



Athlete & Coach Experiences of Para Sport Gateways & Pathways in Ireland



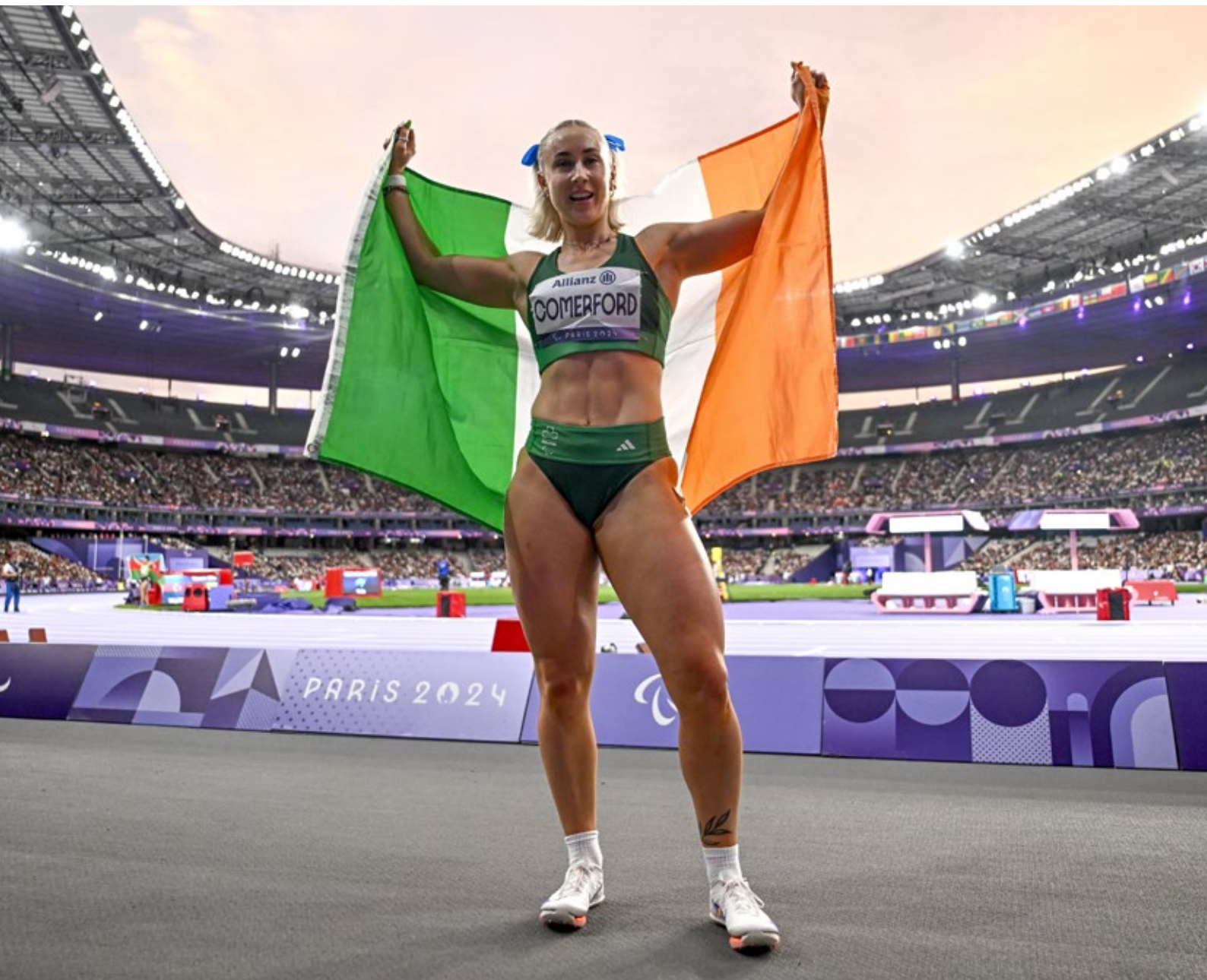
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At the heart of Paralympics Ireland's lies a commitment to understanding and improving the experiences of Para athletes and coaches throughout their sporting journeys. This seminal piece of research—*Athlete and Coach Experiences of Para Sport Gateways & Pathways in Ireland*—marks a pivotal moment in our collective effort to build a more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable Para sport system in Ireland.

This project began with a simple yet powerful question: *What are the lived experiences of athletes and coaches navigating Para sport pathways in Ireland?* With little existing cross-sport, qualitative research focused specifically on this community, Paralympics Ireland recognised the urgent need to listen—deeply and directly—to those living these journeys.

Through this world-leading study, we now have a robust evidence base that brings visibility to the lived experiences of athletes and coaches across the Irish Para sport landscape. It captures their challenges, aspirations, and insights, and offers a blueprint for future development. The findings not only shine a light on what is working—but also where support structures

can be enhanced to ensure that athletes and coaches are enabled to thrive, stay engaged, and reach their potential at every stage of their pathway.

This report is more than research—it is a call to action. It opens up new opportunities for Paralympics Ireland, Sport Ireland, National Governing Bodies, Local Sports Partnerships and disability sport organisations to collaborate meaningfully and intentionally to create a system that reflects the holistic needs of our Para sport community.

We are deeply grateful to Rethink Ireland for providing the funding that made this work possible. Our sincere thanks go to the research team for their integrity, insight, and dedication. Most importantly, we extend heartfelt thanks to the athletes and coaches who generously shared their experiences. Your voices are the foundation of this report—and the future we are building together.

With appreciation,
Stephen McNamara, CEO
Lisa Clancy, President



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report was commissioned by Paralympics Ireland to explore the experiences of Para sport athletes and coaches across the country. It responds to the need for deeper, evidence-based understanding of the factors shaping Para sport participation at a time when national sport participation rates are rising, but significant disparities remain for people with disabilities (Irish Sports Monitor, 2025). Using semi-structured interviews (18 athletes, 15 coaches) and an electronic survey (123 athletes), this mixed-methods study offers a detailed picture of the Irish Para sport landscape.

Getting Involved: Para Sport Gateway Experiences

Athletes were first asked about how they started to play Para sport. Athletes typically entered Para sport at a relatively late age (mean age ~19 years), with girls with congenital disabilities starting significantly later than boys (21.18 years vs 12.6 years). Entry pathways were often informal: most participants were introduced to Para sport through family, friends, or rehabilitation and health professionals, with schools playing a limited role. A multitude of factors served to motivate athletes to start to play Para sport including fun, competition, and enhanced health, fitness, independence and self-confidence. The desire to socialise and meet new people was also a common motivating factor. Reflecting the positive experiences of first playing Para sport, early participation was reported to be sustained via a wide variety of factors, including a sense of independence and accomplishment, and the opportunity to travel and compete. However, entry into Para sport was often hampered by high costs, limited local opportunities, and inadequate access to facilities and equipment.

Para Sport Pathway Experiences

Among those currently participating in Para sport, most trained year-round or multiple seasons per year. Segregated settings were the most commonly reported setting for participation and just over half of the athletes trained with a coach present. When asked about what kept the athletes involved in Para sport, the most common reasons included a sense of accomplishment, maintaining and refining skills, competitive environments, and support from family and friends. Barriers to continued participation mirrored those at entry: high expenses, a lack of adequate facilities, and a lack of adequately trained staff within existing facilities, were the most cited barriers. Athletes with acquired disabilities reported significantly more barriers than those with congenital disabilities.

Injuries in Para Sport

Injury was common among athletes, with 69% having sustained at least one significant injury. Despite generally positive perceptions of injury support services, a substantial number of athletes reported playing through injuries, sometimes due to external pressure, and nearly half had hidden injuries from coaches or teammates. Injury prevention education was inconsistently provided (1 in 3 received no injury prevention education). Most athletes believed their coaches had sufficient understanding of their impairment to help prevent injuries.

Classification in Para Sport

Classification experiences were largely positive in terms of the testing process, environment and staff interactions. However, understanding and perceptions of the fairness of the classification system varied.

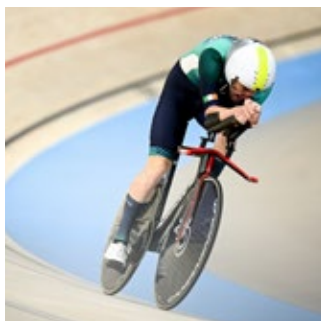
Perceived Benefits of Para Sport Participation

Participants overwhelmingly reported positive impacts of Para sport on their lives. Athletes reported major positive impacts on physical functioning, physical and mental health, social life, and personal independence. Qualitative findings revealed that Para sport contributed to life skills development, broadened horizons, and opened educational and professional opportunities for many athletes. Athletes highlighted the unique value of connecting with others who share similar experiences of living with a disability.

Key Implications

The report identifies critical areas for action, including: promoting earlier and more equitable access to Para sport; increasing the presence of Para sport in schools; expanding local programme and facility availability; addressing gender and disability-specific participation gaps; strengthening coach development gateways and pathways; and leveraging the broader life benefits of Para sport to advocate for greater investment and awareness.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The recently released Irish Sports Monitor (ISM) 2024 data indicates that overall sports participation in Ireland has reached a record high, with 54% of the population participating in sport weekly, up from 47% in 2023. However, this national progress reveals a widening disparity: **the participation gap for people with disabilities has increased to 22 percentage points**, up from 20 in the previous year; just 32% of individuals with a long-term illness or disability regularly participate in sport. Furthermore, individuals with disabilities are nearly twice as likely to be classified as sedentary (29% vs. 15%) and 40% less likely to have membership of a sports club (24% vs 40%), compared to individuals without disabilities.

This growing divide persists despite targeted investments in disability sport. Recognising this challenge, the National Sports Policy 2018-2027 identifies inclusion as a core value, emphasizing the importance of addressing social, disability, gender, ethnic, and other gradients to ensure sport is welcoming and accessible to all. Action 6 of the policy pertains to the development of initiatives to address participation disparities among specific groups, including those with disabilities, noting that team and individual-based NGBs will be encouraged to develop initiatives that promote wider participation. Sport Ireland has also launched a Statement of Commitment and Action to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in sport, as part of its Diversity and Inclusion Policy, further demonstrating a national commitment to closing the participation gap.

To ensure efforts to achieve these strategic goals are evidence-based, focused research to establish a deeper understanding of the factors influencing participation in sport for people with disabilities is critical. Although data providing insight into physical activity *levels* of Irish adults and youth with disabilities is improving, our understanding of *how* and *why* Irish people with disabilities engage in physical activity remains sparse.

