

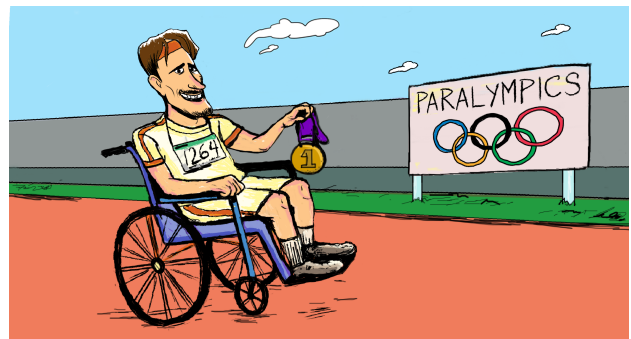
## **Something Fishy at the Paralympics**

Some of sports' most inspiring and heart-warming stories have come from the Special Olympics (for athletes with intellectual disabilities) and the Paralympics (for athletes with intellectual impairments and visual or physical disabilities). The Paralympic games are held in parallel with the Olympics every four years and have become a very big deal. *Sports Illustrated* reports that "Paralympic sport has grown into big business, with countries and sponsors pouring in millions of dollars to fund and promote athletes whose stories highlight the best of humanity."<sup>1</sup> Australian Paralympians are sometimes provided "tens of thousands of dollars in government funding and other perks, including college scholarships, vehicles, and housing."<sup>2</sup> In the 2020 Paralympics, U.S. athletes were slated to receive \$37,500 for each gold medal they won.

Unfortunately, sometimes Paralympians cheat much like regular Olympians have been known to do—they take illicit drugs<sup>3</sup> or they drive their blood pressure up ("boosting") to drive heart rate and improve performance.<sup>4</sup> And, unsurprisingly, the Russians systematically cheat in the Paralympics just as they do in the traditional Olympics.<sup>5</sup> But the most significant cheating involves gaming the International Paralympic Committee's (IPC's) classification system.

The IPC classifies the disabilities of competitors in order to provide a structure for competition. Fair competition thrives only if athletes have similar levels of disabilities, so athletes are grouped into classes based on "how much their impairment affects fundamental activities in each specific sport and discipline."<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, by pretending to have a more serious disability than they actually do, athletes could convince officials to group them with athletes of lesser abilities. And there is evidence that this has happened. For example, among the wrongdoing<sup>7</sup>:



- Swimmers tape their arms for days, removing the tape just before classification. Because of the taping, they are unable to fully extend their arms.
- Athletes arrive for the classification in a wheelchair when they do not otherwise use wheelchairs, or wearing braces that they normally do not wear.
- Athletes submerge in cold water or roll in snow soon before classification to worsen muscle tone.
- Athletes intentionally perform below their ability ("tanking") in assessment races.

- Remarkably, even the shortening and removal of limbs has reportedly occurred.

The most infamous example of Paralympic cheating was by Spain's basketball team at the 2000 Sydney Paralympics: none of the 12 players was mentally disabled as represented.<sup>8</sup> Recently several Paralympians, especially Para-swimmers, have claimed that cheating the classification system is "epidemic."<sup>9</sup>

After the Spanish basketball team was finally punished in 2017, the IPC removed basketball as a Paralympic sport until officials could prove to the IPC's satisfaction that they had the classification problem under control.<sup>10</sup>

And, after believable allegations of widespread classification cheating among Australian Paralympians,<sup>11</sup> Australia has launched an online course that is mandatory for all its Paralympic athletes. The course outlines the classification process and requirements for all staff, coaches and athletes, explains penalties for noncompliance, and trains everyone on ethical decision making.<sup>12</sup>

At this time, the 2020 Tokyo Paralympics, along with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, have been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether or not the increased visibility (and awareness) of Paralympic cheating changes the way these games are played in the future remains to be seen.

**Discussion Questions**

1. Are you surprised to learn that some of these inspiring Paralympians are cheating? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think some Paralympians cheat?
3. What psychological biases, social pressures or rationalizations might these athletes employ to support their decision to cheat? Explain.
4. Why do we seem to have cheating in the Paralympics, but not the Special Olympics?
  - a. Can the video on "[incentive gaming](#)" shed some light on this question?
5. The coach who recruited the 2000 Spanish Paralympic basketball team has reportedly built a fortune by collecting state money aimed to support disabled athletes.<sup>13</sup> Does the self-serving bias play a role in motivating cheating? How so? By the coaches? By the athletes? Explain.
6. It has been reported that the consciences of the 12 non-disabled semi-professional Spanish basketball players who entered the Sydney Paralympics of 2000 (and won the gold medal) were eased by the President of Spain's Federation for Mentally Disabled Sports. He told them that fake Paralympians were commonplace in every sport at the Paralympics.<sup>14</sup> Does this sound like the conformity bias in action? Why or why not?
  - a. Is this assertion defensible intellectually, or is it just a massive rationalization?
7. It has been suggested that cheating by athletes in the Paralympics reinforces a stereotype held by many that people often pretend to be disabled in order to qualify for government payments and are therefore cheats?<sup>15</sup> Is reinforcement of this false narrative a damaging result of the cheating scandal? Why or why not?
  - a. Do you think this negative outcome was foreseen by the wrongdoers?
  - b. Can you think of other collateral impacts?
8. It has been argued that because the Paralympics are about winning (just like all sports) and that sometimes people in other sports cheat, it is no big deal that Paralympians cheat. Indeed, "[s]ome Paralympians and disability-rights speakers take doping scandals as positive news. They say it proves disabled people can achieve the same things as anyone else, including cheating. People, they argue, can identify more with a role model who has made mistakes."<sup>16</sup> Do you find this a convincing argument? Explain.
9. Paralympian gold medal winner Bethany Woodward gave back her gold medal in the relays because one of her teammates was insufficiently disabled and therefore gave her team an unfair advantage. Woodward said, "Paralympic sport is about disabled people pushing themselves and overcoming their disability. Handing back this medal will mean all the medals I

