

• TENNIS SPORT SCIENCE REVIEW •

# Marketing Wheelchair Tennis: Perspectives from Team USA

*Dr. Michael  
Cottingham*

*Tiao  
Hu*

*Doté  
Williams*

*Dr. Don  
Lee*

*Dr. Joyce Olushola  
Ogunrinde*



## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to explore American professional wheelchair tennis players' perspectives on how they are and want to be promoted. The context of wheelchair tennis was selected for two reasons. First, it is the most professionalized disability sport, with the potential for athletes to earn a viable living from prize money. Second, the athletes focus on their own brand while observing how the governing bodies and individual tournaments promote their sport. Two research questions were identified for this study: How do wheelchair tennis players believe they are promoted and perceived and what strategies do wheelchair tennis players believe should be utilized to promote their sport?

The sample consisted of 10 professional wheelchair tennis players who competed for Team USA in the last

six years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using questions created by two authors who reviewed relevant research on marketing in disability sport. Probing questions were used to allow for more authentic expression and to explore themes not identified in the literature. Open and axial coding was used to identify themes from the literature and emerging themes from the participants' lived experiences with a focus on dominant ideologies shaping the purpose, promotion and marginalization of their sport.

Four themes emerged: (1) frustration but understanding with the use of inspirational tropes, (2) the gap between international and professionalism in disability sport promotions, (3) the benefits of event integration and need for furthering this trend, and (4) considerations for improvement of quality and frequency of media coverage.

## BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Wheelchair tennis in the United States began in the late 1970s, evolving steadily from its humble roots to the recognized elite sport it is today. As professionalism and media exposure increased, sports promoters and practitioners developed expectations for strategic marketing around the sport and its athletes. Though subjects of such promotional efforts, little is known about how professional wheelchair tennis players regard its effectiveness or impacts. In seeking to consider athletes' perspectives on marketing trends and how they might be improved, two research questions were explored:

**RQ1: How do wheelchair tennis players believe they are promoted and perceived?**

**RQ2: What strategies do wheelchair tennis players believe should be utilized to promote their sport?**

Because no known research on marketing of wheelchair tennis exists, this literature will explore what we understand about marketing other disability sports; Noticeably, the extent literature softens the line between public relations and marketing. Thus, while public relations is not typically referred to in the marketing mix, it will be included here. Broadly speaking, current disability sport marketing research can be classified into three categories: Research on spectators, research on sport promotion by media and practitioners, and perspectives of the athletes.

### Disability Sport Spectatorship

The limited quantitative research on disability sport spectatorship suggests that fans do not differ exceptionally from non-disability sport fans. Demographically, disability sport spectators tend to have significantly more female representation and about half the spectators have some relationship to disability.<sup>2,4,8,22</sup> Regarding their motivations to consume sport, spectators of disability sport have mostly similar motivations to non-disability sport fans such as drama, escape, physical skill, and aesthetics. However, they also demonstrate distinct motives including "inspiration" and the "supercrip narrative" found only in the context of disability sport.<sup>3,4,16,21</sup>

Besides sport, inspiration and the supercrip narrative are common themes in contexts where disability is explored. The former refers to the idea that persons with disability overcome their circumstances and are thus framed through the lens of empowerment and inspiration. The latter, the supercrip narrative, refers specifically to the emphasis placed on a person who gains attention simply for doing mundane day-to-day tasks, yet due to their impairment, are considered disproportionately successful. These stereotypical representations, while seemingly well-intentioned, are actually quite detrimental to people with disabilities' quality of life as they support a viewpoint that considers individuals with disabilities as people of lesser expectations. Consequently, the actions of the individuals with disabilities

are praised not for their self-benefit but rather, to make non-disabled people feel better about themselves.<sup>12, 13, 15</sup>

Borne of these common conceptions surrounding disability sport is the dichotomy between appreciating an athlete simply for their athleticism or athletic skills versus appreciating an athlete for their inspirational story. Still, the qualitative data tells a complex and compelling story in regard to spectatorship. Chatfield and Cottingham<sup>3</sup> found that first time spectators of wheelchair table tennis were drawn to and valued the inspirational narrative of the athlete, while they tended to undervalue or rationalize their athleticism or athletic skills. However, fans of power wheelchair soccer showed significant variation in their view of the sport, from reflecting on athleticism and skill, to still investing in the supercrip narrative.<sup>6</sup>