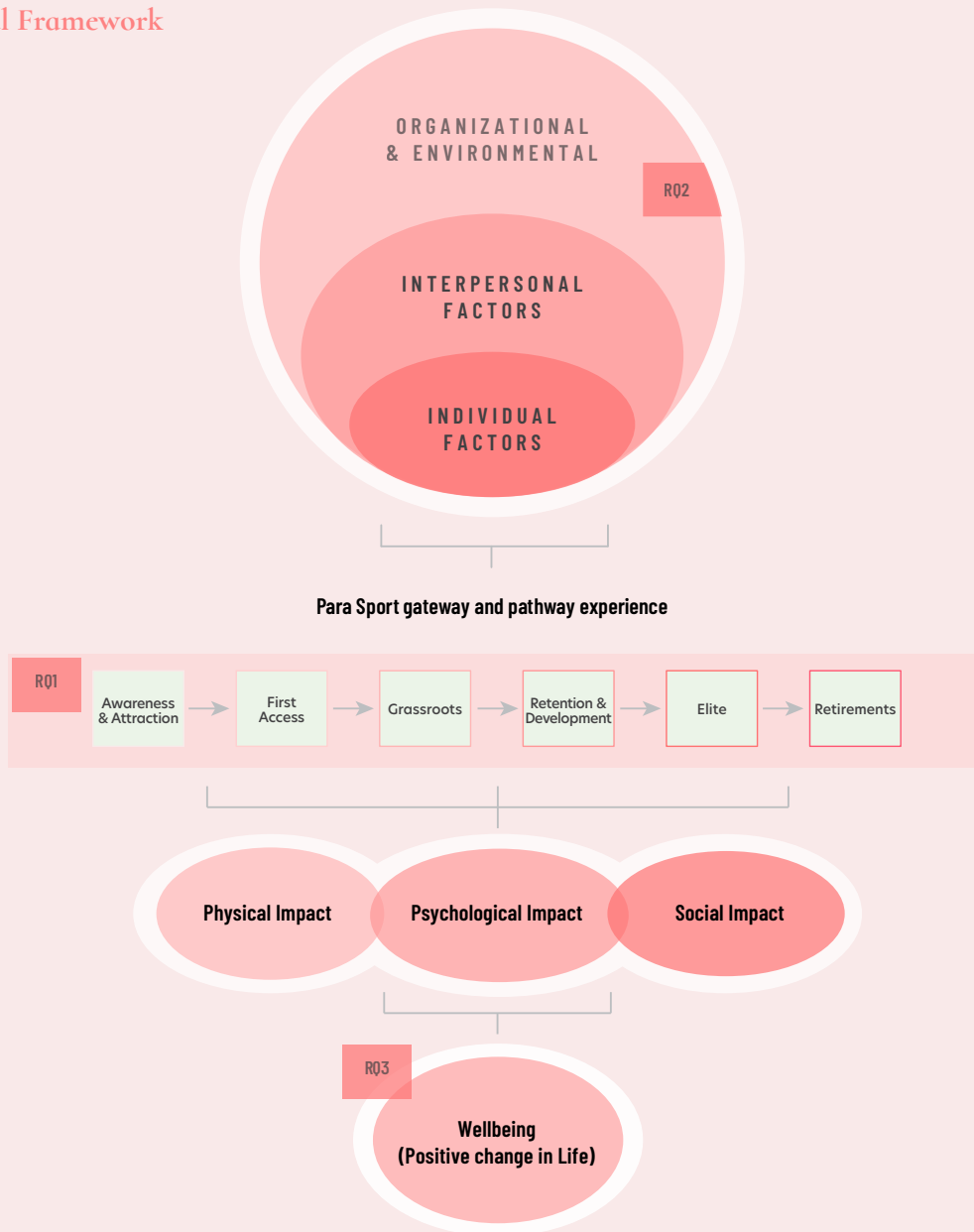
This project was commissioned by Paralympics Ireland to deepen our understanding of how athletes and coaches experience Para sport in Ireland today. While international research has highlighted the complex nature of the Para sport journey – shaped by factors such as impairment type and onset, access to sport-specific opportunities, the role of family and coaches, and national infrastructure, etc. – there remains limited insight into how these dynamics play out within the Irish context. **This study addresses that gap by foregrounding the voices of athletes and coaches within the Para sport system in Ireland. It explores what defines a positive development experience in Irish Para sport, identifies key barriers and enablers to participation, and explores the impact of Para sport on the athlete.** Ultimately, this work aims to support Paralympics Ireland and its partners in cultivating a more inclusive, supportive, and effective system for both current and aspiring Para athletes and coaches.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND STUDY PURPOSE

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of Para sport in Ireland, including identifying key factors that contribute to positive and negative experiences, a conceptual framework was developed to guide the study's research questions (see figure 1):

- RQ1.** How do Irish Para sport athletes **experience** the gateways (i.e., entry) and pathways (i.e. participation) within Para sport?
- RQ2.** What are the **factors that influence** Para sport athletes' experiences?
- RQ3.** How does Para sport participation **impact** athletes?

Figure 1.
Conceptual Framework



3. METHODS SUMMARY

3.1 Research design

This study employed a mixed methods design, integrating qualitative and quantitative data to explore the experiences of Para sport athletes and coaches in Ireland. The research consisted of two concurrent phases: semi-structured interviews with 18 Para sport athletes and 15 coaches to capture in-depth perspectives, and an electronic survey completed by 123 Para sport athletes to provide broader insights. Data were collected August 2024 and February 2025.

3.2 Participants

This study included two participant groups: Para sport athletes and Para sport coaches. Athlete participants were Irish adults (18+ years) actively engaged in Para sports. Para sports were defined as sports that individuals with disabilities can participate in and that adhere to the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) athlete classification code. Athletes with intellectual disabilities were not included in the sample. Coach participants were Irish adults (18+ years) who coached Para sport athletes. Participants were recruited with the support of Paralympics Ireland (PI), which facilitated access to potential participants through multiple channels, including PI events, athlete/coach listservs and social media platforms, etc. National Governing Bodies supported recruitment also via email and social media outreach to their members. Recruitment was purposeful to maximize the diversity and representativeness of the sample of Para sport athletes and coaches, in terms of gender, sport types, location, etc.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 Para sport athletes and 15 Para sport coaches. These interviews were held either in a public location convenient for participants or via teleconference (i.e., Microsoft Teams). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Questions examined entry and participation experiences, barriers and facilitators, key influences such as coaches and governing bodies, and experiences with classification and injuries. Additionally, athletes were asked about the impact of Para sport on their lives and their recommendations for improving Para sport structures in Ireland.

Coach interviews focused on their entry into Para sport coaching, coaching experiences, and perceptions of the Para sport system. Topics included initial motivations, barriers and challenges, sources of knowledge, and skill development. Coaches were also asked about their interactions with other coaches, National Governing Bodies, and Paralympics Ireland, as well as their perspectives on topics such as athlete recruitment and classification.

3.3.2 Surveys

An anonymous online survey was distributed to 123 Para sport athletes via Qualtrics. The survey aimed to capture broader experiences and demographic details of Para sport athletes. The athlete survey was adapted from the Developmental History of Athletes Questionnaire (DHAQ; Hopwood, 2013) and its version modified for Para sport athletes by Dehgansai et al. (2017). The revised version tailored the questions to the Irish context while reducing its length where possible. It covered the following sections:

- Demographic information, including gender, age, ethnicity, living situation, employment, and education
- Disability characteristics, including type of impairment, whether congenital or acquired, age of acquisition, and use of assistive devices
- Sport participation prior to acquiring a disability
- Para sport participation, including sports played, reasons for participation, barriers and facilitators, competition level, frequency of training, and training setting
- Injury history, including support received and experiences of playing while injured
- Classification experience, including national and international classification, understanding of classification, fairness perceptions, and its impact on participation
- Benefits and barriers of sport participation, including impact on social, physical, and mental well-being, and key enablers and challenges
- Talent development environment, including access to coaching support, training structures, and pathways for development



3.4 Data analysis

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using an inductive-deductive thematic analysis approach. Initially, subthemes were identified inductively, allowing patterns and insights to emerge directly from participants' lived experiences without the constraints of a predefined framework. This ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the realities of those involved in Para sport. These emergent themes were then structured deductively using the social-ecological model, which enabled a systematic examination of how factors at the individual, social, environmental, and organizational levels shape participation.

The quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive analyses were conducted to summarize participant demographics, disability characteristics, sport participation patterns, and perceptions of barriers and facilitators. Inferential analyses were performed to explore relationships between key variables, such as differences by gender, sport type (individual vs team), location (cities vs towns and villages), and disability type (congenital vs acquired). Differences between groups are presented when statistically significant. This mixed methods approach ensured a comprehensive analysis of the data, integrating qualitative insights with quantitative findings to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of Para sport athletes and coaches in Ireland.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Who participated? Sample demographics

Data were collected via 18 athlete interviews, 15 coach interviews, and 123 completed athlete surveys.

4.1.1. Overview of Athlete Interviewees

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 18 Para sport athlete interviewees. The study included 18 Para sport athletes who participated in interviews. The average age of participants was 27 years (SD = 8.87). The sample was predominantly male (61.6%). Participants were geographically diverse, with 27.8% residing in a city, 16.7% in a town, and 50% in a village or countryside. In terms of employment status, half of the participants were working for payment or profit, while 27.8% were students.

Most participants lived with their parents and siblings (70.6%), while others lived with a partner (17.6%), a sibling (5.9%), or alone (5.6%). The most common Paralympic sport-eligible impairment group was impaired muscle power (44.4%), followed by impaired passive range of movement (33.3%), hypertonia (22.2%), limb deficiency (16.7%), leg length difference (11.1%), and visual impairment (11.1%). Smaller numbers of participants reported ataxia (5.6%) or short stature (5.6%). Note: Demographic information was not available for one athlete interviewee.



Table 1: Demographic characteristics of athlete interviewees	Full Sample n=17* n(%) or m(SD)
Age	27 (8.87)
Gender	
Male	11 (64.7%)
Female	6 (35.3%)
Location	
City	5 (27.8%)
Town	3 (16.7%)
Village/countryside	9 (50%)
Ethnicity	
White or White Irish	17 (94.4%)
Employment	
Working for payment or profit	9 (50%)
Student	5 (27.8%)
Looking for first regular job	1 (5.6%)
Unable to work due to sickness/disability	1 (5.6%)
Professional athlete	1 (5.6%)
Highest level of education	
Post-Primary	2 (11.8%)
College - Bachelor	12 (66.7%)
College - MSc	2 (11.8%)
College - PhD	1 (6%)
Ethnicity	
White or White Irish	17 (100%)
Live with:	
Parents (and siblings)	12 (70.6%)
Siblings	1 (5.9%)
Partner	3 (17.6%)
By self	1 (5.6%)
Paralympic sport eligible impairment group	
Impaired Muscle Power	8 (44.4%)
Impaired Passive Range of Movement	6 (33.3%)
Hypertonia	4 (22.2%)
Limb Deficiency	3 (16.7%)
Leg Length Difference	2 (11.1%)
Visual Impairment	2 (11.1%)
Ataxia	1 (5.6%)
Short Stature	1 (5.6%)

*1 missing

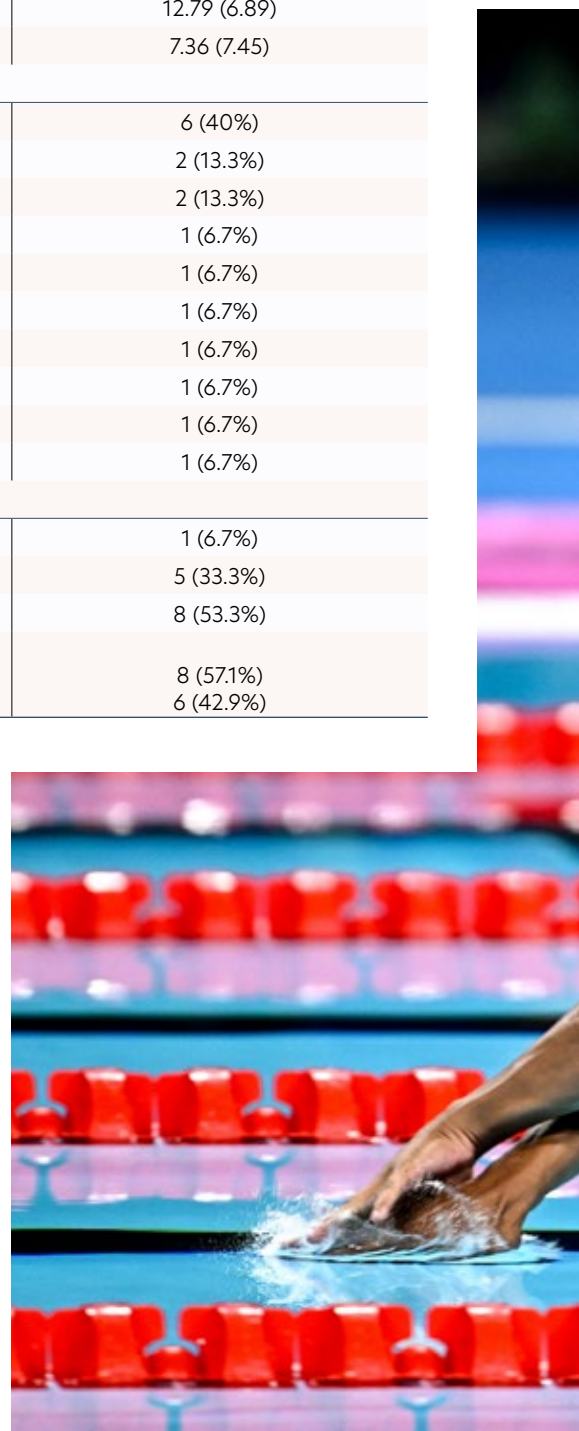
4.1.2. Overview of Coach Interviewees

Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the 15 Para sport coach interviewees. The average age of participants was 41.73 years (SD = 6.56). The sample was approximately equal in term of male (53.3%) and female (46.7%) coaches. In terms of ethnicity, 93.3% of participants identified as White or White Irish. Forty percent of participants had a bachelor's degree, 40% had a master's degree, 13.3% had completed trade qualifications, and 6.7% held a PhD. Most coaches (86.7%) were members of a coaching organization.

