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## Perceptions of Athletes in Disabled and Non-Disabled Sport Contexts: A Descriptive Qualitative Research Study

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## Perceptions of Athletes in Disabled and Non-Disabled Sport Contexts: A Descriptive Qualitative Research Study

### Abstract

The term *supercrip* suggests extraordinary feats but is sometimes applied to any proficiency demonstrated by an athlete with a disability. This use of the term potentially undermines spectator appreciation for achievements of the upper echelon of disability sports participants. Prior disability sport researchers have suggested that a comparison of individuals' perceptions of athletic heroes with and without disabilities has potential to help disability sport marketers counter the supercrip stereotype. The purpose of this research was to explore differences in perceptions by comparing participant descriptions of role models with and without disabilities. Research participants, who consisted of undergraduate students at a large southwestern university, viewed video recorded scenarios of athletes with and without disabilities and participated in focus group interviews. Our findings supported those of prior researchers who suggested that participants were most likely to describe relatable circumstances as inspiring. Our participants also critiqued the depth of the stories presented in the scenarios based on their prior exposure to disability narratives. Disability sport marketers might benefit from emphasizing multiple elements of athletes' backgrounds to appeal to potential consumers. Marketers should also consider that consumers might have developed preexisting expectations about style of presentation of athlete interest stories.

### Keywords

Disability Sport, Sport Marketing, Focus Groups, Qualitative Research, Descriptive Research

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*The term supercrip suggests extraordinary feats but is sometimes applied to any proficiency demonstrated by an athlete with a disability. This use of the term potentially undermines spectator appreciation for achievements of the upper echelon of disability sports participants. Prior disability sport researchers have suggested that a comparison of individuals' perceptions of athletic heroes with and without disabilities has potential to help disability sport marketers counter the supercrip stereotype. The purpose of this research was to explore differences in perceptions by comparing participant descriptions of role models with and without disabilities. Research participants, who consisted of undergraduate students at a large southwestern university, viewed video recorded scenarios of athletes with and without disabilities and participated in focus group interviews. Our findings supported those of prior researchers who suggested that participants were most likely to describe relatable circumstances as inspiring. Our participants also critiqued the depth of the stories presented in the scenarios based on their prior exposure to disability narratives. Disability sport marketers might benefit from emphasizing multiple elements of athletes' backgrounds to appeal to potential consumers. Marketers should also consider that consumers might have developed preexisting expectations about style of presentation of athlete interest stories. Keywords: Disability Sport, Sport Marketing, Focus Groups, Qualitative Research, Descriptive Research*

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The term *supercrip* has been used to describe media depictions of individuals with disabilities who achieve impressive feats (Shapiro, 1994) although often these feats would be considered typical for persons without disabilities (Hardin & Hardin, 2004). Cherney, Lindemann, and Hardin (2015) described the supercrip as an individual who “accomplishes what is generally seen as the “impossible” in light of the individual’s bodily limitations” (p. 7). According to Silva and Howe (2012), “social expectations are so low for individuals with a disability that any positive action may induce praise from others” (p. 175). However, Cherney et al. asserted that much prior supercrip research has “stagnated to the point of merely reproducing evidence” (p. 8) of the prevalence of the stereotype in media, therefore, a meaningful approach to supercrip research, that might reveal alternative ways to frame athletes with disabilities, is to compare this stereotype with “the hero stereotype that pervades coverage of nondisabled athletes” (p. 8). This purpose of this research study, designed in response to this recommendation, was to explore the impact of disability on perception of elite athletes, by comparing qualitative differences in participants’ responses to video scenarios featuring athletes with and without disabilities. A secondary aim of this research was to provide recommendations for marketers of disability sporting events to broaden the reach of these events. To provide a specific framework for this comparison, we chose to use concept of inspiration due to the frequent association of inspiration with disability sport (e.g., Berger, 2008; Boyce, 2015; De Jong, 2010; Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Mano, 2006). The specific research

questions we addressed were: (1) How do participants describe the inspirational potential of athletes with or without disabilities and (2) How do participants describe accomplishments of athletes with or without disabilities?

