

**Research Article**

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# **Physical Literacy and Inclusion: Marlarunyan's Positive Attitude towards Disability in *No Finish Line My life as I See it***

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## **Abstract**

### **Keywords**

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The social, psychological, and individual requirements of people with disabilities are heavily influenced by society perceptions. In response to this need for a shift in mindset, certain UN organizations, government authorities, national and international disability official establishments have made attempts to reject all types of prejudice or discrimination against individuals with disabilities. This has unquestionably yielded results. Many UN member countries have signed and accepted the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. Today, we have many people who have disabilities breaking the stereotype and proving their capabilities to the world. Marla Runyan was the first lawfully unsighted athlete to compete in the Olympic Games. The select life-writings: *No Finish Line* by Marla Runyan, portrays not only the trials and tribulations of the authors, but also their strong determination and physical literacy. This research investigates the psychological impact of athletes to understand how this gets reflected in the participation in sport by the disabled people. It also examines and understands the barriers faced by people with disability. The study suggests that athletes with impairments have identical motivations, training demands, and skill requirements as elite normal-bodied athletes, in the field of sport and the Paralympics. However, in spite of these similarities, the fact remains that there are some unique needs to disability sport which are to be addressed for greater participation and motivation of people who have disabilities.

## Introduction

Recent advances in cultural attitudes together with legal support, and developments in supportive technologies and medicine have helped individuals with disabilities to enter the arena of sports. Athletes with disabilities compete at both the national and international level. In 1948, German-born neurologist Sir Ludwig Guttmann organized a sporting competition in England involving World War II veterans with spinal cord injuries. An international movement was born from his efforts, leading to the first official Paralympic Games, in Rome, Italy in 1960 which had 400 disabled participants from 23 countries. Today, Paralympics has athletes with disabilities or impairments competing in sports like athletics, cycling, judo, rowing, swimming, and volleyball. The Paralympic Games are held in the same year and city as the Olympic Games. Similar to Olympic Games, the Paralympic Games are global multi-sporting events subdivided into summer and winter games. The Paralympic Games have five distinct disability categories that include amputee, cerebral palsy, wheelchair, visual impairment, and les autres. The last category is for disabilities that do not fall into another category. In 2010, a sixth category, intellectual disabilities, was included for the London 2012 Games. The main purpose of classification of impairment is to ensure that competition is fair and equal.

Visual impairments include total blindness and partial blindness, the latter insufficient enough as to be judged legally blind. The degree of visual impairment is determined by the residual visual acuity and breadth of visual field, based on which blindness and low vision are defined in categories. While many sports rely on the use of sight, visual impairment does not mean giving up on sports. Whether it is leisure exercise or competitive sport, there are a range of options for people who are blind or partially sighted. For blind and partially sighted people, sports can be a gateway to social inclusion, improved health, and increased confidence and self-esteem.

World Health Organization (2003) has acknowledged the notion that health and ability of the body can be swayed through physical activity and sport is looked upon as a daily component for all individuals, including those with disability (WHO, 2004). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was the fundamental step that ensured the rights of people with a disability worldwide. Adopted by the General Assembly in December 2006, the Convention was one among the fastest treaties that had ever been negotiated at the United Nations (2006). The convention is envisioned as a human rights tool with an unequivocal, social advancement dimension. As a human rights treaty, it has commitments that have legal binding, and provides a framework that ensures people with disability to access their fundamental human rights. One among these rights is to take part in cultural life, including participation in play, leisure and sporting activities, on an equal basis with others.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities thus enables persons with disabilities to participate on an equal basis with others in recreational, leisure and sporting activities, Walker (2007) insists on quality participation, and not just the promotion of participation of people with disability. Cevra (2007) highlights the fact that the convention aims to empower people with disability to demand their rightful entitlements and fully participate in society, and to promote equality and challenge discrimination. The power of sport as a tool for transformation is of specific importance for women, because women with disabilities tend to experience double discrimination on the basis of their gender and disability. It is a known fact that most women with disabilities do not involve in sport and they comprise only one-third of athletes with disabilities in international competitions. By providing them the opportunity to compete and demonstrate their physical ability, sport can help reduce gender stereotypes and negative views associated with women with disabilities (United Nations, 2008a).

## Sports as a Fundamental Right for People with Disability

The World Health Organization (2003) has acknowledged the notion that health and ability of the body can be swayed through physical activity and sport is looked upon as a daily component for all individuals, including those with disability (WHO, 2004). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was the fundamental step that ensured the rights of people with a disability worldwide. Adopted by the General Assembly in December 2006, the Convention was one among the fastest treaties that had ever been negotiated at the United Nations (2006). The convention is envisioned as a human rights tool with an unequivocal, social advancement dimension. As a human rights treaty, it has commitments that have legal binding, and provides a framework that ensures people with disability to access their fundamental human rights. One among these rights is to take part in cultural life, including participation in play, leisure and sporting activities, on an equal basis with others.

