

BEING AN ADVENTURE SPORT PARATHLETE IN A DEVELOPING COUNTRY: MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES

SER PARATLETA DE DEPORTES DE AVENTURA EN UN PAÍS EN VÍAS DE
DESARROLLO: MOTIVACIONES Y RETOS

SER PARATLETA DE ESPORTES DE AVENTURA EM UM PAÍS EM
DESENVOLVIMENTO: MOTIVAÇÕES E DESAFIOS

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Abstract

Adventure sports is more than a sport and is a kind of lifestyle; however, little is known about the practice of athletes with disabilities. This article shows, based on the adventure/extreme sports athlete with a disability's comprehension, and learn about their challenges and motivations. With the qualitative method, 14 athletes answered an open online questionnaire. Quality of life, love by sport and freedom sensation were considered the main motivators for practice; adrenaline and adventure were the main reasons for choosing the modality; and the main inspiration was athletes with a disability. Notwithstanding, they scored many accessibility barriers (physical and nonphysical) that were overcome by willpower. Thus, the practice of adventure sport by such athletes is an achievement. It is the guarantee of citizenship even if based on overcoming and therefore considered a transgressive act.

Keywords: Disabilities; Sports; Adventure; Accessibility; Questionnaire.

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Resumen

Los deportes de aventura son más que un deporte y son una especie de estilo de vida; sin embargo, poco se sabe sobre la práctica de los atletas con discapacidad. Este artículo muestra, a partir de la comprensión del deportista de aventura/deporte extremo con discapacidad, así como sus motivaciones y desafíos. Con el método cualitativo, 14 atletas respondieron un cuestionario abierto en línea. La calidad de vida, el amor por el deporte y la sensación de libertad fueron considerados los principales motivadores para la práctica; la adrenalina y la aventura fueron los principales motivos para elegir la modalidad; y la principal inspiración fueron los atletas con discapacidad. No obstante, se anotaron muchas barreras de accesibilidad (físicas y no físicas) que fueron superadas con fuerza de voluntad. Así, la práctica del deporte de aventura por parte de estos deportistas es un logro. Es la garantía de la ciudadanía aunque se base en la superación y por lo tanto se considere un acto transgresor.

Palabras clave: Discapacidades; Deportes; Aventura; Accesibilidad; Cuestionario.

Resumo

O esporte de aventura é mais que um esporte e é um estilo de vida; no entanto, pouco se sabe sobre a prática de atletas com deficiência. Este artigo mostra, a partir da compreensão do atleta de esportes radicais/aventura com deficiência, assim como suas motivações e desafios. Com o método qualitativo, 14 atletas responderam a um questionário online aberto. Qualidade de vida, amor pelo esporte e sensação de liberdade foram considerados os principais motivadores para a prática; adrenalina e aventura foram os principais motivos para a escolha da modalidade; e a principal inspiração foram os atletas com deficiência. Não obstante, pontuaram muitas barreiras de acessibilidade (físicas e não físicas) que foram superadas pela força de vontade. Assim, a prática do esporte de aventura por tais atletas é uma conquista. É a garantia da cidadania ainda que pautada na superação e, por isso, considerada um ato transgressor.

Palavras-chave: Deficiência; Esportes; Aventura; Acessibilidade; Questionário.

Introduction

The sport currently has presented such an organization that it has caused, especially from the 20th century, repercussions beyond its scope of action. Today, it is possible to observe a space of commodification in which economic, political and public policy decisions in different regions begin to act. Such is their political-economic influence that the world's two largest sports organizations in the world (INTERNATIONAL OLYMPIC COMMITTEE AND INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF FOOTBALL ASSOCIATIONS) go through crises related to corruption, forcing new reformulations (NAURIGHT AND POPE, 2017).

These sports have a characteristic of a civilized environment, as environmental control, that modern society accepts and proposes. Therefore, faced with this reality, adventure sports emerge that propose an opposition, a "protest" to the way of being of these sports. (BREIVIK, 2010). The rise of adventure sports started in the 1970s and showed a mix of a background of developments inside the sports and the background of aspects of modern societies. This is because these sports are not controlled like conventional sports; moreover, the athletes' bodies and minds need skills to manage anxiety and stress, which show a larger framework in an unpredictable ambient environment (BREIVIK, 2010).