Participants had an average of 12.79 years (SD = 6.89) of general coaching experience and 7.36 years (SD = 7.45) of experience specifically in Para sport. They coached across a range of Para sports, with the most common being athletics (40%), followed by wheelchair basketball (13.3%), badminton (13.3%), and high jump (S&C), cycling, swimming, Para powerlifting, Para triathlon, multi-sports, and Para equestrian (each 6.7%). In terms of the level of athletes they coached, 53.3% worked with elite-level athletes, 33.3% coached at the developmental level, and 6.7% coached at the recreational level. Additionally, 57.1% of the coaches were both athletes (Para or non-Para sport) and coaches.



Table 2. Demographic characteristics of coach interviewees	Full Sample n=15n(%) or m(SD)
Age	41.73 (6.56)
Gender	
Male	8 (53.3%)
Female	7 (46.7%)
Ethnicity	
White or White Irish	14 (93.3%)
Asian or Asian Irish	1 (6.7%)
What is your highest level of education?	
Trade	2 (13.3%)
College - BSc	6 (40%)
College - MSc	6 (40%)
College - PhD	1 (6.7%)
Are you a member of a coaching organisations?	
Yes	13 (86.7%)
No	2 (13.3%)
Years of coaching experience in sport in general:	12.79 (6.89)
Years of coaching experience in Para Sport:	7.36 (7.45)
Para Sports coached:	
Athletics	6 (40%)
WC Basketball	2 (13.3%)
Badminton	2 (13.3%)
S&C - High Jump	1 (6.7%)
Cycling	1 (6.7%)
Swimming	1 (6.7%)
Para Powerlifting	1 (6.7%)
Para Triathlon	1 (6.7%)
Multi-sports	1 (6.7%)
Para Equestrian	1 (6.7%)
What level of Para athletes do you coach?	
Recreational	1 (6.7%)
Developmental	5 (33.3%)
Elite level	8 (53.3%)
Are you an athlete and a coach?	
Yes	8 (57.1%)
No	6 (42.9%)



4.1.3. Overview of Survey Respondents

Demographics. The survey was completed by 123 Para sport athletes, with an average age of 31 years (SD = 9.86). The sample included 65% male and 35% female participants. In terms of geographic location, 46.3% resided in a city, 30.9% in a town, and 22.8% in a village or the countryside. A total of 24 counties were represented in the survey, reflecting a broad geographical spread across the island of Ireland. The majority of respondents were based in Dublin, which accounted for nearly one-third of the sample (30.9%, n=38). Cork had the second highest representation, with 17.1% (n=21) of participants. Smaller numbers of responses came from Derry (6.5%, n=8), Down (4.9%, n=6), and Kildare (4.1%, n=5). The remaining counties each accounted for fewer than 4% of responses.

The majority of respondents (89.4%) identified as White or White Irish, while 8.9% identified as Black or Black Irish and 1.6% as Asian or Asian Irish. Most commonly, participants reported to live with their parents and/or siblings (43.9%), and 36.6% lived with a partner, 8.1% lived alone, 7.3% lived with friends or housemates, and the remaining 4% reported other living situations. Nearly half of the sample (47.2%) were working for payment or profit, 25.2% were unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability, and 13% were students. The highest level of education varied, with the majority (56.1%) holding a bachelor's degree. Table 3 presents the survey respondents' demographic characteristics.



Table 3: Demographic characteristics of survey respondents	Full Sample n=123 n(%) or m(SD)
Age	31.03 (9.86)
Gender	
Male	80 (65%)
Female	43 (35%)
Location	
City	57 (46.3%)
Town	38 (30.9%)
Village/countryside	28 (22.8%)
Ethnicity	
White or White Irish	110 (89.4%)
Black or Black Irish	11 (8.9%)
Asian or Asian Irish	2 (1.6%)
Live with:	
Parents (and siblings)	54 (43.9%)
Partner	45 (36.6%)
By self	10 (8.1%)
Friends/housemates	9 (7.3%)
Other	3 (2.4%)
Siblings	2 (1.6%)
Employment	
Working for payment or profit	58 (47.2%)
Unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability	31 (25.2%)
Student or pupil	16 (13.0%)
Looking for first regular job	5 (4.1%)
Short-term unemployed (less than 12 months)	5 (4.1%)
Retired from employment	3 (2.4%)
Other	3 (2.4%)
Long-term unemployed (12 months or more)	1 (.8%)
Looking after home/family	1 (.8%)
Highest level of education	
Primary	2 (1.6%)
Post-primary	21 (17.1%)
Trade	15 (12.2%)
College - Bachelor	69 (56.1%)
College - Master	14 (11.4%)
College - PhD	2 (1.6%)
Primary education	
Mainstream school only	95 (77.2%)
Mainstream school with some segregated classes with students with disabilities	20 (16.3%)
Special/segregated school for students with disabilities	8 (6.5%)

Disability Characteristics. The disability characteristics of survey respondents are presented in table 4. In summary, among survey respondents, 44.7% had a congenital impairment, while 54.5% had an acquired impairment. The most commonly reported Paralympic sport-eligible impairment groups were impaired passive range of movement (37.4%) and impaired muscle power (34.1%), followed by limb deficiency (20.3%), ataxia (16.3%), and hypertonia (13.8%). Smaller proportions reported visual impairment (13%), leg length difference (11.4%), athetosis (8.9%), intellectual impairment (7.3%), and short stature (5.7%).

The primary nature of impairment varied, with the most common being amputation (14.6%), cerebral palsy (10.6%), and spinal cord injury (10.6%). Other reported conditions included spina bifida (8.9%), visual impairments (7.3%), and loss or deformity of limbs (4.9%), among others. Some respondents also reported secondary impairments, with 7.3% having amputation or leg length difference as a secondary condition and 6.5% having cerebral palsy. Assistive device use was common among participants, with 52.8% using a manual wheelchair, 24.4% using crutches, 21.1% using an electric or motorized wheelchair, and 9.8% used a prosthesis.

Table 4: Disability characteristics of survey respondents

Variable	n (%)
Congenital or Acquired	
Congenital	55 (44.7%)
Acquired	67 (54.5%)
Paralympic sport eligible impairment group	
Impaired Passive Range of Movement	46 (37.4%)
Impaired Muscle Power	42 (34.1%)
Limb Deficiency (Total/partial absence of bones or joints)	25 (20.3%)
Ataxia (Loss of control of muscle movements)	20 (16.3%)
Hypertonia	17 (13.8%)
Visual Impairment (Partial or Full Visual Impairment)	16 (13%)
Leg Length Difference (Bone shortening in one leg)	14 (11.4%)
Athetosis	11 (8.9%)
Intellectual Impairment	9 (7.3%)
Short Stature (Reduced standing height)	7 (5.7%)
Primary nature of your impairment	
Amputation	18 (14.6%)
Cerebral Palsy	13 (10.6%)
Spinal Cord Injury (including: Para/Tetraplegia)	13 (10.6%)
Other	12 (9.8%)
Leg Length Difference	11 (8.9%)
Spina Bifida	11 (8.9%)
Visual: Eye Structure	9 (7.3%)
Loss or Deformity of Limbs	6 (4.9%)
Dysmelia	6 (4.9%)
Arthrogryposis	2 (2.4%)
Stroke	3 (2.4%)
Muscular Dystrophy	3 (2.4%)
Cancer	2 (1.6%)
Multiple Sclerosis	2 (1.6%)
Poliomyelitis	2 (1.6%)
Visual: Optical Pathway	2 (1.6%)
Visual Cortex	2 (1.6%)
Visual: Optical Nerves	1 (0.8%)
Intellectual	1 (0.8%)

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Osteogenesis Imperfecta	1 (0.8%)
Short Stature	1 (0.8%)
Secondary impairment	
Amputation	9 (7.3%)
Leg Length Difference	9 (7.3%)
Spinal Cord Injury (including: Para/Tetraplegia)	9 (7.3%)
Cerebral Palsy	8 (6.5%)
Spina Bifida	7 (5.7%)
Short Stature	4 (3.3%)
Arthrogryposis	4 (3.3%)
Loss or Deformity of Limbs	3 (2.4%)
Muscular Dystrophy	3 (2.4%)
Visual Cortex	1 (0.8%)
Stroke	1 (0.8%)
Visual: Eye Structure	1 (0.8%)
Cancer	2 (1.6%)
Intellectual	2 (1.6%)
Multiple Sclerosis	2 (1.6%)
Osteogenesis Imperfecta	2 (1.6%)
Poliomyelitis	2 (1.6%)
Visual: Optical Nerves	2 (1.6%)
Other	2 (1.6%)
Do you use any of the following assistive devices?	
Manual wheelchair	65 (52.8%)
Crutches	30 (24.4%)
Electric / Motorised wheelchair	26 (21.1%)
Other	23 (18.7%)
Prosthesis	12 (9.8%)
None	18 (14.6%)

Para Sport Participation

Regarding sport participation, displayed in full in table 5, 53.7% of respondents participated exclusively in individual Para sports, 23.6% played only team sports, and 17.9% participated in both individual and team sports. Nineteen sports were represented among the survey sample; the most commonly played Para sports were wheelchair basketball (24.4%), Para athletics (22.8%), and Para swimming (15.4%). Other frequently reported sports included Para cycling (10.6%), wheelchair rugby (10.6%), and Para table tennis (9.8%). Twenty percent of respondents reported unsuccessfully attempting to participate in a Para sport.

Table 5. Overview of Para sport participation of survey respondents

Variable	n (%)
Team vs Individual sport participation	
Individual only	66 (53.7%)
Team only	29 (23.6%)
Both individual and team	22 (17.9%)
Para sport participation (past or current)	
Wheelchair Basketball	30 (24.4%)
Para Athletics	28 (22.8%)
Para Swimming	19 (15.4%)
Para Cycling	13 (10.6%)
Wheelchair Rugby	13 (10.6%)
Para Table Tennis	12 (9.8%)
Other	11 (8.9%)
Para Archery	10 (8.1%)
Para Powerlifting	8 (6.5%)
Para Equestrian	9 (7.3%)
Wheelchair Tennis	6 (4.9%)
Blind Football	5 (4.1%)
Para Badminton	5 (4.1%)
Para Rowing	5 (4.1%)
Boccia	4 (3.3%)
Goalball	4 (3.3%)
Shooting Para Sport	4 (3.3%)
Para Triathlon	3 (2.4%)
Sitting Volleyball	2 (1.6%)
Para Canoe	1 (0.8%)
Para Judo	0
Para Taekwondo	0
Wheelchair Fencing	0
Did you ever unsuccessfully try to participate in Para Sport?	
Yes	24 (20%)
No	96 (80%)
Sport unsuccessfully tried:	
Para Powerlifting	2 (1.6%)
Swimming	2 (1.6%)
Para Archery	1 (.8%)
Para Equestrian	1 (.8%)
Para Judo	1 (.8%)
Para Athletics	1 (.8%)
Rock Climbing	1 (.8%)
Rowing	1 (.8%)
Cycling	1 (.8%)
Table Tennis	1 (.8%)
Triathlon	1 (.8%)
Wheelchair Basketball	1 (.8%)

4.2. Getting Involved: Para Sport Gateway Experiences

4.2.1. Getting started: When and how?

The average age at which participants started engaging in Para sport was 19.45 years (SD = 9.54). Those with congenital disabilities starting at a younger age (15.69 years, SD = 9.42) compared to those with acquired disabilities (22.47 years, SD = 8.57). Participants were most commonly introduced to Para sport through parents (37.4%) or friends and relatives (37.4%). Rehabilitation professionals, including physiotherapists and physicians, played a role in introducing 26.8% of participants, while 22.8% found Para sport through an online search. Other entry pathways included school and teachers (19.5%), watching elite athletes (18.7%), national governing bodies (18.7%), and talent identification programs (13.8%). A smaller proportion were introduced through siblings (13%) or Paralympics Ireland “try it out” events (13%).

Differences emerged in how athletes were introduced to sport based on sport type. Among individual sport athletes, 21% were introduced by a sibling, compared to none in team sports. Friends and family were a more common route of introduction for individual sport athletes (45.5%) than for team sport athletes (17.2%), and schools played a greater role in introducing individual sport athletes (27.3%) compared to those in team sports (3.4%). These patterns may reflect a lack of awareness or familiarity among families and schools with team-based Para sports, such as wheelchair basketball or wheelchair rugby, which could limit opportunities for early exposure. A full overview of these factors is presented in table 6.