Marla Runyan's life proves to the world that a person with disability is not incompetent. By participating in able-bodied events, she had challenged the discrimination which most of the disabled face. She says, *"But you'd be wrong if you supposed that my vision loss impairs my running,"* (Runyan,6,7) Marla Runyan's career as a world-class runner in able-bodied events began in 1999 at the Pan American Games, where she won Gold in the 1,500-meter race. The next year, she placed eighth in the 1,500-meter in the 2000 Sydney Olympics, making her the first legally blind athlete to compete in the Olympics and the highest finish by an American woman in that event. But through it all, she says she hoped she had run for the *"right reasons: to value effort for its own sake, and to prove that impairment does not preclude excellence"* (Runyan,8) Since her childhood, Marla Runyan had been asked what she could see, and she says *"when you run as fast as I do, things tend to be a blur anyway"*(Runyan,6). Visual impairment has least

impact on her ability, as can be seen by her statement . Persons with disabilities are highly capacitated as those with no disabilities, and sport offers an equalizing field for them.

As a nine year old, when her mother tried to explain her that she was legally blind, she gave her a knee-jerk response by saying, *"No, I'm not"*(Runyan, 6). She says the problem is one of perception, and that people confuse "disabled" with "inept". She looked at her blindness as a positive thing. It provided her a sharp contrast between the easy and the difficult. It not only forced her to prove her competence but also it pushed her to achieve.

At a national competition held at California Association of Blind Athletes, CABA, Marla joined an event for impaired athletes. She met her old classmate Casey Cook who was deaf and blind. Casey was in the swimming competition. By the end of the week, she was so excited to have made some friends, and so fascinated by her ability to communicate with Casey, that she decided what her college major would be: Communicative Disorders, with a special emphasis on education of deaf and blind children. This highlights the fact that sport fosters social skill, and empowers one as to take the right decision, and be self-reliant.

According to National Disability Authority (2005), data on participation in physical activity shows that people with disability by and large engage in less physical activity than their able-bodied peers .Global estimate of WHO (2003) on development of health through physical activity suggest that more than 60% of adults worldwide do not engage in physical activity that will benefit their health and that physical inactivity is stated as being even more common among both women and people with disability. Sport England (2002) , the national sports development agency, in two distinct surveys on participation in children and adults with a disability, shows that the frequency of participation by disabled people in sports is significantly lower than their able-bodied counterparts (Sport England, 2001).

When describing the U.S. Paralympic Trials in Atlanta in 1996, Marla Runyan explains her shock on discovering that there was nobody else entered in the 100 meters, and that she would have to run alone on an empty track. In her words:

It was the ultimate administrative Catch-22: there is no race to be raced, because I'm the only competitor in my classification and event. (Runyan,89)

The unique ability of sports is that it transcends linguistic, cultural and social barriers, and provides an excellent platform for tactics of inclusion and adaptation.

While at Sydney, describing her stay at the Olympic Village with athletes from across the world, Marla gives a perfect picture of amalgamation of culture that was made possible by sports:

The dining hall was an interesting adventure, too. It was enormous, a warehouse-sized building with a mind-boggling array of cuisines available. There were foods from every possible country and culture available, (Runyan,171)

Furthermore, the universal popularity of sport and the benefits it provides in terms of physical, social and economic well-being makes it an ideal tool for fostering the inclusion and well-being of persons with disabilities.

Persons with disabilities often face social barriers and disability induces negative approach and perception in several societies. As a result of the stigma and shame associated with disability, persons with disabilities are usually excluded from education, occupation and public life which divest them of prospects essential to their social development, health and welfare. In some societies, persons with disabilities are considered dependent and seen as incompetent, thus imposing inactivity which often causes individuals with physical disabilities to have limited mobility.

In her life-writing, Marla Runyan says that at times, people do not expect much from her, solely because she is partially blind. She writes that she could feel them thinking, "*Oh, you're visually impaired, just go sit on the couch.*" When she is on the track, they say "*There's this blind, girl running, isn't that great?*"(Runyan, 7) or "*She's not supposed to run that fast. She's blind.*"(Runyan, 15) Runyan strongly believes that one can be more disabled by their attitude than by their vision loss. Runyan has met visually impaired people with doctorates, and also those who are content to sit on the sofa and say, "*I'm blind.*" She says with conviction that it comes down to perception-how one perceives their vision loss. Therefore, it's up to the individual to determine what they can and can't do.

According to Marla the terms "*Legally Blind*", "*Vow Vision*", "*Partially Sighted*", "*Visually Handicapped*" or "*Visually Impaired*" make little sense. She says these terms do not actually define her.