## **Background**

### **Perceptions of Disability and Sport**

Perceptions of people with disabilities vary based on the type of disability and the experiences and education level of those making judgments. Negative attitudes have been identified in both those who provide services for individuals with disabilities and those who have disabilities (Antonak & Livneh, 2000). However, athletes with disabilities comprise a subgroup that might be viewed in a more positive way (Silva & Howe, 2012). Berger (2008) suggested that a primary reason why people with disabilities choose to participate in sport is as a response to poor social perceptions. Although Tynedal and Wolbring (2013) asserted that the negative tone of some media coverage of disability sport might serve to deter disability sports participation, Kittson, Gainforth, Edwards, Bolkowy, and Latimer-Cheung (2013) suggested that increasing visible sport and exercise participation by those with disabilities could help decrease stigma and improve perceptions of disability in general. Silva and Howe (2012) similarly asserted that athletes with disabilities who compete at elite levels have potential to positively impact social perceptions of disability, while cautioning that continuing media focus on “distorted assumptions” (p. 175), including those suggested by the supercrip label, might limit this change potential.

### **Inspiration and Sport Marketing**

Thrash and Elliot (2003) defined inspiration as an external experience that influences an observer to the extent that he or she begins to act in a different way. According to Thrash and Elliot (2004), inspiration is most commonly associated with a role model, such as a leader or celebrity. Lockwood and Kunda (1997) found that research participants were more likely to respond to role models they could identify more closely with. In sports contexts, the traditional expectation is that the inspired will change (increase) his or her sports participation behavior as a result of inspiration derived from consuming elite sports.

Despite the suggestion of relationship between disabled sports and inspiration we identified above, few researchers have published findings from empirical studies designed to systematically examine this relationship. We identified three studies in which researchers assessed the inspiration potential of athletes with disabilities. In two of those studies, researchers focused on perception of athletes with disabilities by others with disabilities. De Jong et al. (2010), concluded that elite athletes with disabilities were role models that inspired participation in non-elite athletes, although Berger (2008) described how improvements in competitiveness of a men’s university wheelchair basketball team resulted in a program that continued to inspire those who wanted to compete on an elite level but “alienated the broader disability community” (Berger, 2008, p. 659). Cottingham, Gearity, and Byon (2013) interviewed disability sport marketers regarding promotion of athletes with disabilities, and concluded that marketers viewed promotional efforts as primarily focused on promotion of athleticism of players. Marketers’ opinions varied regarding the appropriateness and potential of additional marketing focus on the inspirational aspects associated with athletes’ disabilities.

Spectator inspiration is also an occasional focus of sport marketing research conducted around elite, non-disability sporting events. Ramchandani, Kokolakis, and Coleman (2014) surveyed participants who attended single events and concluded that degree of inspiration

depended on both individual and event-related factors. Mackintosh, Darko, Rutherford, and Wilkins (2015) used video diaries to qualitatively explore the inspiration impact of the 2012 London Olympic Games on English family groups. According to Mackintosh et al., despite the UK government's stated ambition to use Olympic success to inspire greater participation, within the families participating in this research, financial insecurity, and how parents facilitated sport and recreation opportunities were the primary factors that directly influenced children's sports participation during the 2012 games. De Bosscher, Sotiriadou, and Van Bottenburg (2013) suggested that the participation inspiration potential resulting from sports consumption is not as automatic as once assumed, and asserted that further research into the nature of the relationship is warranted.

## **Summary**

Our review of previously published literature revealed a small number of examples of systematic assessment of the inspiration potential of athletes with or without disabilities although we did not identify any previously published comparisons between athletes with and without disabilities, or attempts to gauge inspiration potential of athletes with disabilities on participants or spectators without disabilities, or the reverse. Additionally, based on the findings of De Bosscher et al. (2013), Mackintosh et al. (2015), and Ramchandani et al. (2014) there might be other mediating factors within the inspiration to participation relationship. Therefore, we aimed to add to the current body of knowledge by exploring how participants describe inspiration potential related to athletes with and without disabilities. We also intended to further explore the influence of the supercrip image, by comparing participants' qualitative perceptions of similar accomplishments when those accomplishments were ascribed to athletes with or without disabilities.

## **Methods**

### **The Researchers**

Both authors have academic training and teaching experience in disability-adapted sport or recreation. The first author has applied experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities and was attracted to this project due to both subject matter and the research design. The second author has extensive experience as a participant, coach, and researcher of both recreational and professional sport for persons with physical disabilities, and was responsible for conceptualizing the research. While we agree on the importance of disability studies research, and have overlap in our educational background, we work in different disciplines and differ to some extent in our worldview. We believe those differences work to counter bias in this and other work. Both authors have completed coursework in qualitative methods and have participated in prior qualitative research projects. We collaboratively drafted the manuscript, and we independently or collaboratively contributed to other segments of the research as described below. A University Institutional Review Board approved the research prior to implementation.