Table 6: Para sport participation: Starting to participate

Survey Question & Response Options	Overall sample n(%)
Age of entry into Para Sport m (SD)	
Congenital	19.45 (9.54)
vs	15.69 (9.42)* vs
Acquired disability	22.47 (8.57)
How were you introduced to this sport?	
Through parents	46 (37.4%)
Through friends/relatives	46 (37.4%)
Through rehabilitation centres/physiotherapists/physicians	33 (26.8%)
Through online search	28 (22.8%)
Through school/teachers	24 (19.5%)
Through watching elite athletes/international competitions	23 (18.7%)
Through National Governing Body	23 (18.7%)
Through workshops/community programs/talent identification	17 (13.8%)
Through siblings	16 (13%)
Through Paralympic Ireland 'try it out' events	16 (13%)
What was your main reason(s) for starting to participate in this sport?	
For enjoyment/fun	81 (65.9%)
To be in a competitive environment	67 (54.5%)
Encouragement from family, partner, or friends	60 (48.8%)
To enhance my overall health and physical fitness	51 (41.5%)
To increase my self-confidence	51 (41.5%)
To increase my independence	38 (30.9%)
To socialize and meet new people	38 (30.9%)
To learn new skills	35 (28.5%)
Recommendation from doctor and/or medical staff	30 (24.4%)
To learn how to navigate/develop skills with my mobility aid/wheelchair	19 (15.4%)
To learn how to cope with my impairment psychologically/emotionally	19 (15.4%)
In what setting did you first participate in Para sport?	
Informal play	37 (30.1%)
Community club	28 (22.8%)
Multi-sport camp	20 (16.3%)
Through talent identification/search programs	12 (9.8%)
School	10 (8.1%)
Other	10 (8.1%)



QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS:

37.4% **Family and Friends as Key Influencers.** Consistent with the survey results showing that 37.4% of participants were introduced to Para sport through family or friends, interviewees described the significant role that parents and peers played in their involvement. Parents often sought out opportunities and provided the necessary support for consistent participation:

“MY PARENTS REALLY MADE ME STICK AT IT AND BROUGHT ME TO ALL MY TRAINING SESSIONS”

Tim

“A FRIEND TOLD ME ABOUT WHEELCHAIR RUGBY, AND THAT’S HOW IT ALL STARTED”

David

26.8% **Rehabilitation Services as a gateway to sport.** Rehabilitation settings were identified in both the survey (26.8%) and interviews as an important gateway to Para sport – this appeared to be particularly true for male athletes. Many male athletes first encountered Para sports while undergoing rehabilitation and were encouraged by staff to continue after discharge (with mixed success):

“A STAFF MEMBER AT THE NRH PUSHED ME TO TRY BASKETBALL, AND THAT LED ME TO MY FIRST CLUB.”

Mark

“AS PART OF REHAB AT THE NATIONAL REHABILITATION HOSPITAL, I TRIED DIFFERENT SPORTS AND LOVED IT. BUT WHEN I GOT HOME, IT WAS DIFFICULT TO FIND ANYTHING NEARBY”

Scott

4.2.2. Getting Started: Why?

The most common reasons for engaging in Para sport were enjoyment and fun (65.9%) and the desire to be in a competitive environment (54.5%). Social encouragement was also significant, with 48.8% reporting that encouragement from family, partners, or friends influenced their decision. Health-related factors, including improving overall physical fitness (41.5%) and increasing self-confidence (41.5%), were also common motivators. Other reasons included increasing independence (30.9%), socialization (30.9%), learning new skills (28.5%), and recommendations from medical professionals (24.4%).

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS:

18.7% **Impact of the Paralympic Games.** The visibility of the Paralympic Games was a recurring theme in interviews, aligning with survey responses where 18.7% of participants were inspired by watching elite athletes:

“AFTER WATCHING THE LONDON PARALYMPICS, I KNEW THERE WAS SOMETHING OUT THERE FOR ME.”

Tim

“BASICALLY, IT WAS AFTER LONDON GAMES. SO THAT’S WHERE I STARTED... THE LONDON GAMES WERE SO BIG. THEN I JOINED THE CLUB... I THINK EVERYBODY STARTED TALKING MORE ABOUT GAMES THEN”

Ronan

13.0% **Talent Identification and “Come and Try” Events.**

Survey results showed that 13% of athletes entered sport through Paralympics Ireland “Try It Out” events. Interviewed athletes and coaches recognised the impact of such events, especially in relation to the recent Next Gen Initiative:

“THE TALENT ID EVENT IN [WITHHELD] WAS GREAT – OUR CLUB GAINED FOUR EXTRA PLAYERS FROM IT.”

Denise

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS:

65.9% **Fun and Competition as Motivators.** Mirroring the survey results where 65.9% of respondents cited fun and 54.5% cited competition as primary motivators, many interviewed athletes described their need for a competitive yet enjoyable environment:

“OUR COACH STRUCK THE RIGHT BALANCE—KEEPING IT COMPETITIVE BUT ALSO FUN WITH FRIENDS.”

Diarmaid

“HAVING LEAGUES AND GAMES TO LOOK FORWARD TO IS SO IMPORTANT. WITHOUT THAT, MOTIVATION DROPS.”

Sinead

“I WANTED A SPORT WHERE I WASN’T PICKED LAST JUST BECAUSE OF MY DISABILITY”

Denis

Connectedness with Other Athletes with Disabilities. A strong theme in the interviews was the value of being around other people with disabilities, which provided motivation and a sense of belonging:

“HAVING PEOPLE IN THE SAME SITUATION AS ME WAS A HUGE FACTOR IN COMING BACK TO SPORT. WE SHARED SIMILAR SCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES”

Finian

4.2.3. Getting started: Where?

Participants first engaged in Para sport in a variety of settings. Informal play was the most common (30.1%), followed by community clubs (22.8%). Others entered through multi-sport camps (16.3%), talent identification programs (9.8%), school programs (8.1%), or other avenues (8.1%).

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS:

19.5% **Underutilization of Schools in Para sport Promotion.** Just 19.5% of survey respondents reported being introduced to a Para sport through schools. Interviewees suggested that schools remain an underutilized avenue for Para sport awareness, but has great potential in this regard:

“A SPORTS DEVELOPMENT OFFICER CAME IN FOR A SHORT SESSION, BUT IT WOULD HAVE BEEN GREAT IF IT WAS MORE SUSTAINED.”
Jim

“THE PERSON FROM THE IWA, HE WAS DOING LOTS OF SCHOOL VISITS AND WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL WORKSHOPS AND HE CAME IN AND SURE I HADN'T BEEN DOING PE FOR THE LAST NUMBER OF YEARS. SO THE TEACHERS KIND OF GAVE ME THE DAY OFF TO JUST PLAY WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL FOR THE DAY TO MAKE UP FOR ALL THOSE MISSED PE SESSIONS. AND I FELL IN LOVE WITH IT THAT DAY AND FOUND OUT THAT THERE WAS A CLUB... THAT I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW ABOUT.”

Fiachra

SPOTLIGHT ON GENDER:

There were some key differences between male and female athletes regarding their early experience of Para sport. Most notably:

For people with congenital impairments, male athletes first played Para sport at age 12.6 years vs 21.18 years among female athletes. For people with acquired impairments, age of entry into Para sport did not differ between male and female athletes (~22 years)

18.8% of male athletes were introduced to Para sport via siblings as compared to only 2.3% of female athletes.

25% of male athletes were introduced to Para sport via their school as compared to only 9.3% of female athletes.

Girls were most often introduced to Para sport via Parents or Friends and relatives (both ~28%)

35% of male athletes were introduced to Para sport via rehabilitation vs only 11.6% of female athletes.

Boys were more likely to play Para sports in multiple settings as compared to girls including in:

- Informal settings (39% boys vs 27.6% girls)
- Multi-sports camp (22.4% boys vs only 7.3% girls)
- School (11.8% boys vs 2.24% girls)
- Girls frequently selected 'other' setting without clarifying the settings.

4.2.4. Getting started: Why not? (Barriers to early participation)

Participants reported on the extent to which fifteen barriers impacted them when 'starting to play' Para sport, with response options of "Not at all", "Very little", "Somewhat", "To a moderate extent", or "To a great extent". On average, athletes reported to experience 4.35 barriers to a moderate or great extent.

High expenses associated with sport were the most frequently reported barrier, impacting 37.4% of respondents to a moderate or great extent. Other common barriers included lack of facilities or inadequate facilities nearby (30.9%), lack of appropriate equipment (30.1%), and dependence on others (30.1%). Disability-related complications (29.3%), limited sporting opportunities nearby (29.2%), and lack of adequately trained facility staff (28.5%) or coaches (28.4%) were also significant obstacles. A full overview of the barriers to early Para sport participation is presented in table 7.

Table 7: Barriers and supports when starting to participate

When you first started to play Para sport, to what extent did the following barriers negatively impact your participation?	To a moderate extent n (%)	To a great extent n (%)	Total n (%)
High expenses associated with sport	27 (22.0%)	19 (15.4%)	46 (37.4%)
Lack of facilities/inadequate facilities near where I live	24 (19.5%)	14 (11.4%)	38 (30.9%)
Lack of appropriate equipment	25 (20.3%)	12 (9.8%)	37 (30.1%)
Dependence on others	21 (17.1%)	16 (13.0%)	37 (30.1%)
Disability-related complications	29 (23.6%)	7 (5.7%)	36 (29.3%)
Lack of sporting opportunities near where I live	26 (21.1%)	10 (8.1%)	36 (29.2%)
Lack of adequately trained staff working at facilities	23 (18.7%)	12 (9.8%)	35 (28.5%)
Lack of adequately trained coaches	24 (19.5%)	11 (8.9%)	35 (28.4%)
Lack of transportation	24 (19.5%)	10 (8.1%)	34 (27.6%)
Lack of familiarity with the new environment	18 (14.6%)	15 (12.2%)	33 (26.8%)
Fear of injuries	24 (19.5%)	4 (3.3%)	28 (22.8%)
Lack of appropriate training guidelines for my disability/sport	18 (14.6%)	11 (8.9%)	29 (23.5%)
Lack of energy	17 (13.8%)	8 (6.5%)	25 (20.3%)
Lack of time	16 (13.0%)	8 (6.5%)	24 (19.5%)
Lack of other athletes with disabilities	18 (14.6%)	4 (3.3%)	22 (17.9%)
Other barriers	10 (8.1%)	4 (3.3%)	14 (11.4%)
When you first started to play Para sport, to what extent did the following factors help keep you engaged?			
Sense of independence	44 (35.8%)	38 (30.9%)	82 (66.7%)
Sense of accomplishment	29 (23.6%)	51 (41.5%)	80 (65.1%)
Opportunity to travel	40 (32.5%)	40 (32.5%)	80 (65.1%)
The competitive environment	32 (26.0%)	47 (38.2%)	79 (64.2%)
Continuous support from family and friends	26 (21.1%)	53 (43.1%)	79 (64.2%)
Being able to maintain and refine skills	37 (30.1%)	42 (34.1%)	79 (64.2%)
Desire to maintain a healthy lifestyle	34 (27.6%)	42 (34.1%)	76 (61.7%)
Desire to maintain contact with peers/teammates	39 (31.7%)	36 (29.3%)	75 (61.0%)
Sense of belongingness	31 (25.2%)	38 (30.9%)	69 (56.1%)
Other	15 (12.2%)	9 (7.3%)	24 (19.5%)

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS:

37.4% **Cost of Equipment and Sport Participation.** Financial barriers were frequently mentioned in the survey (37.4% cited high expenses), and interviewees elaborated on these challenges:

“SO AT THE TIME, I WASN'T WORKING LIKE. SO IF I'M BUYING RUNNING SHOES, IT'LL BE EITHER ME EARNING POCKET MONEY OR IT WAS MY PARENTS, YOU KNOW... OBVIOUSLY YOU GET THE FIRST PAIR OF RUNNING SHOES THAT EVERYONE THINKS ARE GREAT, BUT MY FEET ARE WIDELY DIFFERENT TO THE NORMAL. SO THEY DIDN'T WORK. SO I'M LIKE, MOM, GOD, THESE DON'T REALLY, THESE REALLY DON'T WORK.”