Since birth, these kinds of sports have been shown to develop, such as their nomenclature. In the final 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the term adventure sports was more used for sports in outdoor spaces, near nature, such as surfing, rock climbing, and skydiving. On the other hand, extreme sport name started to be used for sports connected to more urban spaces, such as skates. The lifestyles of both sports practitioners also begin to be different, such as outdoor lifestyle versus urban lifestyle (BREIVIK, 2010).

Adventure sports seek to give a new meaning to life, relating mainly to the feeling of freedom, lack of security, and comfortable modern life usually gives most people; adventure sports act to break these rules and to challenge the modern way society has imposed by reaching the body to its limits (KLOTTER, 2015).

Thenceforth, both adventure sports and extreme sports are more than a sport; they are a lifestyle, a resistance way to modern society to live, which until currently, they are transgressing social barriers to ensure the participation of people with disabilities.

The practice of sports by people with disabilities shows a recent history compared with sports for non-disabilities athletes. Usually, the Stoke Mandeville Games are a landmark of paralympic sports competition; however, some documents showed reports of competitive sports events in France, Germany, and the UK in the early 20th century, although the practice intensified after World Wars (SILVER, 2018).

Nevertheless, it must be considered that the path of sport for people with disabilities is influenced by the locality (SILVER, 2018). In Brazil, the first modality practice was basketball in 1958 (ARAUJO, 1998).

Another situation that must be considered is that although several achievements are observed to the point of saying that we live in an inclusive society, people with disabilities still suffer from exclusion, whether spatial or social. This is because inclusion comes from marginalization and exclusion (KITCHIN, 1998).

People with disabilities started practicing adventure sports as a pedagogical approach, with the objective of experiencing new sensations. The primary adventure sports in this process were: trekking, caving, rock climbing, rafting, and lastly, diving (MUNSTER, 2004).

Following a development timeline, the creation of new technologies expands the specter of adventure sports to people with disabilities by increasing the accessibility during the adventure sport and adding to the controlled risk brought by sports (BRASIL, 2008).

Most adventure sports for people with disabilities nowadays are organized by philanthropical organizations, and in some competition cases, the sports organizations responsible for promoting the conventional adventure sport sometimes open one category for people with disabilities.

Within this context, practicing sports by people with disabilities has been a challenge. Therefore, giving voice to athletes with disabilities who practice adventure/extreme modalities is essential. What motivates them? What kinds of barriers do they face? Who inspires them? Therefore, this study aims to understand the challenges and motivations behind participation in adventure sports by people with disabilities.

Method

The study was conducted in 2020 in Brazil and used a qualitative method since it explored different aspects of the athletes' reports, as proposed by Gerring, 2017. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Campinas State University, Brazil (number 4863069).

The target population was reached through social networks (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok). The publication of the study in social media was made via a single direct message to athletes or organizations inviting them to participate in this study; if the athlete or organization agreed to participate, the researchers would send the online questionnaire and would also ask if the participant knew anyone willing to participate. The inclusion criterion stipulated that the athletes perform some adventure/extreme sports, have a motor disability, and have their consent to participate in the study. Since all participants answered the questions, no exclusion criteria were adopted.

Fourteen athletes aged between 18 and 35 participated in the study, including ten men and four women. The sample size was thought from some principles indicated by Malterud et al. (2016) as the specificity of the target group, disability athletes of adventure/extreme sports, and the clear and objective communication of their answers. Moreover, it was based on saturation data (GILL, 2020) based on the motivation to choose the sport.

Each athlete in the study answered a questionnaire on the Google Forms platform containing the following open questions: What motivated you to start playing sports? Why did you choose an adventure/extreme sport? How have you been practicing this extreme sport? Who is your inspiration, if any? Do you believe that extreme sports organizations and competitions encourage the participation of parathletes? What are the main difficulties faced in your modality? What strategies and adaptations do you use to stay in the sport?

After the response, an Excel spreadsheet was generated, and each response was analyzed to delineate the categories of analysis. After that, a dynamic and cyclic process of immersion of responses was used for data reduction, presentation and interpretation of conclusions, and determination of analysis categories (MILES AND HUBERMAN, 1984).

Results

There was a total of 16 responses from different athletes; most of the athletes were men (71.43%), with a mean age of 30.75 ± 8.12 years, involved in surfing ($n = 10$, one of them practiced skydiving too), downhill skateboarding ($n = 2$), mountain biking ($n = 2$), rafting ($n = 1$) and rock climbing ($n = 1$), all the participants related having physical disabilities. All of them are very experienced athletes with a mean of 7.6 ± 6.8 years of practice; some have practiced for over ten years, and others have practiced since childhood.