### **Focus Groups**

Because our goal is to provide depth to current knowledge, a qualitative and exploratory approach is appropriate. We chose to use focus groups because, according to Barbour (2007), group interviews have potential to provide better "access to 'real-life' social constructions of meaning" (p. 46) when compared to individual interviews.

In order to prevent inconsistent participant responses to written or spoken words or phrases such as disability, athlete with disability, or wheelchair athlete, the several scenarios were prepared in video format. Presentation of information in this way is likewise consistent with the aims of the original *focused* group interviews, described by Merton, Fiske, and Kendall (1990) as including the desire to explore the perceptions of multiple individuals exposed to the same experience or information.

### *Video scenarios*

The second author scripted and produced seven brief videos that depicted variations of a scenario about a table tennis player named Rich. In four videos, the table tennis player used a wheelchair; in the other three, the table tennis player had no visible disability. Table tennis was chosen because it is an Olympic and Paralympic sport that requires minimal disability accommodation. Additionally, the nature of the play area is such that both the athlete and the wheelchair, when used, can be clearly seen. We identified and incorporated a range of other challenges, including difficult family circumstances and struggle to gain sport proficiency, in both with and without disability scenarios. We chose simple challenges we believed our participants would understand and potentially relate to, in order to explore their responses to circumstances other than disability that might provide sources of identification or empathy for the participants.

The same actor portrayed the athlete in all seven videos. A voiceover announcer played the role of the coach in each video and described the athlete and his life circumstances. Each video closed with Rich's direct appeal to the audience to support him and the national team. Only a single video included the narrator's specific reference to the athlete's disability; in this video, the scenario featured an injury-causing accident. Descriptions of each video scenario are listed in Appendix A.

### *Interview guide*

We collaboratively developed an interview guide based on a review of prior literature about inspiration and disability sport. The interview guide is contained in Appendix B.

### *Participants*

The second author recruited undergraduate students from a university in the southwestern United States. Course instructors provided students with a basic description of the research and provided contact information so students could request more information or volunteer to participate. Students were given extra credit for participation, and course instructors offered students alternative equivalent extra credit opportunities to prevent any suggestion of coercion. We did not identify a specific priority population for this research study and hoped within a university setting to recruit typical students so approached instructors of general education courses. We were guided by Merton et al. (1990) and targeted 10 to 12 students per group interview as those authors recommended. The initial number of students who expressed interest provided between 6 and 9 participants per group, although we experienced dropout at two stages. Many students did not complete the consent process. Following this, several students who consented did not show up for their scheduled interview session. We completed all group interviews with those who attended although we repeated one video as described below.

The authors or research assistants reviewed consent with each student participant; each participant signed and received a copy of a consent letter. A total of 15 female and 12 male

students participated. The authors did not gather more specific demographic data from participants because there was no intent to use this information in analysis. Although it was not made part of the selection criteria, the moderator did not observe any visible injury or disability among student participants at the time of the interviews, and no student volunteered that he or she had a disability.

### *Moderator*

The focus group moderator was also an undergraduate student who worked as a research assistant with the second author. According to Patton (2002) and Makosky Daley et al. (2010), use of a peer moderator can contribute to the comfort level of the group and enhance the depth of information provided. The first author provided the student moderator with training and support including practice interview opportunities and feedback throughout the course of data collection.

### *Sessions*

Groups met in a classroom on the university campus at a mutually convenient time. The moderator began the session by introducing herself and introducing participants. She also explained that participants would view a video and then be asked to respond to questions; participants were asked to take turns speaking and requested to avoid cross talk to the extent possible. After the initial session orientation the moderator played the video without making any specific introductory comments. After the video ended, the moderator again made no comments about the video but began each group interview with the same global question (“What can you tell me about the video?”). The moderator proceeded through the interview guide items, using prompts as needed. The moderator allowed the group discussion to flow but also solicited comments from less-responsive participants.