Liam

“I NEEDED TWO SPORTS CHAIRS—ONE FOR BADMINTON, ONE FOR RUGBY—AND THAT WAS A MASSIVE EXPENSE”

Miriam

30.9% **Limited Facilities and Geographic Barriers.** Echoing survey results where 30.9% cited a lack of local facilities, interviewees described difficulties in accessing suitable training environments:

“THE BIGGEST BARRIER WAS DISTANCE AND ACCESS. THERE WAS JUST NOTHING AVAILABLE NEAR ME.”

Sinead

“IF YOU WANT MORE CLUBS IN CERTAIN REGIONS, YOU NEED PEOPLE, FUNDING, AND THE FACILITIES TO MAKE IT HAPPEN.”

Ben

“I'M UP IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, SO THERE'S NOT MUCH GOING ON AROUND HERE. YEAH, FOR PARA SPORTS. I COULD GO TO... WHICH IS MAYBE HALF AN HOUR AWAY FROM ME. I KNOW THERE'S A GIRL THERE WHO RUNS. I THINK IT'S PARA ATHLETICS OR SOMETHING. SO THAT'S PROBABLY THE CLOSEST THING TO ME.”

Tara

4.2.5. Factors Supporting Early Participation.

Despite the barriers, several factors helped participants stay engaged in Para sport when they 'first started to play' Para sport. It is interesting to note that respondents frequently selected multiple factors that supported their early engagement in Para sport, pointing to the variety of benefits gained from participation (see table 7). A sense of independence (66.7%) and a sense of accomplishment (65.1%) were among the strongest motivators. Travel opportunities (65.1%), the competitive environment (64.2%), and continuous support from family and friends (64.2%) also played key roles in sustaining participation. Other important factors included the ability to maintain and refine skills (64.2%), the desire to maintain a healthy lifestyle (61.7%), and staying connected with teammates and peers (61%). A sense of belonging (56.1%) was also an important motivator for many participants.



QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS:

Choosing Sports for Different Purposes. Many athletes engaged in multiple sports for different reasons, balancing competitive aspirations with recreational enjoyment:

“[SPORT 1] IS MY PARALYMPIC-POTENTIAL SPORT, [SPORT 2] IS MY PASSION, AND [SPORT 3] IS JUST FOR FUN.”
Miriam

“... [SPORT A] WON'T BE IN THE PARALYMPICS IN THE NEXT 4 TO 8 YEARS SO I WAS LIKE I WANT TO GO TO PARALYMPICS, SO I NEED TO CHANGE SPORT IF I WANT TO DO THAT SO. I WENT TO GO LOOK AT BLADE RUNNING AT A NEXT GEN EVENT AND FROM THAT I GOT INTRODUCED TO [SPORT B] AND THE [ATHLETE] SAID I THINK YOU'D BE GREAT AT [SPORT B], LET'S GIVE IT A TRY.”
Fiachra

Qualitative Insights on Entry into Para Sport

The qualitative findings reinforce and provide insight into the quantitative data by highlighting the key factors that influenced athletes' entry into Para sport, the barriers they faced, and the supports that helped sustain their participation. The key subthemes, at each level of the ecological model are highlighted in figure 2.

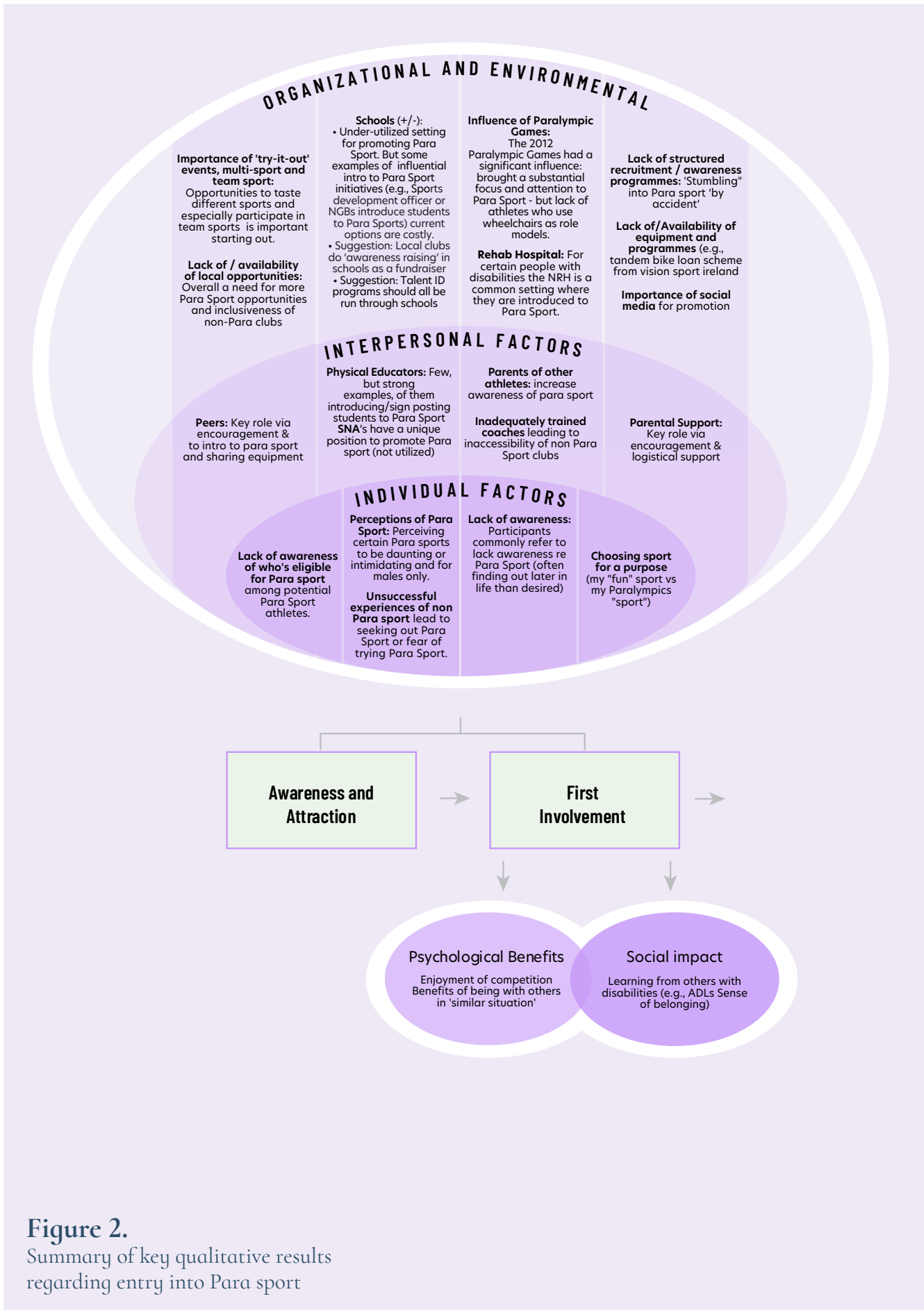


Figure 2.
Summary of key qualitative results regarding entry into Para sport

4.3 PARA SPORT PATHWAY EXPERIENCES

4.3.1 Level of Competition and Frequency of Participation

Among survey respondents, 42.7% had competed at the international level, while 27.4% had participated at the local level. A smaller proportion (6.8%) reported only engaging in Para sport recreationally. In terms of *current* participation, 27% were competing at the national level, 24.3% at the international level, and 9.6% were involved solely in recreational participation. Participation frequency varied, with 44.7% engaging in Para sport year-round, 22.8% competing in multiple seasons per year, and 21.9% taking part in only one season annually. During their playing season, 34.2% of respondents trained daily, while 52.6% trained weekly. A majority of respondents (58.5%) participated in segregated Para sport settings, while 40.7% took part in unified settings, 30.1% in parallel settings, and 14.6% in general sport settings. More details can be seen in Table 8.

Table 8: Nature of Participation

Survey Question & Response Options	Frequency of Response n(%)
What is the highest level of competition that you have participated at?	
No Competition - recreational involvement only	8 (6.8%)
Competition against others at a local level	32 (27.4%)
Competition against others at a national level	25 (21.4%)
Competition against others at an international level	50 (42.7%)
Other (please specify)	2 (1.7%)
At what level of competition do you currently participate?	
No Competition - recreational involvement only	11 (9.6%)
Competition against others at a local level	31 (27.0%)
Competition against others at a national level	31 (27.0%)
Competition against others at an international level	28 (24.3%)
Other (please specify)	14 (12.2%)
How frequently do you participate in Para sport?	
All year round	51 (44.7%)
Multiple seasons per year (e.g., Spring and Autumn)	26 (22.8%)
One season per year (e.g., Spring or Autumn)	25 (21.9%)
A season every few years	12 (10.5%)
During your playing season, how often do you train?	
Daily	39 (34.2%)
Weekly	60 (52.6%)
Monthly	15 (13.2%)
In what setting(s) do you currently participate in Para sport?	
Parallel settings	37 (30.1%)
Segregated setting	72 (58.5%)
Unified setting	50 (40.7%)
General setting	18 (14.6%)

4.3.2 Training and Competition Settings

In terms of practice activities, 79.7% engaged in sport-specific physical training, with 73.8% rating the quality as “good” or “excellent.” Physical preparation was practiced by 69.9% of respondents, with similar quality ratings. Mental preparation was less common, with only 47.2% reporting participation, and 65.5% rating the quality as “good” or “excellent”. Informal play and training camps were also part of some athletes’ training routines (32.5% and 31.7%, respectively). Of those who attended training camps, 81% rated them as “good” or “excellent”. Regarding coaching support, 55% of respondents trained with a coach present in a group setting, while 19.8% received one-on-one coaching. Meanwhile, 15.3% trained independently without a coach, and 9.9% practiced with other athletes but without direct supervision (see table 9).

Table 9: Nature of Practicing

Survey Question & Response Options	n (%)
Which of the following practice activities do you participate in and what is the quality of these activities:	
Sport-specific physical practice (yes):	98 (79.7%)
Perceived quality of Sport-specific physical practice:	
Good	35 (41.7%)
Excellent	27 (32.1%)
Physical preParation (yes):	86 (69.9%)
Perceived quality of physical preparation:	
Good	35 (41.7%)
Excellent	27 (32.1%)
Mental preparation (yes):	58 (47.2%)
Perceived quality of mental preparation:	
Good	24 (41.4%)
Excellent	14 (24.1%)
Informal play (yes):	40 (32.5%)
Perceived quality of informal play:	
Good	13 (33.3%)
Excellent	6 (15.4%)
Training camps (yes):	39 (31.7%)
Perceived quality of training camps:	
Good	15 (40.5%)
Excellent	37 (40.5%)
Which of the following best describes the support you usually have in playing Para sport?	
A coach is present at the training venue providing supervision to you and one or more other athletes.	61 (55.0%)
A coach is present at the training venue providing one-on-one supervision to you and only you in an individual practice session	22 (19.8%)
No coach is present to provide supervision, but you and one or more other athletes are practicing together.	11 (9.9%)
No coach is present to provide supervision, no-one else is practicing with you, but you are practicing on your own.	17 (15.3%)

4.3.3 Barriers to Participation.

A full overview of barriers to 'current' participation in Para sport is presented in table 10. High expenses associated with Para sport (e.g., for equipment, registration, etc.) were the most frequently (35.8%) reported barrier, followed by dependence on others for transportation or support (34.2%). A lack of adequately trained staff at facilities (31.8%) and limited access to appropriate facilities (27.6%) also hindered participation. Transportation difficulties (26%) and limited Para sport opportunities in some areas (26%) were additional challenges. Other barriers included a lack of trained coaches (22.7%), fear of injury (22.7%), disability-related complications (22%), and a lack of appropriate equipment (21.2%). Barriers to participation differed significantly between athletes with congenital vs acquired disabilities, as summarised in the below 'spotlight' tables. Barriers did not significantly differ by gender.

