SPORT, DISABILITY, AND WOMEN: A STUDY OF ORGANISED SWEDISH DISABILITY SPORT IN 1969-2012

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Abstract

Introduction. The purpose of this article is first to provide a picture of disability sport in general and second to increase knowledge of sport for women with disabilities. Material and methods. The study method is a qualitative text analysis of organised Swedish disability sport and of media reporting of the Paralympics. The theory is based on three conceptual pairs: integration and inclusion, the medical and social models, and the traditional and progressive models of media coverage. Results. The results show that SHIF strove principally not for inclusion but for integration. Further, women in SHIF led a hidden existence, except for the period between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, when initiatives were taken to improve their position. In other respects, this was a non-issue. Moreover, the medical model was dominant, and sport was viewed above all as rehabilitating. Finally, mainstream media reporting was traditional, namely Paraolympic participants were portrayed first and foremost as people with disabilities and secondarily as sports practitioners. Conclusion. Swedish disability sport during this period was not included in the sports movement in general and integration work was, for the SHIF board, subordinate to the gender aspect.

Key words: disability sport, women, integration, inclusion, medical and social model, media

Introduction

Our knowledge of disability sport in general is rather limited compared with other sports, and even more so regarding sportswomen with disabilities. One reason for this is that organised disability sport is a relatively new phenomenon. In Sweden, the Swedish Sports Organization for the Disabled (SHIF), or the Swedish Parasport Federation, as it is called today, was established 1962. Another reason is that historically, women's sport has not been researched to the same extent as men's. The aim of this article is twofold: firstly, to provide a picture of Swedish disability sport in general, the way it was organised, and the issues that were pursued. Sweden is an interesting study object because the country was internationally fairly quick out of the blocks regarding disability sport and Paralympic participation. For instance, Sweden was one of the twenty-two countries that participated in the first Paralympics in 1960, and in 1976, it hosted the first Winter Paralympics. Moreover, SHIF, in terms of temporal and discipline development, corresponds to how research has described Western progress.

The second aim is to increase the knowledge of sport for women with disabilities by examining women's place in organised disability sport and by analysing media reporting of both male and female Paralympic participation. The research period starts in 1969, when SHIF was founded (in 2015, it changed its name to the Swedish Parasport Federation), and ends with the 2012 Paralympics.

Background

Disability sport has grown concurrently with the generally increasing acceptance and integration of people with disabilities in our society. Historically, disability sport can be traced all the way back to antiquity, when in the fifth-century BC, the father of medicine, Hippocrates, used, for instance, horse-riding as a treatment method to strengthen patients' muscles, improve their condition, and stimulate their minds. In modern times, German sportsmen with impaired hearing formed an organisation in Berlin in 1888, and the first international competitions for people with impaired hearing were held in France in 1924. Furthermore, organised rehabilitative sport for people with disabilities was more or less necessitated by World Wars I and II as well as the polio epidemics. Sport became a common form in the international exchanges between disabled soldiers, which constitutes the basis of today's disability sport.

Of special importance in this context was Stoke Mandeville Hospital, which was inaugurated in 1944 in Aylesbury, England. At this specialist spinal injuries hospital, competitive sport came to play an important role because it was a key part of the rehabilitation, especially the medical rehabilitation. However, there was also a socio-psychological idea behind it: sport could make hospital life slightly easier to endure. In 1948, the first Stoke Mandeville Games were held, and fourteen British war veterans, of whom two were women, competed against each other in archery. In the 1950s, the number of disciplines grew to include, for example, netball, throwing the javelin, and snooker.