Participants were divided in order to provide a target of four to six per session, although there were several absentee participants. Due to concerns about conditioning, each group viewed only one of the seven video scenarios. A total of eight sessions were held in order to repeat one of the seven sessions that initially had only one participant. The responses from the single participant session were combined with the data from the repeat session. Of the seven group interview sessions, one had five participants; three had four participants; two had three participants, and one had two participants. Sessions ranged in length from 13:45 (the single participant session) to 29:46 with an average duration of 19:48.

### **Data Preparation and Analysis**

Group interviews were audio recorded by the moderator. The original recording files were provided to the first author through use of a secure storage website. The first author transcribed all audio recordings using transcription software, headphones, and a foot pedal, and referred to content focused transcription guidelines provided by Dresing, Pehl, and Schmieder (2013). Another student research assistant and the focus group moderator checked all typed transcripts for accuracy. Several minor corrections were identified and communicated via telephone to the first author, who incorporated the corrections into transcripts prior to analysis.

Focus group research designs are not associated with a specific analytical process, so to most appropriately address the research questions for this exploratory study, the authors chose to use a qualitative descriptive (Sandelowski, 2000) approach to data analysis. Per Merton et al. (1990), the goal of a focused interview is “to elicit as complete a report as possible of what was involved in the experience of a particular situation” (p. 21). According to

Sandelowski, researchers using a qualitative descriptive approach remain closer to the data, striving to produce “an accurate accounting” (p. 337) that reflects the general consensus of participant responses and researchers’ understanding of those responses. We believe the similarity in these two expressions provides support for our use of a descriptive analysis approach with these data.

We used Chenail’s (2012) “meaningful qualitative elements” (p. 266) as initial units of analysis. We conducted all stages of coding in Microsoft ® Word, using the commenting function to identify excerpts and assign codes. As we read the transcripts, we identified each chunk of meaning and assessed whether it addressed our research questions. We used open coding, described by Gibbs (2007) as “the opposite of starting with a given list of codes” (p. 45), because in open coding, the researcher derives codes from selected data as excerpts are selected. We chose open coding because we believed it allowed us to remain open to simile, metaphor, slang, malapropisms, or other ways different participants might describe similar things. Our use of open coding also allowed us to identify and tag information that did not strictly address our research questions but might signify other patterns of potential interest.

We structured our open coding through select processes of first cycle and second cycle coding described by Saldaña (2013). We also created analytic memos to record impressions of the data and track analysis decisions. We undertook this to contribute to quality control and provide documents for our audit trail. Throughout our coding and analysis, we reviewed and discussed the stages of analysis to improve quality control by capturing what we felt were the core findings relevant to the research questions. We also sought to identify auxiliary findings that clarified the core findings or provided direction for additional research.

For first cycle coding, we selected excerpts of text and assigned code labels consisting of words or phrases that served to summarize the data while retaining as much of the flavor of the excerpt as we were able to. Our goal for this stage was to reduce the data corpus while retaining the essence. Additionally, as Gibbs noted, coding is a tool for “methodical retrieval of thematically related sections of the text,” (p. 48), so we expected our first cycle coding to aid us in our second cycle coding. We did not actively try to match coded excerpts with prior excerpts in this stage but rather attempted to represent each excerpt with an appropriate code.

We conducted first cycle coding using descriptive and *in vivo* coding schemes (Saldaña, 2013). We chose descriptive coding due to the descriptive nature of analysis. We found *in vivo* coding additionally useful for instances in which we felt participants’ actual words provided superior codes to any we could develop.

We conducted second cycle pattern coding using the first cycle codes as data. Saldaña (2013) described pattern coding as bundling related codes to derive a summarizing code that serves “as a stimulus to develop a statement that describes a major theme, a pattern of action, a network of interrelationships, or a theoretical construct from the data” (p. 212). Our pattern codes comprised bundles of first cycle codes that we believed formed logical clusters based on similar meaning. We began with a list of first cycle codes, and cut and pasted to place like codes together. We repeated this process until we were satisfied that we had condensed the codes into an exhaustive set of pattern codes. During this stage, many first cycle codes were condensed into 11 pattern codes.

We engaged in one final process of aggregation to derive broader themes from the pattern codes. According to Saldaña (2013), a theme is “an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection” (p. 175). We derived themes from the pattern codes by testing different clusters of the patterns for fit, referring back to the original context of data excerpts and analytic memos to provide clarification when needed, until we were satisfied we had created an exhaustive set of themes that represented the data in a more abstract way but remained clear to our goal to describe findings in a primarily descriptive way.