SPOTLIGHT ON DISABILITY TYPE: CONGENITAL VS ACQUIRED

People with acquired disabilities reported significantly more barriers to participation (to a moderate or great extent) than those with congenital disabilities (5.4 vs 3 barriers). Specific barriers more commonly reported by individuals with acquired disabilities vs individuals with congenital disabilities are presented as follows. This pattern may reflect the fact that individuals with congenital disabilities have had more time to adapt to their circumstances and build support networks, routines, and skills to navigate participation in sport over the course of their lives. In contrast, those with acquired disabilities may face a steeper adjustment period, encountering unfamiliar systems and environments that are often not designed to support their new needs, which can amplify barriers such as cost, accessibility, and lack of trained personnel.

50.9%	40.4%	38.6%	47.4%	38.6%	35.1%
VS	VS	VS	VS	VS	VS
27.8%	20.4%	14.8%	22.2%	11.1%	16.7%
HIGH EXPENSES OF PARTICIPATION:	LACK OF ADEQUATE FACILITIES:	LACK OF OTHER PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES:	LACK OF TRAINED STAFF IN FACILITIES:	LACK OF TRAINED COACHES:	LACK OF TRAINED COACHES:

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS:

Barriers related to expense and travel:

Consistent with our survey findings, interviewees highlighted how the cost of equipment and the lack of locally available programmes and facilities were barriers to their participation in Para Sport:

“THE BIGGEST BARRIER WAS DISTANCE AND ACCESS, AND BASICALLY NOTHING BEING AVAILABLE, WHICH IS PROBABLY TO A CERTAIN EXTENT THE CASE FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE. I THINK, ALONG THE WESTERN SEABOARD TODAY UNFORTUNATELY.”

Philip

“LIKE MORE THAN ONE CLUB IN THE SOUTHEAST, STUFF LIKE THAT, BUT YOU NEED THE PEOPLE, YOU NEED THE MONEY, YOU NEED THE FACILITIES TO DO IT”

Eric

SO LIKE, IT'S HARD TO BE EXCITED TO REPRESENT IRELAND WHEN YOU'RE STRUGGLING WITH FINANCES FOR IT, YOU KNOW, SO I DEFINITELY DO THINK THERE COULD BE MORE OF LIKE A FUNDING FOR KIND OF LOCAL SPORTS.”

Andrea

4.3.4 Facilitators for Participation.

The most commonly cited motivator for continued participation was a sense of accomplishment, reported by 67.5% of respondents. Other significant facilitators included the competitive environment (60.2%), maintaining and refining skills (61%), and continuous support from family and friends (57%). A desire to maintain a healthy lifestyle (56.9%) and stay connected with teammates (52%) were also important factors. A sense of independence (50.4%) and belonging (48.7%) further contributed to ongoing engagement, while 49.6% cited opportunities to travel as a motivating factor. Employer support played a smaller, but notable, role; 30.8% of respondents identifying it as helpful to their participation.

Table 10: Current barriers and facilitators

To what extent do the following barriers negatively impact your participation?	To a moderate extent n (%)	To a great extent n (%)	Total n (%)
High expenses associated with sport (i.e., equipment, registration, etc.)	28 (22.8%)	16 (13.0%)	44 (35.8%)
Dependence on others	22 (17.9%)	20 (16.3%)	42 (34.2%)
Lack of adequately trained staff working at facilities	27 (22.0%)	12 (9.8%)	39 (31.8%)
Lack of facilities/inadequate facilities near where I live	24 (19.5%)	10 (8.1%)	34 (27.6%)
Lack of transportation	22 (17.9%)	10 (8.1%)	32 (26.0%)
Lack of sporting opportunities near where I live	19 (15.4%)	13 (10.6%)	32 (26.0%)
Lack of other athletes with disabilities	20 (16.3%)	10 (8.1%)	30 (24.4%)
Lack of time	21 (17.1%)	8 (6.5%)	29 (23.6%)
Lack of familiarity with the new environment	21 (17.1%)	8 (6.5%)	29 (23.6%)
Lack of appropriate training guidelines for my disability/sport	22 (17.9%)	6 (4.9%)	28 (22.8%)
Fear of injuries	17 (13.8%)	11 (8.9%)	28 (22.7%)
Lack of adequately trained coaches	18 (14.6%)	10 (8.1%)	28 (22.7%)
Disability-related complications	22 (17.9%)	5 (4.1%)	27 (22.0%)
Lack of appropriate equipment	14 (11.4%)	12 (9.8%)	26 (21.2%)
Lack of energy	21 (17.1%)	3 (2.4%)	24 (19.5%)
To what extent do the following factors currently help your participation?			
Sense of accomplishment	30 (24.4%)	53 (43.1%)	83 (67.5%)
The competitive environment	31 (25.2%)	43 (35.0%)	74 (60.2%)
Being able to maintain and refine skills	28 (22.8%)	47 (38.2%)	75 (61.0%)
Continuous support from family and friends	20 (16.3%)	50 (40.7%)	70 (57.0%)
Desire to maintain a healthy lifestyle	23 (18.7%)	47 (38.2%)	70 (56.9%)
Desire to maintain contact with peers/teammates	30 (24.4%)	34 (27.6%)	64 (52.0%)
Sense of independence	26 (21.1%)	36 (29.3%)	62 (50.4%)
Opportunity to travel	31 (25.2%)	30 (24.4%)	61 (49.6%)
Sense of belongingness	26 (21.1%)	34 (27.6%)	60 (48.7%)
Support from employer	19 (15.4%)	19 (15.4%)	38 (30.8%)
Others, please list reasons below	6 (4.9%)	8 (6.5%)	14 (11.4%)
To what degree does the NGB responsible for your Para sport help your participation?			
The NGB is very helpful	55 (44.7%)		
The NGB is neither helpful or unhelpful	30 (24.4%)		
The NGB is unhelpful	10 (8.1%)		
I do not know the NGB for this sport	15 (12.2%)		

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS:

Competition as a motivator for participation was emphasised in the interviews, reflecting survey findings. The level of competition was sometimes hampered by a lack of competitive leagues (with too few athletes).

“ONE OF THE COACHES BROUGHT IN THAT COMPETITIVE NATURE INTO THESE TRAINING SESSIONS AS WELL AS WELL AS KIND OF HAVING THE LAUGH WITH YOUR FRIENDS AND SO ON. THERE WAS KIND OF A NICE BALANCE THERE AS IT WENT ON”

Susan

“IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO KIND OF HAVE SOMETHING TO AIM FOR. I DO FEEL LIKE IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO HAVE GAMES YOU'RE LOOKING FORWARD TO, TO HAVE LEAGUES, THAT YOU COULD BE COMPETITIVE IN BECAUSE LIKE EVEN FOR THE LAST FEW YEARS, THE LEAGUE FOR US HASN'T BEEN TOO COMPETITIVE”

Noel

4.3.5 Perceptions of National Governing Bodies (NGBs).

Among respondents, 44.7% rated their NGB as very helpful, while 24.4% found them neutral, and 8.1% considered them unhelpful. Notably, 12.2% of respondents were unaware of the NGB responsible for their sport.

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS:

Participants expressed a lack of clarity about Paralympics Ireland's core mission, with some perceiving confusing around whether its focus lies in elite performance or grassroots development. Additionally, concerns were raised about an overemphasis on medal outcomes, which may lead to underinvestment in team sports or broader participation initiatives perceived as less medal-efficient.

“IF YOU ASK ME AT THE MOMENT, WHAT'S THE MISSION STATEMENT OF PI. I MIGHT BE A LITTLE BIT UNCLEAR AS TO WHETHER IT'S DRIVING THE UPPER ELITE END OF PARALYMPIC GAMES PERFORMANCE OR WHETHER IT'S TRYING TO GROW THE BASE... NOW, THOSE TWO THINGS AREN'T MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE OBVIOUSLY, BUT THEY DON'T OVERLAP COMPLETELY EITHER. SO, AGAIN, I THINK ANY ORGANIZATION JUST REALLY NEEDS A CLARITY OF PURPOSE AND NEEDS TO HAVE ALL ITS PEOPLE ON THE SAME PAGE. I THINK ANY ORGANIZATION CAN BENEFIT FROM MORE FROM IMPROVED INTERORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION.”

Robert

“A TEAM GOING TO PARALYMPICS, LETS SAY BASKETBALL; IS IT 10-15 PLAYERS? I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S ON A TEAM OR THE PANEL. THAT'S ONE MEDAL. THAT'S NOT VERY COST EFFECTIVE FOR PI TO BE PUTTING MONEY INTO 10/12/15 ATHLETES AND WHATEVER SUPPORT STAFF FOR ONE MEDAL. I'VE SPOKEN TO OTHER PLAYER... SAYING THERE'S VERY LITTLE BACKING FOR THE TEAM BECAUSE IT'S NOT A BIG PAY OFF AT THE END OF THE DAY WHEN IT GETS TO PARALYMPIC LEVEL AND, UNFORTUNATELY, PI WANT MEDALS.”

Lucy

4.4 Injuries in Para Sport

A full overview of data on injuries in Para sport is presented in table 11. Among survey respondents, 69.1% reported having sustained at least one significant injury while participating in Para sport. Of these, 26.8% had experienced one injury, 31.7% had between two and five injuries, and a small proportion (2.4%) had six or more injuries. When asked about the support received following their most significant injury, 33.3% rated it as excellent, 40% as good, 17.3% as fair, and 9.3% as bad or very bad. Injury prevention education was received by 68% of respondents, while 32% reported never having received such education.

Participation in Para sport while injured was reported by 61.3% of respondents, and 38.7% had been encouraged by a coach, player, or other individual to play through an injury. Additionally, 52% had hidden an injury from a coach or peer to avoid missing training or competition. Regarding coaches' understanding of athletes' impairments to help prevent injuries, 78.7% of athletes felt their coach had sufficient knowledge, while 21.3% believed their coach's understanding was insufficient.

Table 11. Injuries

Survey Question & Response Options	Frequency of Response n (%)
How many significant injuries have you experienced while participating in Para sport?	
0	38 (30.9%)
1	33 (26.8%)
2-5	39 (31.7%)
6-10	2 (1.6%)
11+	1 (0.8%)
How would you rate the support you received post your most significant injury?	
Excellent	25 (33.3%)
Good	30 (40%)
Fair	13 (17.3%)
Bad	6 (8%)
Very bad	1 (1.3%)
Did you ever receive injury prevention education?	
Yes	51 (68%)
No	24 (32%)
Have you ever played Para sport while being injured?	
Yes	46 (61.3%)
No	29 (38.7%)
Have you ever been encouraged by a coach, player or other individual to play with/through an injury?	
Yes	29 (38.7%)
No	46 (61.3%)
Have you ever hidden an injury from a coach or peer to avoid missing training or competition?	
Yes	39 (52%)
No	36 (48%)
Do you feel your coaches' understanding of your impairment is sufficient to help prevent you getting injured in your sport?	
Yes	59 (78.7%)
No	1 (21.3%)

4.5 Classification in Para Sport

A majority (70.4%) of respondents were members of a NGB or trained in an NGB-registered club. The most common affiliations included Irish Wheelchair Association Sport (29.3%), Paralympics Ireland (13.8%), and Athletics Ireland (7.3%). Smaller numbers were affiliated with sports such as archery, table tennis, badminton, cycling, and triathlon. No respondents reported affiliations with Deaf Sports Ireland, fencing, judo, or taekwondo.

In terms of classification, 62% had received a national classification, while 48.7% had undergone international classification. Among those classified internationally, 81.8% were familiar with the process beforehand, whereas 18.2% were not. When asked about their classification experience, 69.9% rated their interaction with medical staff as positive or very positive, while 8% rated it negatively. The testing procedure was rated as positive or very positive by 64.6% of respondents, though 9.7% found it negative. Privacy and comfort were rated as positive by 71.7% of respondents; 9.8% found it negative. Understanding of the classification system varied, with 66.4% reporting a good or excellent understanding, while 12.4% had little or no understanding. Perceptions of fairness were mixed: 37.2% found the system fair, 19.5% very fair, while 16.8% considered it unfair or very unfair, and 26.5% were neutral. See table 12 for complete findings on classification.

