quad rugby context. Unlike doctors, players like Alan and Bill view abnormality not as being physically impaired but as having too much mobility. While a doctor may diagnose an amputee as too disabled to function without prosthetics (although some amputees do not wish to use prosthetics), quad rugby athletes and coaches may monitor a player's on-court displays and deem him or her not disabled enough to play at that particular classification level, or even to play at all. The result of these sideline enactments of surveillance, then, is a constraining gaze that undercuts potentially liberating definitions of disability; the player, "Philly," is obviously impaired but, if Alan and Bill had their way, he might be deemed not disabled enough to play quad rugby.

While wandering the sidelines at the same tournament, I stepped into a similar conversation about classification and sandbagging. This one was between a coach and player about a new Japanese "import" player who was supposed to be even faster than Philly:

James [a coach for a Florida team] and Doug [a player] watch a game and discuss "Shim," the Japanese player who will be coming to the U.S. to play on Doug's team next year. In sidelong glances, James interrogates Doug.

James: [in a challenging tone] Why is he a three [classified as a 3.0]?

Doug: His hands aren't that good.

J: [with a raised eyebrow] He doesn't have trunk [torso movement]?

D: Oh, he's got trunk.

J: [with a knowing smile] Then why is he a three?

Doug says nothing more, shrugs his shoulders, and rolls away. James crosses his arms triumphantly, turns to another player and mutters, "That's bullshit."

Such sideline monitoring imitates the ableist gaze, albeit with an important distinction. The ableist gaze is one that marks disabled bodies as different and, therefore, "abnormal." For example, this gaze is enacted in medical diagnoses of disability as an impaired body in need of "fixing" (Davis; Koppers; Mitchell and Snyder). Sideline conversations regarding classification function in a more nuanced way.

Performances of sandbagging can be framed as what Erving Goffman terms fabrication—"the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is going on" (*Frame Analysis* 83). Clearly, Alan, Bill, and James believe that some players fabricate their physical impairment. When a person maintains a position that can be discredited, Goffman argues, "it is likely there will be some place and occasion in which his actions provide the evidence" to discredit him or her (166). Discreditation is always possible during a game. This is apparent in the sideline talk recorded in the above excerpts. To avoid such discreditation, players move backstage, to locker rooms and bathrooms, when they want to "exit" their role as a particular class of player.

Because discreditation is always a possibility, players must learn the intricacies of such performances. The players being discussed in sideline conversations like the two presented above are probably aware they are being watched, as the following field note excerpt illustrates:

In the bathroom, Boomer, a quad amp [both arms and both legs amputated], sits by the sink in his rugby chair. His teammate, Peter, a large, muscular player with all four limbs intact, rolls in and stops in front of the mirror. After taking a look at himself, Peter notices that his jersey is not tucked in. "I gotta tuck," he says, and stands up to get a better look at himself. Peter and Boomer are alone in the bathroom (except for me). Peter suddenly looks around. "I can't be standing up out there," he says, and quickly sits down. Boomer replies, "You can if you want to." Then, as if this were an explanation, he adds, "I never have to get classed again."

Other players are less secretive but no less discreet about the ways in which they display their (dis)abilities:

Back in the locker room, which is really just a kind of staging area under the bleachers, the team gathers. Doug, who seems to be the team mechanic, flips Alan's chair over to make some adjustments. Alan has bent his axle in a crash, a hazard of the game. Doug struggles to get a good angle on the left axle, to no avail. Finally, after looking around to make sure no one is coming around the corner, Doug stands up in his awkward way, leaning to the right so much that he might fall over, and then gets down on the floor. In no time, the axle is changed and Alan is on his way. Doug stands up and plops back into his seat.

As is clear from the above excerpts, when an incomplete quad can walk, he or she rarely does so in the sight of other players. In this backstage context, performances of

sandbagging emerge as multi-layered and point to the enactment of impairment as crucial to a “competent” performance of (dis)ability. For example, while his on-court displays are competent in the sense that they challenge ableist notions of the disabled body, Philly’s performances are not entirely competent in the context of quad rugby: his extremely agile displays attracted a lot of attention and scrutiny. Peter and Doug’s awareness of front and backstage spaces (Goffman *Presentation*) make their performances more competent in that they more successfully mask their level of impairment.

Some players, however, believe it is next to impossible to mask one’s level of physical ability. B.S., who was going through the classification process at the time of our interview, explained, “I think it’s easy to sandbag, but I think that it all depends on how far you take it.” B.S. continued by arguing that sandbagging is essentially a futile effort, at least at the elite level at which he plays:

We [his team] had a whole group of people out there that got classified. And for some of them, it’s never going to matter because they’re never going to go on to compete in any arena where classification really matters. I’m going on with the Demons this year, one of the best Division I teams in the country. And to play in that arena, there’s going to be . . . [classifiers] there that have been around the sport a long time. And you’re not going to be able to fool them.

While it may be more difficult to fool experienced classifiers, stories of getting “caught” are rare. The only such story shared in my interviews came from J-Man, and his had a twist:

There’s a guy from Australia named, he had a nickname, “The Truck.” Total a-b [able-bodied], total a-b. Faking the whole thing. They actually caught him. The classifiers saw him at the airport walking around, just carrying his bag, the whole thing, actually pushing his chair with one hand and walking to the exit.