Regarding the questionnaire responses on why they practiced adventure sports, most athletes ($n = 6$) chose adventure sports because of the adrenaline the activity would bring them. After that, athletes indicated that because of the personal incentive from others, or third-party invitations ($n = 4$), also that close contact with nature was the reason for choosing adventure sports ($n = 3$), and lastly, because of personal challenge ($n = 3$).

Regarding the athletes' motivations to continue practicing adventure sports, there are different answers; most demonstrate the intention to improve their quality of life ($n = 8$), including obtaining better health, love by sport ($n = 4$), and freedom sensation ($n = 2$).

Most of the athletes answered that they believe sports organizations encourage the participation of parathletes ($n = 10$); on the other hand, six believe that is not the case.

Regarding the biggest challenge to competing in adventure sports, most athletes indicated that the lack of accessibility is the main problem ($n = 7$), followed by the high cost of the material and sports equipment ($n = 4$). Moreover, two athletes reported that the lack of disclosure and marketing on the adventure sport was the biggest challenge, two mentioned that the sports organization responsible for the tournaments had management problems or lack of participating opportunities, and one said there were no challenges.

As the last question of the questionnaire was related to the adaptations the athletes used to stay practicing the adventure sports, most answered that different equipment adaptations were made to keep them active in the adventure sports ($n = 7$), followed by the athlete's will to continue practicing the adventure sport ($n = 5$), two reported that the organization's campaigns made them want to keep practicing

the sport, one answered that the routine planning was vital to keep being active, and one said that as he has just started practicing the adventure sport, the change in perspective was the major adaptation.

Discussion

The main findings of this study were to shed some light on how people with disabilities experience and maintain themselves active in adventure sports. As reported by the athletes, most are involved with adventure sports because of the adrenaline rush. However, the lack of accessibility and the high equipment cost are the biggest challenges they face as adventure sport parathletes.

However, what draws attention is the importance given to the quality of life as the primary motivating factor for sports practice, as referred to by the climbing athlete: “Seek better quality of life”; and the female surf athlete who wrote: “Fun, well-being, quality of life, health.” According to the World Health Organization, 2004, quality of life is the auto perception of individuals about their lives. This perception is influenced by the perception and goals of each person, as well as individual values and culture and the society into which they are inserted. In this way, as health, the perceptions of good quality of life and motivation are more than a simple answer; they are a result of the life, values, and history of each participant and the society they live in.

Moreover, the love of practice sport was reported by two persons by the answers “love to surf” (surf male athlete) and “sport has always been part of my life, and when I became a PCD, I kept doing what I always did, only in a different way” (rafting male athlete). In this case, independent of social rules and barriers, the practice of sports was the first motivation to break down barriers to access.

Regarding the choice of the extreme sport by athletes, adrenaline, and adventure were the main reasons for choosing the modality, as they said: “Used to strolling in a wheelchair, I saw downhill skating as an opportunity to ride up to 65 km/h” (skate downhill athlete, male) or “liking adventures” (mountain bike athlete, female).

Moreover, it is important to analyze the sentence about their choices: "So for the freedom it gives me and the direct contact with nature" (surf athlete, male) or "I looked for something different, I was tired of the trivial" (rafting male athlete), said by two athletes that reflect more than contact with nature, reflect their feeling of freedom that they usually do not experience in everyday life. Both sentences are crucial to understanding what Breivik, 2010 pointed out about the characteristics of the adventure sport as an opposite and "protest" sport against the current society and conventional sports. This idea is important because disability is spatially and socially constructed, as mentioned by Kitchin, 1998, and society, as constituted today, creates excluding spaces, as wrote by Kitchin 1998: "Spaces are currently organized to keep disabled people 'in their place' and 'written' to convey to disabled people who they are 'out of place' (KITCHIN, 1998, P. 343).

