Midland Counties Athletic Association Proposal for the Inclusion of Disabled Athletes in League Matches.

Introduction

Since the London 2012 Paralympics 12 years ago, disability athletics has undergone a renaissance in this country. It has evolved from a social and recreational activity organized by fringe charities; looked down upon its peers and insulated from wider organisation to an accepted and celebrated part of the athletics calendar. Today, disability athletics is embraced by the wider public, and its role models are appreciated on par with seasoned Olympians. Anecdotally I remember an era were many an athletics clubs or competition were unwilling to accept disability athletes citing a lack of experience or an unwillingness for revolutionary change to tradition. Thankfully instances of this are now rare and whilst injustices persist resultant due to practicality butting heads with compassion progress continues to be made. The change in perception of disabled athletes has been spurred on by several factors, including the efforts of National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and associated organizations, funding policies implemented by UK Sport, and the ongoing "Superhuman" media campaigns by Channel 4. Many high-profile associations now include disability sports in their schedules, such as British Universities & Colleges Sport (BUCS), The School Games, and the Commonwealth Games. These events have received much acclaim for fostering the exchange of experiences between disabled and able-bodied groups, significantly enhancing inclusion in wider society.

Nevertheless, due to outdated policy there remains a gap within the framework of athletics in the UK that hinders inclusion, causing a persistent segregation of disabled and abled bodied athletics. This gap stems from British Athletics' performance policies, which focus on developing elite competitors, and the insulated nature of disability sport charities, which lack the resources to influence able-bodied athletics policies. However, whilst this gap stems from this doctrine the reasons for the underrepresentation of disabled athletes in athletics clubs can be summarized by acknowledging that there is no external motivation within club athletics by athletes, coaches or managers to recruit, maintain and progress disabled athletes within the current club structure.

This proposal aims to address this gap by integrating scored disability athletics events into the Midlands league structure, thereby encouraging more inclusive behaviours and improving cohesion between disability and able-bodied athletics.

Proposal

To allow the entry of scored disability athletes into Midlands league competitions, athletes must be of an appropriate age and, when required, must throw the senior weight for their disability category. Inclusion will be implemented as follows:

- Ambulant runners will race alongside their disabled peers and able-bodied competitors within the normal racing timetable, based on their sex. When a guide runner is required, two lanes will be allocated to the athlete.
- Ambulant competitors in field events will compete alongside their disabled peers within the normal field competition pools, based on their sex. Ambulant field competitors will get the

maximum number of throws unless there are more than 8 disabled competitors in the event. If there are more than 8 disabled competitors, all athletes will get 3 attempts and will then be ranked based on their positions, with the top 8 getting an additional 3 attempts.

- Depending on interest and timetabling, wheelchair racers will have the opportunity to compete in at least two races in each match: a sprint and a middle-distance race. These events will be included in the track timetable and can be mixed gender or separated by sex. Match organizers can arrange more wheelchair racing events if the timetable allows.
- If the timetable allows, there is interest, and the track has adequate facilities, match organizers should organize at least one seated throwing event.
- Positioning will be defined by the RAZA points system, with the athlete with the highest score winning the event. Scores can be calculated using an Excel sheet found at (https://www.paralympic.org/athletics/technical-information).
- Scored events will be separated by sex and whether the athlete is ambulant or seated/wheelchair racer. Disabled athletes will only be able to compete in events sanctioned for their class by the International Paralympic Committee.
- Athletes must have at least a national-level classification and are required to inform the match organizer of their classification prior to the match.
- Scoring in the events will depend on the number of disabled competitors. Clubs can field as many disability competitors as they like but will only gain points for the athlete with the highest position.Scoring: 1 Club Match D String = 2
    - Scoring: 2 Club Match D String = 3 / 2
    - Scoring: 3 Club Match D String = 4 / 3 / 2
    - Scoring: 4 Club Match D String = 5 / 4 / 3 / 2
    - Scoring: 5 Club Match D String = 6 / 5 / 4 / 3 / 2
    - Scoring: 6 Club Match D String = 7 / 6 / 5 / 4 / 3 / 2
    - Scoring: 7 Club Match D String = 9 / 7 / 6 / 5 / 4 / 3 / 2
    - Scoring: ≥8 Club Match D String = 11 / 9 / 7 / 6 / 5 / 4 / 3 / 2

Rational

Here we have designed a practical and robust set of rules aimed at maximizing the inclusion of disability athletes of all abilities while minimizing disruption to match and league structures.