And that, to me, is silly. You can use any term you like, but it doesn't define me. In the end, it's my responsibility to ensure that the attributes by which I would prefer to be defined are more visible to you than my blindness. . (Runyan, 15)

Sport impacts persons with disability in an equally intense way by empowering them to understand their full potential and campaign for changes in society. Through sport, persons with disabilities acquire the prerequisite social skills, become independent, and empowered to act as agents of change. Sport teaches individuals how to communicate effectively, and what teamwork, cooperation and respect for others mean. Sport is one of the activities where individuals project their inherent talent to the world. It reduces their dependence and develops greater independence. Thus, it can be said that participation in sports help persons with disabilities to become physically and mentally stronger. These skills can then be transferred into other areas that include employment and support work for building self-sufficiency.

Sport plays a great role in reducing the stigma and discrimination accompanying disability by highlighting the skills of persons with disabilities. It transforms the attitude of the community by reducing their tendency to see the disability instead of the person. Through sport, persons with no physical deformities work together with persons with disabilities in a positive context, and this enables them to restructure their suppositions about what persons with disabilities can and cannot do. The power of sport as a tool for transformation is of specific importance for women, because women with disabilities tend to experience double discrimination on the basis of their gender and disability. It is a known fact that most women with disabilities do not involve in sport and they comprise only one-third of athletes with disabilities in international competitions. By providing them the opportunity to compete and demonstrate their physical ability, sport can help reduce gender stereotypes and negative views associated with women with disabilities.

Sports-based opportunities can help in increased enrolment in primary education, as they remove the stigma that prevents children with disabilities from attending school. Other benefits that can be achieved are promotion of gender equality by empowering women and girls with disabilities to gain health facts, skills, social networks, and leadership qualities; and lead to increased employment, reduced poverty levels and increased self-confidence.

Recalling her early experience at San Diego State University, Marla Runyan says the track team was her strongest connection, her source of friendships and social life on campus. She lived at the track; it was the only place she really wanted to be. She spent most of her time with a group simply known as “the jumpers,” about thirty male and female long jumpers, high jumpers, triple-jumpers, and pole-vaulters. When at track practice, she studied the sprinters and hurdlers who were coached by Rahn Sheffield, a prominent local sprinter. Rahn observed that she had a powerful bounce in her step that suggested she might be as much a runner as a jumper.

Rahn himself had a serious accident wherein 830 pounds of metal came down on his leg, and three years after the emergency operation, he started running again, and in 1986 he made it back into the world rankings in the 400 hurdles. He then coached his younger sister, LaTanya, as well as another great young San Diego sprinter named Renee Ross, for he thought they had better Olympic chances than he did. Marla also recalls how participation in sports placed her on track with the heptathlon, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, and Romanian World Champion Gabrielo Szalo.

In the summer of 1988, during the Seoul Olympics, Runyan watched Jackie Joyner-Kersey break the world record in the heptathlon, the seven-event competition, the women's equivalent of the decathlon and was greatly fascinated by it. She felt as a good high jumper and a good runner, she could do the heptathlon. To compete in the heptathlon, she would have to run the 100-meter hurdles, put the shot, throw the javelin, high jump, long jump, and run 200 and 800 meters. Donna Waller, who was perennially ranked among the top ten nationally, and Rahn were her coaches. In that heptathlon, she competed with the 1992 Olympic Gold Medalist, Gail Devers.

## **Social Perception of athletes with disability**

The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) endeavors to position the Paralympic Games as elite sports competition wherein the social perceptions about differently abled people are invalidated by the affirmation that Paralympians are athletes and their sport performances, not their physical disabilities should come to the fore. It therefore follows that every individual and institution including the media should endorse the concept that impairment is purely incidental, but not influential, in Paralympic sport. Some are of the opinion that impairment could be included by the IPC in a manner that leads to reconfiguration of social understanding of individuals with disability, and also helps differentiate the Paralympic Games from the established able-bodied sporting competitions presently in vogue.

Most others want Paralympians to be recognized as athletes, with other facets of their identity not being commented upon. This is mainly because it has been a natural attitude of many to consider impairment as the dominating part of an individual with a disability identity.

Media coverage of Paralympic events should be to acknowledge the athletes' desire for respect and give importance to their high performances. Media personnel should attempt to report Paralympic sport in an informed and critical way, in keeping with the coverage which mainstream able-bodied sports receive. However, media prefer reporting the heart-breaking and feel-good stories about overcoming disability. The high performances of these Paralympians become subordinated beneath tragic-overcoming stories. Van Hilvoorde and Landeweerd(2008) highlight this preoccupation with disability, without giving importance to sporting achievement. According to them, for many people in disability sport, the athlete is still a "patient battling with their limitations", instead of an elite athlete with definite talents or brilliance'. Furthermore, they say that there seems to be a sharp contrast between the athlete as a social hero and icon and the disabled person that needs additional attention or care; the one integrating the peak of normality, human functioning at its best, the other often representing the opposite (United Nations, 2008b).

