

Sino-US Competitive Sports for Persons with Disabilities: Historical Evolution and Future Prospects

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Abstract

By reviewing the history and current development of competitive sports for persons with disabilities in China and the United States and summarizing relevant experience, this paper provides a reference for the modernization of China's competitive sports development. Literature retrieval was conducted through platforms such as CNKI, Web of Science, and JSTOR from the inception of each database to November 7, 2024. Chinese search terms included: China's competitive sports, US competitive sports, athletes with disabilities, competitive sports management, and employment of persons with disabilities. English search terms included: disability, disabilities, disabled, special needs, physical activity, exercise, sport. Combined searches were performed for each group of Chinese and English terms, followed by manual screening of included literature to further collect studies meeting the inclusion criteria of this paper.

Keywords

Competitive sports; Current development; Athletes with disabilities.

1. Introduction

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, under the guidance of thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, China has integrated the cause of persons with disabilities into the Five-Sphere Integrated Plan and the Four-Pronged Comprehensive Strategy, adopting effective measures to promote the vigorous development of sports for persons with disabilities [1]. The performance of sports for persons with disabilities has continuously improved. Athletes with disabilities have shown perseverance, strived for excellence, won honors for the country, and inspired society, achieving historic progress in the cause of sports for persons with disabilities.

Competitive sports for persons with disabilities refer to sports competitions participated in by people with physical disabilities, aiming to demonstrate their physical fitness, skills, and spiritual outlook, and to promote social awareness and respect for persons with disabilities. Characterized by equality, inclusion, motivation, and rehabilitation, they provide a platform for persons with disabilities to express themselves, enhance their self-confidence and self-esteem, and facilitate physical and mental rehabilitation and social integration. As a major sports country, the United States is a world leader in advancing the development of sports for persons with disabilities, with sports organizations for persons with disabilities at all levels and in all categories playing an indispensable role. Learning from others' strengths to offset one's weaknesses, summarizing and drawing on US experience is of great significance for China to promote the development of competitive sports.

2. Historical Review of the Development of Competitive Sports for Persons with Disabilities in China and the United States

2.1. Historical Review of China's Competitive Sports for Persons with Disabilities

China's competitive sports for persons with disabilities have evolved from scratch and from weak to strong, achieving remarkable results supported by policies and social attention especially since the reform and opening-up. Generally, they have gone through three stages.

The first stage is the initial development of sports activities for persons with disabilities, from the founding of the People's Republic of China to 1982. During this period, sports activities were mainly held in welfare factories, welfare institutions, special education schools, and some grassroots units, providing opportunities for persons with disabilities to participate in physical exercise, with low social enthusiasm for sports.

The second stage is the formation and development of the cause for persons with disabilities in China. Since the reform and opening-up, sports for persons with disabilities have entered a rapid development track, with domestic sports games for persons with disabilities launched successively, and a large number of persons with disabilities beginning to participate in sports. In 1984, China participated in the 7th Summer Paralympic Games in New York, USA, for the first time. Blind athlete Ping Yali won the first gold medal, achieving China's breakthrough of zero gold medals in the Paralympic Games, marking the official entry of China's sports for persons with disabilities into the international arena.

The third stage is the rapid development of competitive sports for persons with disabilities, starting from the 6th Far East and South Pacific Games for the Disabled (FESPIC Games), the first large-scale international sports event for persons with disabilities hosted by China, until now. Since the 4th FESPIC Games, China has consecutively ranked first in gold medals and total medals [2].

2.2. Historical Review of US Competitive Sports for Persons with Disabilities

The development of competitive sports for persons with disabilities in the United States can be divided into three stages.

The first stage is the origin and early development (1948–1976). Modern sports for persons with disabilities are generally considered to have originated from rehabilitation therapy after World War II. British neurosurgeon Dr. Ludwig Guttmann pioneered the use of sports for the rehabilitation of patients with spinal cord injuries and held the first Wheelchair Games at the hospital in 1948, the predecessor of the Paralympic Games. These games gradually became annual events and attracted participants from other countries [3]. The second stage is the period of organizational and international development. Influenced by international sports for persons with disabilities, the United States gradually attached importance to its domestic development. In the late 1950s, local sports organizations for persons with disabilities were established, which not only provided opportunities for participation but also promoted popularization through regular competitions [4]. Meanwhile, the Stoke Mandeville Games grew into an international event for persons with disabilities. Since 1960, the Paralympic Games have been held every four years in parallel with the Olympic Games, greatly elevating the international status and influence of sports for persons with disabilities.

The third stage has been from the 1980s to the present, when sports for persons with disabilities have been fully integrated into the mainstream sports system. Outstanding performances of athletes with disabilities at home and abroad have improved their social status and strengthened public understanding and respect for this group. For example, top sports leagues such as the US National Football League (NFL) and National Basketball Association

(NBA) have set up special programs and public welfare activities for persons with disabilities. Community-based sports activities for persons with disabilities have also become increasingly diverse, forming a multi-level and multi-dimensional sports ecosystem for persons with disabilities.