Therefore, thoughts like those of these athletes, such as visualizing an inspiring person, become crucial for being an athlete, being not deficient but an efficient barrier breaker for visible and nonvisible hurdles. In this way, when they read the "Who is your inspiration, if any?", they all responded to the question. Moreover, 57% responded that they had an athlete with a disability as their idol, as mentioned, for example, Aaron Wheels (said by a male wheelchair motocross athlete); Bethany Hamilton (told by two female and one male surf athletes); Daniel Dias (said by male surf athlete); Clodoaldo Silva (said by male surf and skydiving athlete). The symbol of idol current is controversial because, on the one hand, they are a model of triumph, a celebrity; on the other hand, idolatry provides a significant profit for sports clubs or associations, and Disability & Society distort the real image of the world (ZIVANOVIC et al., 2015). However, what is observed in the writing of the athletes participating in this research is that they linked the image of inspiring to also an athlete with a disability, showing their place of belonging, of representation, showing that they are in the right place.

Kerr and Mackenzie (2012) noted these multiple motivations and highlighted that motivation is a subjective perception of everyone. In this case, specific motives may have different degrees of importance according to the values and experiences of each athlete.

However, some barriers are pointed out by them. Seven of them cited accessibility inside (as said, "Accessibility on the beach, lack of adequate equipment" - female surf) and outside of competition (as stated, "The biggest one without a doubt is urban mobility most extensively from the moment when accessing the street where the sidewalks are irregular to public transport" - male surf). Accessibility seems to be a common barrier experienced by people with physical disabilities, whether to practice conventional sports (regardless of age – JAARSMA et al., 2014) or to perform some physical activity (MCKENZIE, 2021); however, the focus of our study was athletes of adventure sports.

Another barrier athletes highlight is sponsorship, as reported by female surf athletes who wrote "Financing, sponsorship, investment" and others. Although in Brazil there is funding for athletes (with and without disabilities) called "Bolsa Atleta," "the athlete disputes this scholarship with others in all national territories. This sponsorship was created in 2005 to "finance" the athlete so that he could dedicate himself to the sport. There are different levels, with different requirements and different values. For example, a national-level athlete can receive R\$925.00 (equivalent to U\$198.55), and an international-level athlete can receive R\$1,850 (equal to U\$397.11) (BRAZIL, 2022A). However, when analyzing the list of athletes awarded the athlete scholarship in 2022, no Paralympic athletes are practicing adventure sports. Only Paralympic athletes from conventional sports for parathletes (BRAZIL, 2022B). Other kinds of sport sponsorship are rarer in sports for people with disabilities in Brazil, mainly in adventure sports.

Nevertheless, what strategies and adaptations do they use to stay in the sport? Analyzing the answers, there are two main ideas: willpower to overcome obstacles ("My ideologies and the fight for a better world" – male practice skydiving and surf athlete, and "A lot of willpower, without adapting the equipment, just reading the sea and I will get to the outside" – male surf athlete) and, in some way, some accessibility (physical and nonphysical) despite the barriers ("Use borrowed equipment or make adaptations to equipment").

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This striking feature becomes a great act of resistance by adventure sports athletes against a profile expected of an athlete with a disability. The writings go towards a different way of seeing the world from what society has imposed as theirs, where athletes follow their ideologies and fight for a better world for everyone.

The study is limited because it was conducted via Google Forms instead of an interview. The option of this procedure had to be adopted due to the pandemic reality experienced at the time and the preference by athletes to fill out a form at their most opportune times. Another limitation is that the study was conducted only with athletes with motor disabilities and not asked if those disabilities were acquired or congenital, making it impossible to take a broader view of athletes with intellectual and visual disabilities, for example. However, new studies should be directed to understand the perceptions of other athletes with disabilities.

The fact that adventure sports athletes have had a voice to present their conceptions, confrontations, and motivators they face in their sports day-to-day is highlighted as a strong point of the study. Listening to them allows us to deepen our understanding of adventure sports and adventure sports for an audience that tends to be excluded. Notably, published studies on sports practice for people with disabilities have prioritized practitioners, adults, or children over athletes. Thus, this is the first study the authors know of that interviewed adventure sports parathletes' motivations to stay active in said sport and asked them about their challenges and opinions regarding the competitions and sports organizations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can observe that most parathletes involved in adventure sports have been active for a very long time; however, they report the most significant challenges are regarding the high costs of the equipment and low accessibility during practices or competitions; and the biggest motivation to maintain in adventure sports are about the adrenaline rush.

Finally, although adventure sports are considered a new modality compared with other sports, the presence of athletes in the modality and the incentive for people with disabilities to practice them overcome a vision of being "out of place" (cited by Kitchin 1998) to a view of "inside the place," a place where all people should feel in society.

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