Sandelowski (2000) noted that descriptive analysis regularly includes the practice of combining tools from other qualitative approaches. In this instance, to enhance the authors' ability to organize, digest, and present the data, two data interpretation tools were adapted from alternative qualitative research designs and also applied to these data. Among procedures for interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) described use of a theme table that includes themes and supporting data. According to the criteria outlined by Smith (2010) for interview research with four to eight participants, themes should be represented by at least three participants; for this group interview research, we re-interpreted this criterion to require representation from at least three of eight groups to verify a theme. Our primary goal for use of the theme table was as a means of validating the themes developed in the coding processes described above, as these represented multiple stages of data reduction, so were in some ways quite "far" from the original data. We acknowledge that this approach represents a quantization of qualitative data analysis, and we leave it to our readers to determine to what extent they believe representation by more groups adds additional support for the presented themes.

Yin (2009) described use of a "word table" (p. 158) in case study research to present a concise comparison of multiple cases. Unlike the theme table, we did not create the word table with the results of our initial coding processes. Instead, we derived the information by repeating first cycle coding, this time coding data three a priori codes. We used this tool to compare the responses of each group based on descriptions of the athlete, perceptions of the athlete's accomplishments, and how each athlete was viewed in terms of being an inspirational role model, which represent our three research questions. Although we did not employ a case study design, we determined that this process from that approach provided us with a helpful visual and organizational tool for data management and interpretation. Both the word and theme tables were particularly helpful for the focus group moderator, who had limited prior qualitative data analysis experience, but actively participated in review and commenting on the stages of analysis. We include these tables because we believed this presentation might likewise be helpful for our readers.

## Results

The findings from this research project are presented in two parts. The first part describes thematic analysis that reflects composite data from all seven distinct groups/scenarios and incorporates the information developed through the coding process and supported by the theme table. The second part is a presentation of the comparative analysis, which focuses on the differences between groups, supplemented by information adapted from our word table.

### Thematic Analysis

*Like inspires like.* The first developed theme related primarily to the first research question and was titled *like inspires like*. Several participants believed that Rich with a disability would be most inspirational to other wheelchair users. According to one participant, Rich's inspirational potential would have "a more dominant effect on the people that have already experienced the same or similar situation." Another participant had a similar response: "I think he would inspire mainly those in a wheelchair. Just because they're going through the same thing, and they might not know what to do." A third participant personalized this thought: "Very inspirational, especially if I was handicapped [sic]."

One participant described Rich with a disability as most likely to be viewed as inspirational by "other ping pong players." Another participant who thought ping pong was a

sport that relied more on intellect than strength extended the inspiration potential of Rich without disability to include any “who focus more on the mental aspect of sports than physical.”

This theme extended to other aspects of the scenarios. A version of Rich with a disability that was raised in foster care was described by one participant as “really motivational for kids coming from shelters or foster care.”

*Determinism versus self-determined.* Data included under the second theme, titled *determinism versus self-determined*, primarily addressed the second research question. Participants frequently provided examples that demonstrated that the value they placed on Rich’s accomplishments were dependent on how much control they felt Rich had over conditions. When Rich was described as having a family background that included high-performing athletes, this was seen as diminishing his accomplishment, and, by extension, his inspirational potential. Participants who viewed Rich with or without a disability expressed this view. One participant who viewed Rich with a disability stated, “The fact that he came from a good family who had privileges, it kind of is less than someone who struggled or those whose parents didn’t have the money to put them in sports.” Another noted that Rich without disability under the same circumstances was likely to have “less of an impact” on his sport, and be someone others “might not be able to relate to” because of his background.

Participants had a different response to one pair of scenarios that depicted Rich who overcame lack of talent through hard work. One participant noted the fact that Rich “worked for every single thing, that’s what makes it impressive. Because if he was a prodigy, it wouldn’t be.”

Participants also described how the cause of Rich’s disability would impact their responses to his accomplishments. When Rich’s disability was attributed to the negligence of another, one participant noted that Rich is inspirational “because it wasn’t something he chose to do, it was someone else that caused the paralysis; I think it would be a different story if he put himself in that situation.” In a scenario that did not address the cause of Rich’s disability, a participant considered alternatives: “I wonder if he was born like that, or did he get in an accident when he was 17; that could change perception a little bit.”