3. Comparison of the Current Development of Competitive Sports for Persons with Disabilities in China and the United States

3.1. Goals and Concepts

China has long regarded "winning glory for the country" as the primary goal, forming an ideology where collectivism overrides individualism. While conducive to team cohesion, this concept may restrain individual athletes' initiative. In contrast, the core concept of US competitive sports for persons with disabilities is "freedom and equality", emphasizing individual competitive spirit, which motivates coaches and athletes to participate proactively and advocate a self-driven attitude.

3.2. Sports Management Model

In terms of operation mechanism, China's management system for competitive sports for persons with disabilities is a typical government-led model, consistent with that for able-bodied competitive sports. The government, as the core of the management system, is the main funder and investor, bearing most expenses such as sports funding, training equipment, and salaries and allowances for coaches and related staff. The system consists of two subsystems: governmental and social management. The General Administration of Sport of China holds the supreme leadership and decision-making power, with the China Paralympic Sports Management Center responsible for specific affairs. In the social subsystem, government actions still dominate in substance, guiding the development of sub-organizations including the China Disabled Persons' Sports Association [5].

The US management system for sports for persons with disabilities is mainly composed of social organizations and university departments for sports for persons with disabilities, with the government barely involved in funding. Key bodies include the Paralympic Division of the US Olympic Committee and numerous social organizations: regional sports organizations and community sports clubs collaborate vertically to build a bottom-up pathway for elite Paralympic talent development, covering six stages: recreation, development, selection, elite, national team, and Paralympic competition [6]. The US system is decentralized, emphasizing independent learning and self-reflection, allowing athletes to develop in a relaxed environment.

3.3. Legal Protection

Since the War of Independence, the core discourse of US society has been a strong sense of "rights". A distinctive feature of contemporary American legal culture is the rise of special rights, including the rights of persons with disabilities [7]. The United States has a sound legal system protecting the sports rights of persons with disabilities, most notably the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA requires all public places and sports facilities to meet accessibility standards, ensuring equal participation in sports activities. Schools and community sports programs are also obligated to provide reasonable accommodations and services [8]. Through a series of legislations, the US has safeguarded the rights of persons with disabilities to watch sports, use public sports venues, and compete in the Paralympics, greatly boosting domestic sports for persons with disabilities [9].

3.4. Government Support

The Chinese government attaches great importance to the development of sports for persons with disabilities and incorporates it into the national strategy. Since the successful hosting of

the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games, China has invested heavily in infrastructure construction and policy formulation, designating 45 national sports training bases for persons with disabilities to support competition, training, education, and scientific research, thus improving overall competitive performance. To enhance training conditions and quality, China has established 16 accessible sports bases and developed fitness equipment tailored to the special needs of persons with disabilities [10]. These accessible facilities cover entrances, service desks, restrooms, and other areas, significantly improving the training and living environment for athletes with disabilities.

The US government excels in meta-governance: it enacts laws to clarify the functions and powers of social sports organizations, legitimizes social participation in competitive sports, and grants substantial autonomy to these organizations. The US Olympic Committee, national governing bodies of sports, and the NCAA collaborate equally and check each other, with sound communication and coordination mechanisms; the US Olympic Committee has no dominant power over other organizations [11].

3.5. Athletes

3.5.1. Athlete Training Model

China mainly selects and trains athletes with disabilities through the "whole-nation system", featuring centralized management and early professionalization to ensure top athletes access the best resources and technical support. For instance, China maintains long-term dominance in traditional strong events such as table tennis and badminton through systematic national team training and high-level coaching teams [12].

The United States adopts a "school-sports integration" model to cultivate reserve talents. It integrates academic education and sports training in school and community sports activities, and incorporates talent development into Paralympic training academies at state, national, and international levels. This approach ensures cultural education while making full use of school sports facilities for after-school training, achieving organic integration of the two [12].

3.5.2. Selection and Training

There are two main channels for selecting athletes with disabilities in China: (1) voluntary registration at disability federations; (2) scouting by federation staff at special schools, households of persons with disabilities, and national/regional Paralympic competitions [13].

China's training model has long followed the planned-economy tradition: progression from amateur sports schools to provincial teams and then to the national team. Athletes usually start training at the age of 4–8, with a training span of 8–20 years. The system follows the principles of "unified planning, full organization, and systematic training", advancing step by step across events nationwide with clear goals at each stage.

- Primary training focuses on basic skills and broadens the talent pool to build the third-tier echelon.
- Intermediate training prioritizes technical improvement and supplies reserve talents to higher-level teams.
- Advanced training targets top provincial athletes, including professional club and national team members, representing provincial excellence in international competitions [14].

The United States has unique practices in selection and training, especially valuing veterans with disabilities, who often possess strong discipline and physical fitness suitable for high-intensity training. For example, in para biathlon (cross-country skiing plus shooting), the US tends to select strong athletes with military backgrounds to meet competition requirements [15]. In addition, the US university system provides abundant training and competition opportunities, forming a sound talent development mechanism.