Implementing ambulant and wheelchair racing events requires minimal adaptation, primarily needing extra space for additional competitors. Throwing events will need facilities to provide appropriate weights for throwers, which should be standard at venues hosting junior-level competitions. The feasibility of including wheelchair racing events depends on the capacity to accommodate extra races. However, based on the number of athletes, it is encouraged to organize as many wheelchair races as desired by the competitors, within reasonable limits.

Introducing seated throws requires the greatest adaptation and therefore necessitates a compromise. This event primarily needs the availability of tie-downs, space in the event timetable, knowledge of the rules and tie-down procedures, and, in the event club throw, the appropriate implements. As a result, additional assistance from external organizations may be needed for successful implementation. The feasibility of this event depends on the confidence of the organizing team and officials. Consequently, this proposal stipulates that a seated throws event should only be held if all necessary criteria are met. However, this should not deter the integration of disability athletics into the league structure, especially given the minimal adaptation required for ambulant and wheelchair racing events.

While this proposal may seem to significantly increase the number of competitors in the league structure, the actual impact on field sizes will be manageable. Successful implementation is expected to result in a modest rise in disabled participants. Evidence from disability athletics competitions in

the UK shows that even specialized events attract relatively few competitors. For instance, at the 2024 England Athletics Senior Para Athletics Championships, which welcomed all senior disability athletes from the UK and abroad, the most populated running event was the ambulant men's 400m with 13 competitors, and the most populated field event was the ambulant women's shot put with 5 competitors. It is therefore unreasonable to suggest that a greater number of athletes will be at any one midlands league match and is far more realistic to expect an average of an additional 3 competitors per event.

To determine positions, the RAZA points system will be used. This widely recognized system is designed for competitions involving multiple classifications. It assigns points based on how close an athlete's performance is to their classification's world record, with athletes closer to the world record scoring more points. The RAZA points system is easily accessible from any computer and can be downloaded for offline use. It is robust and requires minimal additional data entry.

The scoring system aims to balance several factors, it avoids giving athletes only a token number of points that might dissuade clubs from fielding them, while also preventing a single athlete from significantly affecting league results by entering multiple events highlighted previously. The scoring system also considers the potential low attendance many of these events. The scoring system is based on the B string scoring system currently in place but takes a "places from last approach" and is highly dependent on field size. A "no points for last place rules" have been omitted as this discourages clubs from fielding athletes if they are the only competitor for an event or they are assured last place.

Benefits

National perception

Successfully integrating disability athletics into the Midland Counties Track & Field League will be a landmark achievement for the Midland's Counties Athletics Association. This move will showcase the association's commitment to inclusion and position it as a role model for other athletics organizations to emulate.

Coach Club Athlete Development

Clubs will be incentivized to develop and recruit disabled athletes, leading to a more inclusive environment. Coaches will be expected to acquire the necessary skills to effectively train disabled athletes, which will enhance coaching quality for disability sports across the Midlands. This, in turn, will improve talent identification systems for disability sports in the region and boost disabled athlete retention.

Inclusivity

An inclusive policy fosters stronger connections between disability athletics and able-bodied athletics. Disabled athletes within clubs will have the opportunity to work towards common goals alongside their able-bodied peers, and successes will be shared across both groups. This integration will enable disabled athletes to contribute positively to club success and feel more connected to the team. Meanwhile, able-bodied athletes will develop a greater appreciation for their disabled peers, and the social interactions within the club structure will promote an inclusive mindset among younger athletes.