*Selling the story.* In addition to considering Rich in each scenario, the participants considered the content of the videos themselves, often in comparison with their prior exposure to athlete stories. The theme that contains these data was titled *selling the story*. When Rich with a disability experienced growing up in foster care, one participant noted that these factors combined to “also make a good story, just because it’s one more obstacle he had that most kids don’t have.” Rich without a disability in the same circumstance reminded one participant “you hear all of the time about Olympic athletes having these tragic events.” One participant who viewed Rich without a disability who had athlete parents noted how that scenario contrasted with “those stories where someone is not so fortunate and they somehow become a star player.” A player viewing Rich with a disability commented, “A lot of these types of stories are actually coming out.”

Some participants saw the brevity and presentation of the scenarios as a limitation. According to one: “They pretty much took his life story and summed it up in a minute, so it’s kind of hard for me to get into that because usually they do these hour-long specials about what athletes had to overcome.” Another noted that, “a mix of narration and personal input” would have intensified participant reactions to Rich. Also “most documentaries are longer and you feel for the athlete when you’re engaged in the video for so long.” One participant described the need for a video to have “the wow factor” in order to be inspirational, while another noted that Rich himself needed to “seem more excited” to engage his audience.

## Comparative Analysis

Tables 1 and 2 contain abbreviated versions of the word tables developed to compare the responses of the groups to specific moderator guide questions including: how would you describe Rich? Who would find Rich inspirational? The information shown in the response column reflects author-developed combinations of direct quotes and paraphrases of participant responses.

Of the scenarios featuring Rich without a disability, the most positive descriptions were provided for the lack of talent scenario. As discussed above, having a family history of table tennis proficiency was viewed by participants as an advantage that undermined Rich's accomplishment whether or not he had a disability. Rich who had been in foster care was viewed as hard working, whether or not he had a disability, although Rich with a disability was described in slightly more positive terms. Participants tended to initially focus on the foster care and view disability as an added challenge. One participant noted, "on top of growing up in a shelter, he's also in a wheelchair." This sentiment was not universal, however. Although one participant speculated about potential difficulty in maneuvering a wheelchair while playing table tennis, others countered that playing seated might instead present an unfair advantage.

Rich who acquired disability as a result of an accident was described as having the greatest inspiration potential, based on both frequency of responses and strength of language used. Participants believed his story provided a role model for many other people. Further, this version of Rich could inspire athletes without disabilities who might conclude, as one participant described: "If he can do it, I can do it, too." This sentiment was expressed to a lesser degree in other disability scenarios. Rich without a disability was generally described as being most likely to be seen as inspirational by other table tennis players.

Table 1. Description of Rich

<b>Disability scenario</b>	<b>Summary of participant response</b>	<b>No disability scenario</b>	<b>Summary of participant response</b>
<b>1 Shelter/foster</b>	Hard working, determined; had a more difficult life due to background; disability was one additional obstacle	2 Shelter	Determined, driven, dedicated; remained focused on sport despite difficulties in his life
<b>3 Legacy</b>	Might be focusing on athletics to compensate for using a wheelchair; has advantage due to money	5 Legacy	Less motivational because he has family background in table tennis
<b>4 Lack of talent</b>	Kept pushing himself; passionate; lots of drive.	7 Lack of talent	Impressive because he kept trying; passionate; motivated.
<b>6 Rich with injury</b>	Not giving up on life despite injury. Focused and resilient.		

Table 2. Who Would Find Rich Inspirational?

<b>Disability scenario</b>	<b>Summary of participant response</b>	<b>No disability scenario</b>	<b>Summary of participant response</b>
<b>1 Shelter/foster</b>	Mainly those who use a wheelchair; also kids coming from shelter or foster care	2 Shelter/foster	People who have lost their parents or focus on more mental sports
<b>3 Legacy</b>	Young children, especially wheelchair users	5 Legacy	People who are familiar with table tennis; young children, especially if they are not involved in more popular sports
<b>4 Lack of talent</b>	People with disabilities; people in non sports contexts faced with naysayers	7 Lack of talent	Other table tennis players; people might be inspired in a non-sports context by the fact that Rich overcame lack of ability
<b>6 Rich with injury</b>	People who have experienced a similar circumstance		

## Discussion

In general, groups of participants expressed that others who had life circumstances similar to the version of Rich in the video they viewed would be those most likely to find Rich inspirational. This is consistent with the idea of inspiration potential associated with perceived relevance as posited by Lockwood and Kunda (1997). However, participants broadened Rich's inspiration potential based on three of the seven scenarios; participants were more likely to also describe the two "overcoming lack of talent" and the "Rich injured by drunk driver" stories as having inspiration potential that transferred to individuals in circumstances outside of sports.