3.5.3. Post-Retirement Employment

The Chinese government highly values the employment of retired athletes with disabilities and has introduced a series of supportive policies. First, it coordinates relevant departments to ensure outstanding athletes receive substantive assistance in continuing education and employment placement, such as special scholarships, adult education, and distance learning to address insufficient educational background [16]. Second, it optimizes the employment environment through legislation to protect employment rights and promote social acceptance. The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities stipulates the proportional employment system: any employer failing to meet the required ratio must pay a disability employment security fund. Meanwhile, national programs have been launched: the Vocational Training Program for Retired Athletes with Disabilities supports career transition [17]; the Program for Recruiting Outstanding Athletes with Disabilities to Universities has enrolled students in sports training at Beijing Sport University since 2015. After completing training, qualified athletes can work in sports-related fields, including coaching, to sustain the development of sports for persons with disabilities.

The United States also has unique advantages in protecting the employment rights of athletes with disabilities. First, legislative protection: the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act serve as cornerstones, prohibiting all forms of employment discrimination and requiring employers to provide reasonable workplace accommodations, ensuring fair competition for jobs [18]. The federal government established the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to manage and allocate funds for vocational training and employment placement. Numerous non-profit organizations and charities provide additional support such as career counseling and skill training. It also advocates an inclusive corporate culture through publicity, education, and policy incentives to encourage enterprises to recruit and retain persons with disabilities, such as implementing disability-inclusive multicultural policies and popularizing the ADA, greatly elevating the status of persons with disabilities in the workplace. Post-retirement employment of athletes with disabilities is a complex social issue involving individual education, social acceptance, and policy support. As influential global countries, China and the United States adopt different strategies and practices. The employment status of athletes with disabilities affects their quality of life, social integration, and family stability, as well as the group's perception of society, social stability, and the sustainable development of sports for persons with disabilities [19].

4. Implications for the Development of Competitive Sports for Persons with Disabilities in China

4.1. Strengthen Social Publicity and Create an Accessible Environment

The all-round development of the cause for persons with disabilities ultimately lies in the all-round development of people, requiring joint efforts of all people including persons with disabilities to advocate the values of equality, integration, and sharing. At present, China's accessible environment construction mainly focuses on physical accessibility such as barrier-free passages and facilities, while there is great demand for social environment development. With China's integration into the international community, discrimination against persons with disabilities has gradually decreased but not been eliminated. For competitive sports for persons with disabilities, insufficient media coverage and low public attention remain challenges. It is necessary to increase publicity, change public perceptions, and avoid misconceptions such as labeling participation as "strong-willed despite disability", which deepens alienation. Creating an equal and integrated social environment requires more than physical accessibility.

4.2. Improve Relevant Laws and Regulations and Perfect the Protection System for Sports for Persons with Disabilities

First, formulate a special law on sports for persons with disabilities. Develop public service policies and regulations adapted to China's economic and social development based on the modes and characteristics of sports for persons with disabilities, conduct legislative research, and further protect the rights to participation, physical education, sports rehabilitation, and free movement. Second, revise existing laws and regulations. Amend laws such as the Sports Law of the People's Republic of China to add special protection clauses for sports for persons with disabilities, ensuring equal rights in sports activities.

4.3. Expand Employment Channels for Athletes with Disabilities

For persons with disabilities, sports rank low in daily needs; they need to make far greater efforts than able-bodied people to gain a foothold in society, prioritizing rehabilitation, employment, and education over sports. Conversely, employment promotes sports participation. First, improve educational levels: advance the policy of exempting outstanding athletes with disabilities from entrance exams for higher education, expand enrollment in secondary vocational schools, and encourage qualified universities to offer majors related to sports for persons with disabilities to improve the quality of talent sources. For athletes in training during compulsory education, ensure school enrollment and completion of all courses. For those who withdraw from training after compulsory education, recommend general senior secondary and higher education. Encourage flexible access to higher education through adult education, distance learning, self-study exams, and the Open University of China. Second, enhance employability: for retired athletes, coordinate vocational colleges to provide education based on disability type, severity, and educational background. Encourage secondary vocational schools under disability federations to admit eligible athletes with favorable conditions to equip them with vocational skills for employment.

5. Conclusion

China and the United States each have distinctive features and advantages in the development of competitive sports for persons with disabilities. Led by the government, China has achieved remarkable results in infrastructure construction and athlete centralized training. The United States excels in social organization participation and legal protection of individual rights.

In terms of social environment, it is necessary to strengthen publicity, build a truly barrier-free society, and change one-sided public perceptions of competitive sports for persons with disabilities. In terms of legal protection, improve laws and regulations to fully safeguard sports rights. In terms of career development, expand employment channels and improve educational levels and employability.

By learning from US experience and improving continuously based on national conditions, China's cause of competitive sports for persons with disabilities will reach new heights, realizing the all-round development of athletes with disabilities and the harmonious progress of sports for persons with disabilities and society as a whole. It will enable competitive sports for persons with disabilities to play a more positive and far-reaching role in promoting social integration, demonstrating self-value, and advancing social civilization and progress.

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