won are to do with me, my cerebral palsy and my strength.”<sup>17</sup> This act has been mocked by Jim Moore, who wrote: “Para sport is either about inspiration porn, and giving ‘special people’ a little something to do in between putting us all back in a box. Or it’s about what all other sport is about: winning.”<sup>18</sup> Do you agree with Moore? Do you admire Woodward? Both? Neither? Support your position.

10. Athletes like Bethany Woodward and U.S. Para-swimmer Jessica Long have been trying to call attention to cheating in the Paralympics. But they have been criticized by fellow Para-athletes for causing a furor that threatens to tear the sport apart and thereby damage it irrevocably.<sup>19</sup> Some think that Woodward and Long should just shut up. Do you? Why or why not?
11. Are the steps being taken by the IPC (banning basketball until the sport can clean up its act) and individual countries like Australia (with its online training course) necessary? Are they sufficient? Explain your reasoning.

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**End Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Sanchez, *Dirty Pool at the Paralympics*, *Sports Illustrated*, March 2020, at <https://www.si.com/olympics/2020/03/03/paralympiccheating>.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Sanchez, *Dirty Pool at the Paralympics*, *Sports Illustrated*, March 2020, at <https://www.si.com/olympics/2020/03/03/paralympiccheating>.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Collier, *Most Paralympians Inspire, But Others Cheat*, *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, Sept. 9, 2008, at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2527388/>.

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Carpenter, *The Dark Side of the Paralympics: Cheating Through “Boosting,”* *LawInSport*, Aug. 27, 2012, at <https://www.lawinsport.com/more/blogs/kevin-carpenter/item/the-dark-side-of-the-paralympics-cheating-through-boosting>.

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Ruiz, *Russia Is Banned from Paralympics, Again, for Doping*, *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 2018, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/29/sports/paralympics-russia-doping.html>.

<sup>6</sup> International Paralympic Committee, *November 2015 IPC Athlete Classification Code* (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Sanchez, *Dirty Pool at the Paralympics*, *Sports Illustrated*, March 2020, at <https://www.si.com/olympics/2020/03/03/paralympiccheating>.

<sup>8</sup> Simon Tomlinson, *Are These the Biggest Cheats in Sporting History? Staggering Story of the Healthy Spanish Basketball Team Who Pretended to Be Mentally Handicapped to Win Paralympic Gold*, *The*

Daily Mail, Oct. 14, 2013, at <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2458715/Spanish-basketball-team-pretended-disabled-win-Paralympic-gold.html>

<sup>9</sup> Robert Sanchez, *Dirty Pool at the Paralympics*, *Sports Illustrated*, March 2020, at <https://www.si.com/olympics/2020/03/03/paralympiccheating>.

<sup>10</sup> Craig Lord, *Jessica Long on the Poison Pool in Paralympic Swimming Where 'Classification Cheats Prosper*, ' *Swimming World Magazine*, March 5, 2020, at <https://www.swimmingworldmagazine.com/news/jessica-long-on-the-poison-pool-in-paralympic-swimming-where-classification-cheats-prosper/>.

<sup>11</sup> Scot Spits, *Misrepresenting Disability on a Par with Doping: Paralympics, Australia*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 31, 2019, at <https://www.smh.com.au/sport/misrepresenting-disability-on-a-par-with-doping-paralympics-australia-20190731-p52cm2.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Chris Dutton, *Paralympics Australia Launches Crackdown on Cheats*, *Canberra Times*, May 29, 2019, at <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6188557/para-sport-launch-cheating-crackdown/#gsc.tab=0>.

<sup>13</sup> Alex Dunham, 'Stop Playing Well, They'll Know You're Not Disabled,' *The Local*, Oct. 11, 2013, at <https://www.thelocal.es/20131011/stop-playing-well-theyll-know-youre-not-disabled>.

<sup>14</sup> Alex Dunham, 'Stop Playing Well, They'll Know You're Not Disabled,' *The Local*, Oct. 11, 2013, at <https://www.thelocal.es/20131011/stop-playing-well-theyll-know-youre-not-disabled>.

<sup>15</sup> James Moore, *The Paralympics Cheating Scandal Proves that British Para-sport is a Victim of Its Own Success*, *The Independent*, Oct. 31, 2017, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/paralympics-cheating-scandal-british-athletes-success-disabilities-classification-a8029866.html>.

<sup>16</sup> BBC, *Paralympics: Olympic Implications*, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/sport/aspects/paralympics.shtml>.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Grant, 'I'm Handing Back My Medal': Is Paralympic Sport Classification Fit for Purpose?, *BBC.com*, Sept. 18, 2017, at <https://www.bbc.com/sport/disability-sport/41253174>.

<sup>18</sup> James Moore, *Why is Anyone Shocked that Paralympians Have Been Accused of Cheating?*, *The Independent*, Sept. 23, 2017, at <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/paralympics-para-athletes-doping-cheating-classification-paralympians-a7962796.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Sanchez, *Dirty Pool at the Paralympics*, *Sports Illustrated*, March 2020, at <https://www.si.com/olympics/2020/03/03/paralympiccheating>.