### Responses to Content

There were minor qualitative differences when comparing participants' descriptions of Rich with or without a disability, and participants tended to focus on the other elements of the scenario. We also found limited support for inspiration arising primarily from the supercrip image when we defined this as assessment of an individual based on a lower set of standards than are used for persons without disabilities, or as Silva and Howe (2012) described, individuals who "can actually do something positive, 'despite' their disability" (p. 175).

Several participants expressed a low opinion of table tennis, especially in comparison with what they viewed as more mainstream sports. As a result of this prejudice, there were relatively few positive comments about Rich's athleticism whether or not he was depicted a disability. Kittson et al. (2013) assessed the judgment of participants without disabilities regarding the constructs warmth and competence in athletes with disabilities and found that "status as an elite athlete enhanced perceptions of competence" (p. 850). Kittson et al. found

the greatest increase in ratings of competence resulted when participants viewed the individual engaging in adaptive alpine skiing when compared to videos of participants engaging in resistance training or a routine transportation activity; this suggests that the type of sport itself does influence participants' judgments.

Participants who viewed the scenario in which Rich had experienced a disabling injury were those who most often used descriptions that are consistent with prior researchers' descriptions of the supercrip image. Additionally, as stated above, this was one of few scenarios in which participants also suggested that Rich had inspiration potential that extended beyond the specific circumstances of sport or even disability. We should reiterate, however, that the consensus expressed by this group was that they would have a less favorable view of Rich had his personal negligence contributed to his disability.

### **Responses to Presentation**

Participants' responses to the presentation of the various narratives provided an unexpected dimension to the findings. Participants appeared in some instances to accept the scenarios as presented while simultaneously drawing unfavorable comparisons between the presentation and what they have come to regard as a norm for presentation of an inspirational athlete story. It should be noted that some of the interviews were conducted around the time of the Olympic and Paralympic games so participants might have had multiple recent exposures to professionally produced inspirational athlete stories.

The suggestion that participants had developed both expectations and rating criteria for viewing these stories has parallels in the work of Keenan (1975), who used an Aristotelian lens to identify the elements of drama in athletics, and, more recently, that of DeVolder (2013) who explored a concept she called "compulsory heroism," (p. 748). According to Keenan, viewers desire both a sense of identification with athletes and the emotional experience that results when athletes demonstrate excellence, even when victory does not result. DeVolder posited that media and other organizations offer "overcoming" (p. 746) stories featuring injury or disability "as antidotes to bad news stories" (p. 749). The expected outcome of such stories, which is that individuals are eventually able to reassume pre-disability roles is "so entrenched in our collective cultural imaginary that many people cannot even imagine a different storyline" (DeVolder, 2013, p. 750). Both Keenan and DeVolder asserted that viewers might experience catharsis through overcoming stories, although Keenan noted that the idealized athletic drama "must be of sufficient length to allow for the development of pleasing action" (p. 51.) This leads us to question whether some of the research participants' criticism reflected their disappointment that our brief video scenarios failed to deliver the depth of detail they have come to expect in a typical "celebration of human resilience" (DeVolder, 2013, p. 747).

### **Practical Implications**

Based on these findings, we offer the following recommendations for marketers and promoters of disability sport:

- Our participants were generally quick to express empathy with Rich's circumstances they could relate to. One primary example of this was that Rich was described as attending online courses to complete his degree; our university student participants frequently acknowledged respect for Rich's desire to balance education with an athletic career. We suggest that marketers of disability sport continue to focus on athlete practices and characteristics that potential consumers can connect with. This can counter the discomfort that some individuals have when confronted with disability (Antonak & Livneh), and might

result in more enduring interest in disability sport than is inspired by emphasis by use of overcoming narratives.