After her winning performance at Pan-American Games, the press came to her, and thrust tape recorders in her, and volleyed questions at her simultaneously. But one voice really shook Marla as it asked her to tell about her eyes.

"Marla, tell us about your eyes! You have got to be kidding me.

After I've won a gold medal in only my fourth 1500-you want to know about my eyes?

(Runyan,136)

Marla Runyan felt that at that moment the subject of her eyesight was the most inappropriate and irrelevant topic she could think of. They had overlooked the excitement and the drama of the

race itself. She asks, "*Why couldn't they let my accomplishment stand on its own?*"( Runyan 136)

Thus, the social assessment of an individual with impairment and that of an athlete is seen as conflicting, incompatible within the same body at the same time. This becomes a challenge for the IPC who wish to market the Paralympic Games as an elite sports competition, which by design includes persons with impairments. The relationship between the physical appearance of the sport personality and the generally imperfect impaired body is intricate. There could be to certain extent some *gaucherie* and uneasiness in watching athletes with some evident disability perform. They pose the concern of otherness, prompting the sporting public to understand that not all elite athletes have ideal bodies and striking body shapes. However, there is perhaps a need to attempt to put in another way sporting bodies, if select athletes with a disability are to have their high level sporting performances recognized. DePauw (1997) delivers a valuable insight into the issue of disability and elite sport, by proposing a three tiered typology. This relates to the visibility of disability in sport, and accordingly, one, individuals with disabilities have been excluded from sport which means invisibility of disability in sport, two, they have become visible in sport as disabled athletes that translates as visibility of disability in sport and three, disabled people are becoming increasingly visible in sport as athletes, and this is (in) Visibility of (dis)Ability in sport.

Marla Runyan says that blind runners, wheelchair racers, and dwarf power -lifters show to the world that they are athletes first, and disabled second. Unfortunately, no matter how fast they ran or swam or cycled, the media confused them with the Special Olympics, a competition for athletes with mental retardation. She says that was disheartening, and the word, "special" was despising. Invariably, every newspaper article or news on visual media carried that word along with "courageous" and "inspirational." She says:

Our accomplishments were always overshadowed by the presence of a wheelchair, a Prosthetic limb, or a guide runner. Proving the point was an exhausting task. We always told the press the same thing. "I am an athlete with a disability, not a disabled athlete" I said, time after time. (Runyan, 84)

## Conclusion

People with disabilities realize the dual role through sport activities: the desired reception of an impaired athlete's performance, by an able-bodied audience, and focuses on valuing sporting achievement and performance, aside from disability. Deciphering the sporting performances of individuals with impairment would breakdown the stigma of 'otherness' (Chatziefstathiou et al., 2020) which some people with no disabilities may see as intrinsic when interacting with a person with a disability. Moreover, focusing on the sporting aspect of an individual's identity, rather than their disability, could possibly empower persons with physical defect. This empowerment could be availed by both individuals with disability who are actually active and those who are not, as the concept of identity as a multi-dimensional bio- social construct is being highlighted, opposed to a reductive focus on impairment.

However, the paradox of Paralympic games is that there is a vital need for able-bodied audiences to be able to recognize the Paralympian as possessing some form of impairment, to ensure the individual is a credible and justified member of a disability sport competition.

What has made Marla's achievements remarkable is that she has been legally blind since childhood. Depending purely on her peripheral visual field and other senses, hard work, grit and pure determination, Marla competed and won at the highest level against the best fully sighted female athletes in the world. To date, Marla is the only U.S. Track and Field athlete, to have qualified and competed in both the Paralympic and Olympic Games.

Marla believes that sport has the power to change perceptions and attitudes about what it means to have a disability. She has lived her life showing the world that impairment does not preclude excellence. Marla's vision was normal until she was about nine years old. When she was in the fourth grade, she was diagnosed with Stargardt's Disease, an irreversible form of macular degeneration. With the unwavering support of her parents, she refused to let her disease limit her dreams. Despite her severely impaired vision, Marla rode a horse and learned to play the violin. But she found her true calling in sports.

During the 1976 Olympics, when she was just seven years old, she was glued to watching gymnasts on TV. She would walk around on her hands and practice doing the splits, and finish each "routine" with her toes perfectly pointed and her hands high above her head, as if to take a bow to the imaginary audience.

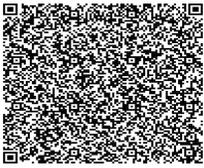
Marla has become an inspiration for others who have vision impairments and an inspiration for everyone to go for whatever they want in life. Marla does not consider her vision impairment a disability on the track.

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