Table 12. Classification

Survey Question & Response Options	Frequency of Response n (%)
Are you a member of a National Governing Body (NGB) of Sport or do you train in an NGB-registered club?	
Yes	81 (70.4%)
No	34 (29.6%)
If yes, what is the name of the NGB of Sport you are a member of, or that your club is affiliated with?	
Irish Wheelchair Association Sport	36 (29.3%)
Paralympics Ireland	17 (13.8%)
Other	10 (8.1%)
Athletics Ireland	9 (7.3%)
Archery Ireland	6 (4.9%)
Table Tennis Ireland	5 (4.1%)
Badminton Ireland	3 (2.4%)
Cycling Ireland	3 (2.4%)
Horsesport Ireland	3 (2.4%)
Vision Sports Ireland	3 (2.4%)
Canoeing Ireland	2 (1.6%)
Tennis Ireland	2 (1.6%)
Triathlon Ireland	2 (1.6%)
Deaf Sports Ireland	0
Fencing Ireland	0
Irish Judo Association	0
Taekwondo Ireland	0
Have you received a national classification carried out by Paralympics Ireland classifiers for this sport?	
Yes	70 (62%)
No	43 (38%)
Have you received an international classification for this sport?	
Yes	55 (48.7%)
No	58 (51.3%)
If yes, were you familiar with the process in advance of your assessment (through previous national classification or guidance)?	
Yes	45 (81.8%)
No	10 (18.2%)

When you got your classification, how would you rate the following parts of the experience:

Interaction with the medical staff

Very negative	2 (1.8%)
Negative	7 (6.2%)
Neither Negative or positive	25 (22.1%)
Positive	45 (39.8%)
Very positive	34 (30.1%)

Testing procedure

Very negative	1 (0.9%)
Negative	10 (8.8%)
Neither Negative or positive	29 (25.7%)
Positive	48 (42.5%)
Very positive	25 (22.1%)

Location

Very negative	3 (2.7%)
Negative	5 (4.4%)
Neither Negative or positive	27 (23.9%)
Positive	39 (34.5%)
Very positive	39 (34.5%)

Privacy and Comfort

Very negative	3 (2.7%)
Negative	8 (7.1%)
Neither Negative or positive	21 (18.6%)
Positive	46 (40.7%)
Very positive	35 (31%)

What is your level of understanding of the classification system used in your sport?

No understanding at all	5 (4.4%)
Little understanding	9 (8%)
Moderate understanding	24 (21.2%)
Good understanding	52 (46%)
Excellent understanding	23 (20.4%)

How fair do you feel the classification system in your sport is?

Very unfair	6 (5.3%)
Unfair	13 (11.5%)
Neutral	30 (26.5%)
Fair	42 (37.2%)
Very fair	22 (19.5%)

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS:

Perceptions of Classification: Interviewees and survey respondents felt that the process of getting a classification was overall positive, but had mixed opinions on the fairness of the system.

“OBVIOUSLY IT IS EXTREMELY FRUSTRATING FOR ME SEEING THE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM THAT IS THERE AT THE MOMENT. I AM A FULL-TIME WHEELCHAIR USER AND I'M NOT ABLE TO BE CLASSIFIED FOR ATHLETICS OR WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL SPORT”

Osín

“I THINK FOR THE MOST PART IT (CLASSIFICATION) IS FAIR, LIKE I DON'T HAVE A PROBLEM WITH THE CLASSIFICATIONS THEMSELVES. I THINK THEY'RE ALL REASONABLY BALANCED”

Niamh

“[SPORT A] IS THE ONE WHERE IT (CLASSIFICATION) GETS A BIT DODGY BECAUSE I THINK LIKE FOR EXAMPLE.. I HAVE NO CLUE WHY (ATHLETE NAME - WITHHELD) SHOULDN'T BE A 4.5 AT LEAST OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT. I WAS LIKE 'WHAT'S THE STORY WITH (ATHLETE)?' HE'S LIKE, OH, WE'RE WAITING ON A RULING FROM (PARALYMPIC NGB). I WAS LIKE, THAT SHOULD BE NOTHING TO DO (PARALYMPIC NGB). THAT SHOULD BE DECIDED BY (INGB 1) OR (SCCC) WITHIN THE SPORT. IT'S FOR THE GOODNESS OF THE SPORT ON A LOCAL LEVEL FOR INCLUSIVITY. HE'S NOT TRYING TO. HE DOESN'T WANT TO. HE'S NOT CLASSIFIABLE INTERNATIONALLY. HE KNOWS THAT AND HE'S NOT TRYING TO BE CLASSIFIED INTERNATIONALLY. HE'S TRYING TO BE CLASSIFIED LOCALLY WITH HIS LOCAL TEAM. HE USES A DAY CHAIR EVERY DAY. I JUST THINK THAT'S MADNESS”

Miriam



4.6 Perceived Benefits of Para Sport Participation

Participants were asked to rate how their involvement in Para sport had impacted different aspects of their lives (see table 13). Overall, participants reported overwhelmingly positive effects of Para sport participation on their social life, physical functioning, physical health, and mental health, with very few indicating negative impacts. The impact of Para sport on employability and education was less pronounced, with many participants reporting a neutral effect—indicating that its influence on these outcomes may be more indirect or not yet fully recognised by individuals. However, as illustrated in the following ‘qualitative insight,’ the interview data underscore the far-reaching and powerful benefits of Para sport beyond what may be immediately captured in survey responses.

- **Social life:** 74.2% reported a positive or very positive impact, while 4.4% indicated a negative or very negative impact.
- **Physical functioning:** 79.6% reported a positive or very positive impact, while 3.6% indicated a negative or very negative impact.
- **Physical health:** 81.4% reported a positive or very positive impact, while 8.8% indicated a negative or very negative impact.
- **Mental health:** 75.2% reported a positive or very positive impact, while 4.5% indicated a negative or very negative impact.
- **Employability:** 37.2% reported a positive or very positive impact. The majority (47.8%) reported a neutral impact.
- **Education:** 41.6% reported a positive or very positive impact, while nearly half (46.9%) reported a neutral impact.



Table 13: Benefits of Para sport

Survey Question & Response Options	Frequency of Response n (%)
Does your Para sport participation impact the following aspects of your life?	
Social	
Very Negative Impact	1 (0.9%)
Negative Impact	4 (3.5%)
Neutral Impact	23 (20.4%)
Positive Impact	53 (45.9%)
Very Positive Impact	32 (28.3%)
Physical Functioning	
Very Negative Impact	1 (0.9%)
Negative Impact	3 (2.7%)
Neutral Impact	19 (16.8%)
Positive Impact	38 (33.6%)
Very Positive Impact	52 (46%)
Physical Health	
Very Negative Impact	4 (3.5%)
Negative Impact	6 (5.3%)
Neutral Impact	11 (9.7%)
Positive Impact	41 (36.3%)
Very Positive Impact	51 (45.1%)
Mental Health	
Very Negative Impact	2 (1.8%)
Negative Impact	3 (2.7%)
Neutral Impact	23 (20.4%)
Positive Impact	35 (31%)
Very Positive Impact	50 (44.2%)
Employability	
Very Negative Impact	9 (8%)
Negative Impact	8 (7.1%)
Neutral Impact	54 (47.8%)
Positive Impact	28 (24.8%)
Very Positive Impact	14 (12.4%)
Education	
Very Negative Impact	6 (5.3%)
Negative Impact	7 (6.2%)
Neutral Impact	53 (46.9%)
Positive Impact	31 (27.4%)
Very Positive Impact	16 (14.2%)

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS:

The following qualitative insights illustrates the wide-ranging benefits of Para sport, highlighting its positive impact across all aspects of life.

BB MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS: "I THINK IT'S REALLY GOOD FOR YOUR HEAD, LIKE MENTAL HEALTH WISE, I THINK SORT OF BEING ABLE TO TAKE A COUPLE OF HOURS OUT OF YOUR WEEK AND JUST ENJOY IT AND NOT THINK ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE AND YOU KNOW. ALSO, JUST EXERCISE. WORK UP A SWEAT, FITNESS ALL OF THAT, AND THEN THERE'S ALSO THE SATISFACTION OF WHEN YOU DO WELL IN A GAME OR YOU KNOW, WIN A TROPHY OR, YOU KNOW, LIKE JUST PROGRESS AS A TEAM AND AS AN INDIVIDUAL. I THINK THAT'S VERY LIKE POSITIVE AND IT WOULD LEAVE A GOOD IMPACT ON YOU, YEAH."

Fiachra

BB LEARNING LIFE SKILLS --"WATCHING OTHER ATHLETES, LIKE, THERE IS LEARNINGS THAT WAY AS WELL SO AS FAR AS LIFE SKILLS. THERE'S DEFINITELY A HUGE AMOUNT OF LEARNING I'VE DONE. GETTING GLOVES ON FOR MY RACE CHAIR OR FOR MY RUGBY; ALL THOSE THINGS COME INTO IT USUALLY AS WELL.

Liam

BB LIFE-CHANGING BENEFITS: "THROUGH SPORT IN GENERAL AND THROUGH PARA SPORT IN MY INSTANCE, I THINK YOU CAN GAIN A LOT OF CONFIDENCE. AND JUST KIND OF BELIEF IN YOURSELF FROM JUST FROM DOING HARD THINGS AND GETTING GOOD RESULTS AND BEATING GOOD PLAYERS OR AND WINNING MEDALS AND THAT THOUGHT JUST KIND OF CREEPS INTO YOUR HEAD LIKE 'OH YEAH, MAYBE I AM THE MAN I'M KIND OF HYPED UP TO BE... AND LIKE THEN THAT KIND OF SEEPS INTO YOUR EVERYDAY LIFE... IT'S (PARA SPORT) HAS GIVEN ME A LOT TO PUT DOWN ON MY CV TO BE HONEST, LIKE AND IT'S GOOD ... IT OPENS A LOT OF DOORS THAT YOU WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN APPRECIATIVE OF BEFORE. LIKE I'VE BEEN TO MANY MORE COUNTRIES AND A LOT OF PEOPLE MY AGE WHO AREN'T INVOLVED IN INTERNATIONAL SPORT. I WAS ABLE TO GET A SPORT SCHOLARSHIP IN (WITHHELD). WHEN I WAS DOWN THERE, SO THERE ARE AVENUES THAT MAYBE YOU WOULDN'T THINK OF WHEN STARTING OUT LIKE YOU THINK, I JUST WANT TO PLAY SPORTS AND HAVE FUN, BUT IT CAN BE LIFE CHANGING,