- Based on responses to table tennis, we suggest it might be necessary to educate viewers about the athleticism required to participate in less mainstream sports, or adaptive versions of known sports. That our participants speculated on whether use of a wheelchair provides an advantage might relate to the controversy about performance enhancing technology that arose as runner Oscar Pistorius experienced great success using high tech prosthesis (Burkett, McNamne, & Potthast, 2011). Individuals who do not typically use a wheelchair might not immediately recognize the additional challenge presented by using one's arms for mobility as well as often for the skill aspects of sport.
- Marketers should be aware that consumers often come equipped with a previously developed set of expectations about how athlete interest or inspiration stories should look. Failing to present material of appropriate production quality or length can undermine the quality of content presented.
- Finally and perhaps most relevant to this study, it would seem evident that efforts to ignore a disability and the supercrip narrative may not be effective. Our findings indicate that participants, even when not primed to discuss disability quickly addressed the topic, and, at least indirectly, aspects of the supercrip image. Given this, we conclude that disability sport promoters cannot avoid the issue of inspiration and that preconceived notions of disability will impact spectators' perceptions. Therefore we suggest that promoters begin by acknowledging these issues, and, in particular explicitly addressing the more negative impressions associated with the stereotype while promoting disability sporting events.

Limitations of this research study include that the participants represented a relatively homogenous group of university students from a single region of the country and that the scenarios presented represented only one type of disability sport. However, as the goal of this research was exploration and not generalization, the findings are informative and suggest several areas for future research.

Because many participants were not familiar with table tennis, presentation of these scenarios via a more mainstream sport, such as basketball/wheelchair basketball, or even a more extreme sport, such as snowboarding, surfing, or as alpine skiing, as depicted by Kittson et al. (2013) might elicit different or more nuanced responses. Alternately or additionally, purposive recruitment of participants with and without disabilities might provide unique insight and an opportunity for discourse as well as descriptive analysis. Given that participants were attentive to the presentation of the story, future researchers might wish to assess the specific elements of narrative that contribute more or less to what might be the anticipated norms of the overcoming story. We also did not provide participants with any opportunity to respond to scenarios with an athlete who has a physical disability and is female. DeVolder (2013) provided examples to argue that being female is in some contexts likewise considered analogous to disability; further research studies might facilitate comparison of both male and female athletes with or without disabilities.

Some researchers (Shehu & Moruisi, 2010; Sherry, 2010) have suggested that participation in athletics has potential to improve personal and social relationships for various marginalized groups; disability sport likewise has potential to improve quality of some aspects of lives of the participants. However, it is not clear from this research whether increased exposure to disability sport has potential to improve the view of disability by those who identify as not having disabilities. In particular, we find it noteworthy and of concern that attitude toward persons with disabilities might vary based on others' interpretations of the role of an individuals' own actions or decisions in acquiring disability. Future researchers might explore

these attitudes further and consider the need for disability awareness education both in general and in conjunction with disability sport marketing.

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## Appendix

### List of Video Scenarios

1. Rich with disability; grew up in battered women's shelter and foster homes
2. Rich with no disability; grew up in battered women's shelter and foster homes
3. Rich with disability; from a family of high performing table tennis players ("legacy")
4. Rich with disability; overcoming lack of natural ability for table tennis
5. Rich with no disability; from a family of high performing table tennis players ("legacy")
6. Rich with adventitious disability due to injury in accident caused by drunk driver
7. Rich with no disability; overcoming lack of natural ability for table tennis

### Focus Group Moderator Guide

Today I am going to show you a video/videos and ask you some questions. Your responses will be recorded and transcribed but you will not be identified on the transcript or any analysis. You do not have to respond to each question but I hope that all or most of you will. Please feel free to express your opinions, even if they are not the same as the opinions of other people.

Tell me about the video you just viewed.

Describe Rich. (Probe, reuse as needed – what else can you say about him?)

What is inspirational about Rich? (Probe, reuse to obtain multiple responses – what else?)

Why is X inspirational? (X refers to items identified in the prior question; repeat this question as many times as needed to ask about each X)

What things about Rich do you think other people with disabilities might find inspiring? (Probe – why?)

What things about Rich might be inspiring to people without disabilities? (Probe – why?)

What about Rich do you think people who play table tennis might find inspiring? (Probe – why?)

What about Rich do you think people who play other sports might find inspiring? (Probe – why?)

What do you think of when you hear the word 'inspiration?'

In general, what types of things do you find inspiring? (Probe for specifics if categories are offered.)

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