After reading J-Man’s story, one may wonder why someone who is not disabled would fake an impairment simply to play the sport. J-Man speculated that “The Truck” may not have been good enough to play an able-bodied sport at an elite level. I do not know if his story was accurate or complete, so it is entirely possible that “The Truck” was indeed physically impaired in some way. More important, however, are the implications of such performances for understanding inclusion in disabled sport and in disability communities.

This analysis extends and problematizes Coopman’s discussion of metaphors of disability in communication research, as well as current research into inclusion and classification. Coopman presents several metaphors for disability studies that may simultaneously empower and oppress the disabled population. She distinguishes between disability as cognition, in culture, as culture, as politics, and as community, noting that the last metaphor provides the most complex and comprehensive view of disability. The author calls for research into empowering strategies of communication within disabled communities. The above excerpts echo Linton’s argument that disabled communities are not free from politics and fragmentation. Interestingly, contestations of meanings of disability are located in the enactments—

performances—of impairment. As such, community may be a more complex metaphor than initially posited by Coopman. In this analysis, it seems to be a multi-layered concept: the community of quad rugby within the community of disabled sport within the community of disability. These concentric circles of community emanate from specific embodiments of physical impairment, like pond ripples from pebbles. Similarly, the performances examined in this paper illuminate and extend performance studies theory and disability studies in wide array.

Conclusions

The player performances examined in this paper enable and constrain potentially transformative moments in which players may come to new understandings of their disability. Performances of sandbagging, in which athletes perform more impairment to receive a favorable classification, challenge the medical gaze of classifiers by denying easy labeling, or perhaps any definitive label, of their physical impairment. As quad rugby is a competitive team sport, however, it benefits other players and coaches to monitor on-court performances for signs of “discreditation” (Goffman *Stigma*). These surveillance practices imitate the ableist gaze—a gaze that seeks to label some bodies as “normal” and discipline those that are different. In the quad rugby context, such a gaze defines “normal” players as those who seem sufficiently impaired for their classification level; any mobility that seems to surpass the classification is labeled “abnormal,” rendering suspect that athlete’s eligibility to play and, in essence, that athlete’s disability. As such, this analysis extends current disability sport theorizing (Brasile and Hedrick; DePauw and Gavron; Promis et al.; Sherrill) by illustrating how athletes strategically negotiate and subvert the classification system through performance.

There is a growing body of writing devoted to performance and disability (Kuppers; Sandahl and Auslander). However, little of this addresses the performance of disability in sport (Manderson and Peake). Examining performances of disability in a sport context is useful because disabled sport offers athletes opportunities for reflexive performances of self in a context temporarily removed from able-bodied society. Specifically, this study elaborates performance studies theory in two ways. First, it extends thinking about the efficaciousness of performance, or the effectiveness of performance, in achieving a transformed sense of self or in challenging stereotypes. Second, it offers additional considerations of performance as resistance.

Disabled persons occupy a liminal state. In this state, one is in between identities; for example, an adolescent who is no longer a child but not yet an adult (Turner). Many physically impaired persons, who often have visible bodily differences, are unfortunately not perceived as entirely part of an able-bodied world; they are considered disabled. However, neither are they part of another world entirely removed from the physical spaces and discursive formations embedded in able-bodied society. Some disability scholars encourage disabled individuals to embrace their perpetual liminal state between social roles and use it as grounds on which to

challenge existing social structures (Willett and Deegan). In a similar vein, one might be tempted to view quad rugby players' performances as evidence of the efficacy of performance to challenge ableist notions of disability.

In some ways, quad rugby players' performances seem to accomplish resistance. Players learn to perform their impairment adeptly on and off the court in ways that challenge the medicalized gaze that Others the disabled body (Foucault; Koppers). However, quad rugby performances may be just as effective in helping male players re-inscribe their disabled bodies as conventionally athletic. This athleticism is distinctly ableist and heterosexually masculine (Messner *Power*). While embracing this notion of athleticism can be empowering, it may also undercut the work of disability studies to offer conceptions of disability not dependent on an able-disabled, "normal"—"abnormal" continuum.

This study highlights contestations in conceptualizations of disability in other ways as well. Most notably, this paper points to the integral role of performance theory in conceptualizing disability. Staged performances and other activities "marked off" from everyday life, like quad rugby athletes' play, have the power to challenge conceptions of "normal" firmly rooted in able-bodiedness. Athletes play with their impairment and use the visibility of their "stigma," or bodily differences, to "tweak" the dominant script of disability. Thus, this study creates new in-roads towards understanding the power of play in helping disabled persons claim agency over their "stigmatized" self (Goffman *Stigma*). Rather than masking or hiding disability as a way to neutralize a perceived stigma, quad rugby athletes' displays highlight bodily difference through play. In this way, performances of disability, especially in a sport context, can subvert the stigma associated with physical disability in surprisingly effective ways.

Note

- [1] The sport is frequently referred to as both "quad rugby" and "wheelchair rugby." Since many readers may be unfamiliar with the medical classification of a quadriplegia, I will use these terms interchangeably.

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