Tomas

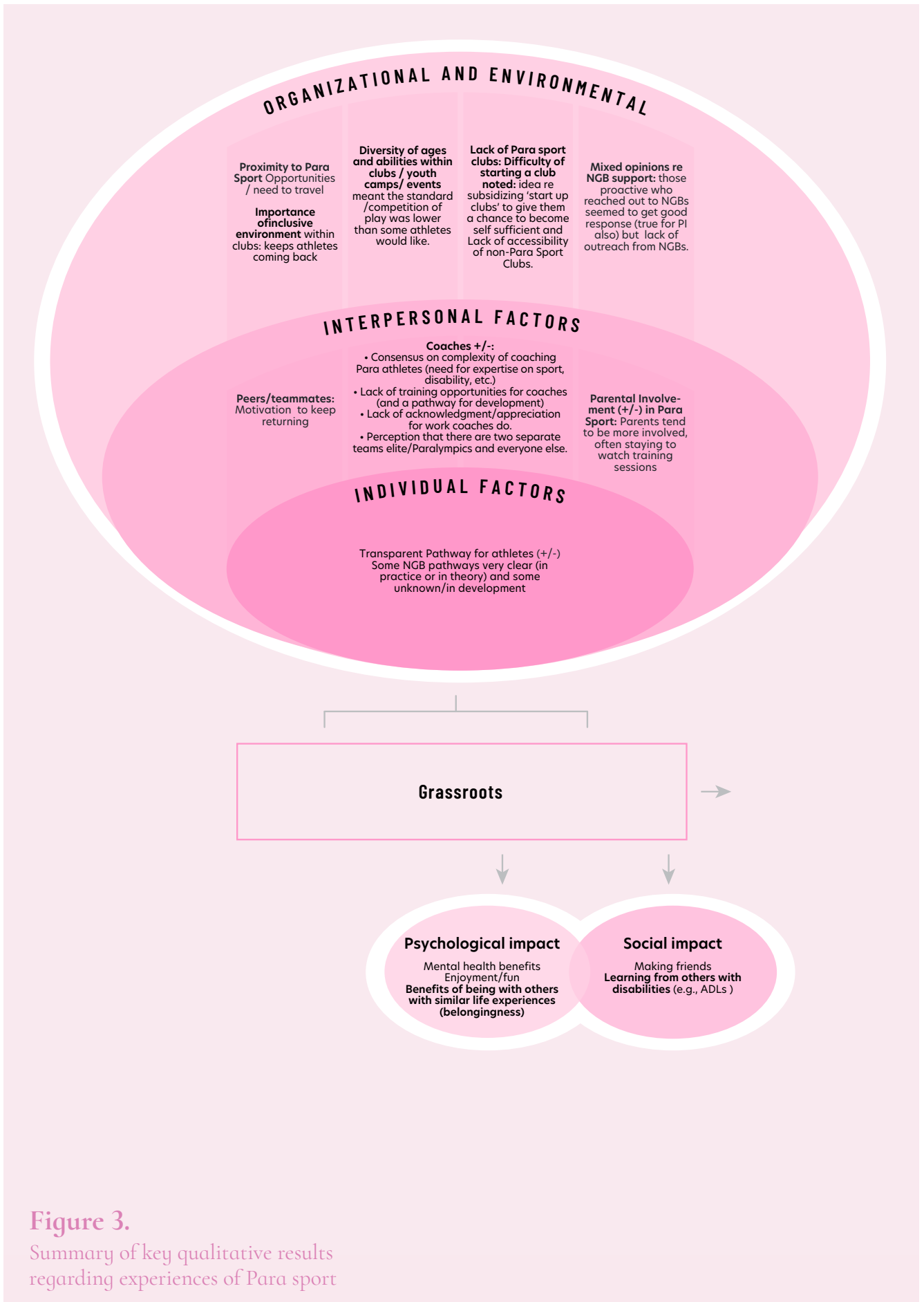


Figure 3. Summary of key qualitative results regarding experiences of Para sport

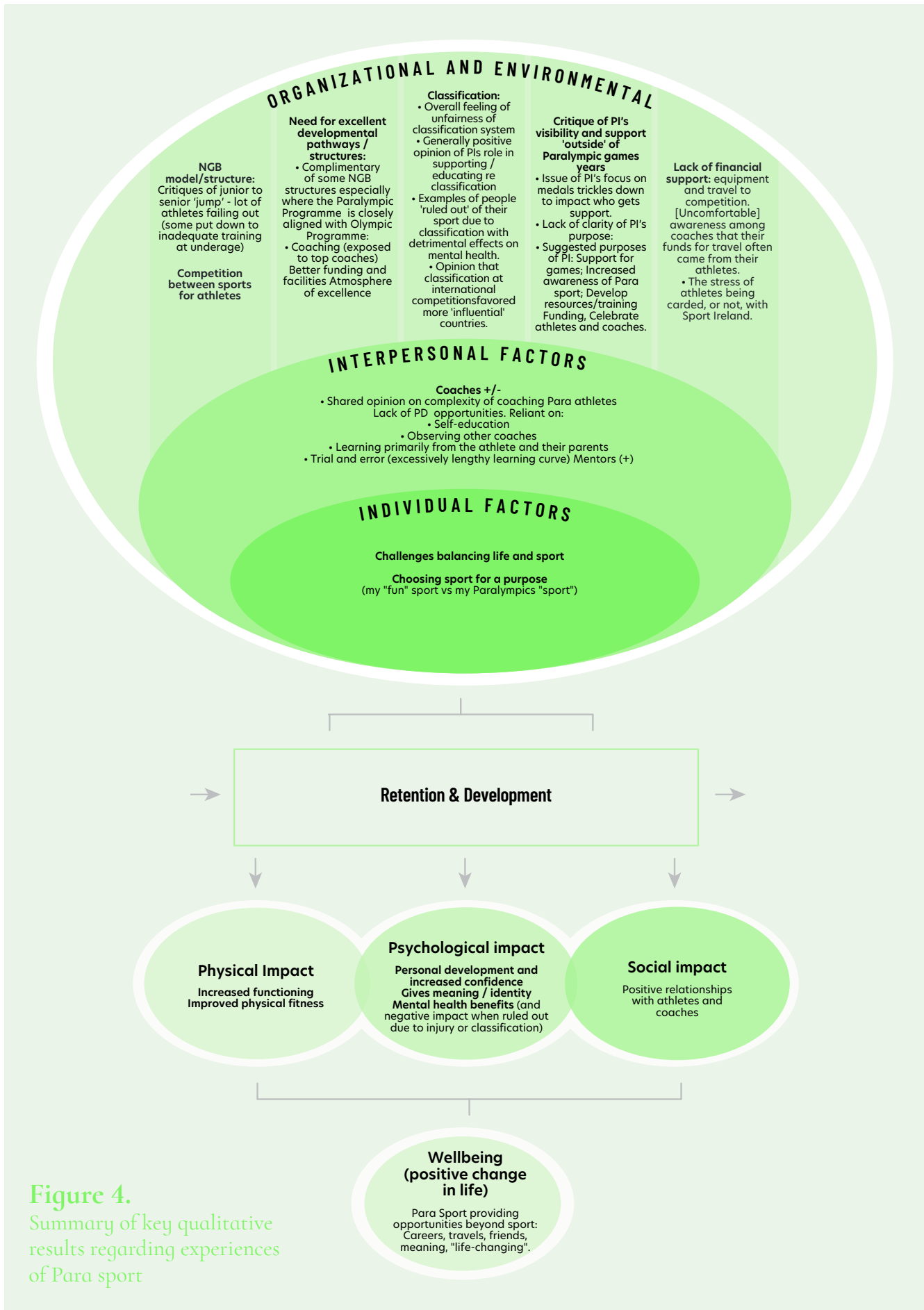


Figure 4. Summary of key qualitative results regarding experiences of Para sport

5. KEY TAKEAWAYS AND IMPLICATIONS

Promoting Earlier and More Equitable Access to Para Sport

Athletes reported starting Para sport at quite an older age in comparison to non-Para athletes. Athletes with congenital disabilities started, on average, at nearly 16 years, with a significant gender gap: girls with congenital disabilities began at 21 years on average, compared to 12.6 years for boys. In interviews, athletes often spoke of 'stumbling' into Para sport 'by chance' at a much later age than they would have liked. This delayed entry can limit skill development and hinder long-term participation, as well as depriving the individual of the benefits of Para sport at a younger age. Promoting earlier awareness and exposure to Para sport – through families, schools, community sport clubs, paediatric health and rehab settings, etc. – is essential. Greater awareness among families and educators, in particular, could help ensure that children with disabilities, especially girls, are introduced to Para sport earlier in life.

Unlocking the Potential of Schools

Schools were a missed opportunity in many athletes' journeys. Only 19.5% of participants were introduced to Para sport by a teacher or through school, and just 2.2% of girls reported playing a Para sport in a school setting. Qualitative data highlighted both the potential, but extreme lack of, Para sport in schools. Teachers, especially physical educators, and special needs assistants could play a stronger role in connecting students with local Para sport opportunities. With structured support and resources, schools can become key access points, particularly for younger children and those less likely to encounter Para sport elsewhere. To fully leverage the physical educators in this regard, increasing their knowledge about Para sport via pre-service education or professional development will be crucial.

Leveraging the Influence of Family and Friends

Social networks are a major factor in both starting and sticking with sport. Nearly 40% of athletes reported parents or friends and relatives as the person who introduced them to Para sport and the majority cited them as being important for continuing participation. Interviewees credited parents for finding Para sport opportunities and providing encouragement and logistical support (e.g., financial support, transport, etc.), underscoring how valuable family involvement is. Notably, the influence of family and friends was more

felt by individual sport athletes than for team sport athletes (for example, 45.5% of individual sport athletes vs 17.2% of team sport athletes noted that friends and family introduced them to Para sport). Outreach and education regarding Para sport opportunities, including team sport options, aimed at families could strengthen these support networks and help more athletes get and stay engaged in Para sport at a young age.

Addressing Programme and Facility Access

Programme and facility access was a common barrier, reported by 30.9% at Para sport entry and 27.6% during ongoing participation. Interviewees, especially those outside of Ireland's cities, spoke of the overall lack of local Para sport options and the need to travel long distances to participate. A national evaluation of Para sport programmes may be required to identify Para sport 'deserts'. Support for the development of new clubs will be critical for addressing the lack of programmes currently available. Transport supports should also be considered as part of the solution. The increased availability of Para sport specific settings – multi-Para sport clubs and team Para sports (e.g. wheelchair basketball) were noted as being particular needed –, as well as inclusive non-Para sport clubs will be necessary to address this issue.

Reducing Equipment Barriers Through Access, Sharing, and Reuse

Lack of appropriate equipment, particularly expensive sport wheelchairs, was cited as a barrier by nearly one-third of participants when they started, and by one-fifth during continued participation. Interviewees also emphasised the severity of this issue. However, there were examples of successful equipment loan schemes, that allowed for the 'borrowing' of equipment such as tandem bikes and racing chairs. These initiatives show real promise and should be expanded, promoted, and coordinated nationally. Exploring a structured second-hand equipment scheme could also help, though customisation requirements may hinder this approach.

Building a Skilled and Supported Coaching Workforce

One in four athletes lacked regular coaching support, with 15.3% training independently and another 9.9% training with peers but without a coach. Athletes emphasised how valuable good, adequately trained coaches were, but also, how few there were. Interviewed coaches spoke of the complexity of their role – requiring



both sport-specific and impairment-specific knowledge. However, the majority relied on peer support or “learning by doing,” to gain this expertise, with few structured professional development opportunities on offer. A multitude of promising ‘sources’ of Para coaches were also mentioned in the interviews, including retired athletes, parents, and non-Para coaches – but no formal initiative appears to be in place to fully leverage these groups to increase the number of coaches in the Para sport system. Coaches also spoke of feeling isolated, underappreciated and unrecognised – efforts to remedy this should be explored also. There is a clear need for a national strategy to recruit, develop, and retain Para sport coaches.

Recognising and Promoting the Broader Value of Para Sport

The impact of Para sport went far beyond health and well-being. Most athletes cited improved

independence, self-confidence, and social connection, to name but a few, as benefits that kept them involved in Para sport. Benefits such as travel, a sense of accomplishment, and belonging were frequently cited as key motivators also. Interviewees also spoke about the importance of being with others who share similar lived experiences of having a disability; for many interviewees, Para sport was the first setting in which this occurred. There is a need to raise awareness of the transformative potential of Para sport for all people with disabilities—beyond the typical benefits associated with sport. Greater recognition of these wider impacts can help drive increased participation among athletes and coaches, while also building broader support for Para sport across Irish society.

Tackling Gender Disparities in Para Sport Participation

Our findings point to clear gender gaps in how athletes get involved in Para sport. In addition to women with congenital impairments started, on average, almost a decade later than men, they were also less likely than men to have been introduced to Para sport through schools (9.3% vs 25%), siblings (2.3% vs 18.8%), or through rehabilitation centres, physiotherapists or physicians (11.6% vs 35%). More targeted efforts to education people, particularly families, school personnel, and health and rehabilitation workers, about the value of Para sport for girls and women, is required.

Addressing the Unequal Burden of Barriers Among People with Acquired Disabilities

Athletes with acquired disabilities reported significantly more barriers to participation in Para sport than those with congenital disabilities, averaging 5.4 barriers compared to 3. They were significantly more likely to report issues such as high participation costs (50.9% vs 27.8%), inadequate facilities (40.4% vs 20.4%), and a lack of trained coaches (38.6% vs 11.1%) as compared to athletes with congenital disabilities. Entry into Para sport is often more complex for those with acquired disabilities, and current structures appear to be inadequate to meet their needs. Addressing this requires targeted investment in coach and staff training to meet the needs of this group and continuing promotion of Para sport in our NRH, building upon its success in promoting Para sport to date, with more structured links to NGBs and community clubs.

6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how Para sport is experienced by athletes and coaches in Ireland, and to better understand what helps or hinders people with disabilities in getting involved and staying involved in Para sport. Through a combination of surveys and interviews, we captured a detailed and multifaceted picture of the current landscape of Para sport in Ireland. The findings will help shape Paralympics Ireland's contribution to reducing the disparities in sport participation among people with disabilities.

A key outcome of the study was the overwhelming evidence of the positive impact Para sport can have on individuals. Participants consistently described enhanced physical and mental well-being, enhanced independence, and meaningful social connections fostered through Para sport; benefits that extended into all aspects of their lives. These findings underscore the potential of Para sport not just as a vehicle for athletic achievement, but as a key contributor to quality of life and broader social inclusion for people with disabilities in Ireland.

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