

Sports and well-being for disabled athletes: which policies for a new mediated “distinctive” culture

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In the last decades, the physical and mental well-being of the population has become one of the primary goals of “advanced” societies for innovative actions for health, consumption, and sustainable lifestyles. The approach and work strategy presented in the document of the World Health Organization “The European health report 2012: Charting the way to wellbeing” (WHO Europe 2013) states this key point, in which the broad perspective of well-being as a frame to achieve improvements in the psycho-physical, social, and relational health of the population. Pursuing and maintaining these goals is part of the social contract that connects Governments to the citizens they represent. Therefore, health and well-being are the most meaningful aspects of a social transformation in which integration, social cohesion, and security are requirements for the European welfare state. These aspects are particularly important not only for themselves but also because they reduce inequalities in health that still are one of the main challenges for civilized countries.

The notion of health is strongly intertwined with that of a healthy lifestyle, intercepting in sports practice and physical activity is one of the keys to improving people’s lives, and on the other hand, bolstering and encouraging equal opportunities for minority groups, also people who are disabled. Recent data from Eurostat show that one in four people (25.4%) in the EU has a disability ranging from mild to severe (EUROSTAT, 2021). In Italy, there are approximately 3.1 million disabled people (5.2% of the population) (ISTAT, 2019).

Starting the increasing dimension of phenomena, it is interesting to test the connection between the benefit of sports and the well-being of those who experience situations of social vulnerability and explore how far social exclusion may be overcome by sports participation and sporting provision.

A specific framework can be observed when paying attention to the main sporting event and its athletes: the Paralympic Games, even if they are just scarcely visible in Italian mass media. News with a focus on disability when it rarely happens, is often misguided, and tends to perpetuate negative stereotypes. The main opportunity for the mass media to portray disabled people in an empowering and positive way is through the Paralympic Games.

Based on an Italian National project (PRIN Pnrr), in this paper, we explore the views and perceptions of Paralympic athletes themselves on how certain representations make them feel, think or react and ask how sport and disability should be better represented at the Paralympic Games to provide a more

positive representation of disability. The core overarching aim of this study is in line with the European Disability Strategy and its key term "self-determination", which reflects the right of disabled people to have a say in how they would like to be represented. The research project provides valuable educational and training resources on the promotion of non-discriminatory, inclusive, and empowering portrayal of disability aimed at: a) media professionals/journalists; b) Paralympic athletes; c) members of the disability community.

This research project, through an evidence-based, 3-step approach, will provide, prompt, valuable educational and training resources on the promotion of non-discriminatory, inclusive and empowering portrayal of disability aimed at: a) media professionals/journalists; b) Paralympic athletes; c) members of the disability community.

Specifically, the project investigates the evolution of the relationship between media, adapted sports and disability in Italy and its policies (from the 1960s to the present) about three specific areas of disability narratives in Paralympic media coverage: 1) Extraordinary normality representation of overcoming disability in discourses of disability inclusion that include the ability to successfully navigate able-bodied institutions; 2) Able-bodied rehabilitation: representation of Paralympic sports to restore 'normal' life; and 3) Able-bodied sports nationalism: promotion of visual images centered on the bodies of successful athletes where disability has been 'overcome' thanks to technological advances. A Mixed-methods have been used to investigate the field.

Through an interdisciplinarity approach between the sociology of sport, media history, and disability studies, the project is designed to have a sustainable legacy for future sports editions (such as the PG in Milano-Cortina 2026), able to promote a new distinctive sporting culture aim to participation and integration of disabled people through adapted sports.