### **Media and Practitioners' Promotion of Disability Sport**

Regardless of spectator perspectives of the athlete in disability sport, to become fans of disability sport, first-time spectators were likely to have early exposure to a promotional invite or media ad that appealed to them and attracted them to attend an event. Of all the research in disability sport promotion and marketing, analysis on media portrayals is the most substantial and consistent in its findings. Goggin and Newell<sup>10</sup> frame the research as a whole when they say "...media representations fit well within the established power relations which oppress people with disability in society. While there have been some changes and improvements... disabling media representations still very much persist (p. 71, 2000)." Pappous et al.,<sup>18</sup> supports this sentiment, describing the presentation of disability sport as a focus on emotion rather than motion- another clear allusion to the supercrip narrative.

While the extent and quality of coverage range greatly from country to country,<sup>1</sup> the media covers disability sport in an ad hoc nature most of the time and disability sport is broadcasted regionally rather than nationally, except during the Paralympic Games. Flindall,<sup>9</sup> on a constructive note, contends that quality coverage has clearly improved, at least for the Paralympics. Due to aggressive athlete advocacy, meaningful coverage is more available for fans. Ideally, that coverage would progressively lessen media exploits of the supercrip narrative. Given that practitioners understand how spectators internalize the sport and effectively respond to the supercrip image, however, they find themselves riding a tight line between providing the supercrip narrative they know sells and advocating for meaningful framing of the sports that athletes deserve.<sup>5,6</sup>

### **Perspectives of Athletes**

While disability sport marketing research has clear interest in understanding the views of spectators and media, very little research exists on how the athletes with disabilities themselves view sport promotion. Two studies<sup>6,11</sup> address the topics tangentially, all indicating that participants felt that an inspirational story-based narrative was paternalistic and ineffective. All of these studies focused on different research questions rooted in the inspirational narrative. A fourth qualitative study set in Brazil addressed how disability sports were perceived publicly, denoting a clear mix of both paternalistic and athletic-focused concepts.<sup>14</sup> The study did not, however, address how athletes wanted to be promoted. While the research shows how athletes with disabilities currently view their publicity, to date, no research examines how athletes with disabilities wish to be promoted or work to promote themselves.

### **Tennis as a Unique Context**

Tennis provides an important and valuable context to explore athletes' perspectives on promotion for several reasons. First of all, the International Tennis Federation (ITF) has created a structure that provides the greatest pathway to profitability for elite athletes with disabilities when compared to other sports. Many athletes are supported through their governing bodies, and this provides a level of financial stability. Moreover, wheelchair tennis is unique in that there is an opportunity for meaningful income from prize money and sponsorships, independent of national governing body (NGB) support.

Second, unlike many other sports, promotional efforts are managed at three different levels:

- 1 The governing bodies (international and national), which promote the events and attract sponsors;**
- 2 The tournaments, which attract fans, sponsors and may sell media rights; and**
- 3 The athletes themselves, who manage their own brands.**

Finally, the sport provides points of promotion at integrated events, such as the grand slams and ITF wheelchair only events. In short, professional wheelchair tennis players have perspectives on the sports promotion at the macro and micro levels. This study aims to explore how American professional wheelchair tennis players believe they are promoted, how they believe they *should* be marketed, and how they manage their brand.

## METHODS

To explore elite wheelchair tennis athletes' views on their current and desired promotional strategies, an emergent design was employed. Emergent design allows for an organic investigation structure that provides researchers the flexibility to mold data collection according to preliminary data gathered in the process. The flexibility of emergent design is useful when exploring topics that are novel or have limited empirical research to guide the data collection process. In the case of this study, the researchers prepared a specific set of written questions, yet asked related follow-up questions based on participants' responses. In this way, some interview questions diverged more than others.

### Participants

Members of Team USA wheelchair tennis served as the target population to assess current and desired marketing of athletes. Team membership was defined as players who were on a World Cup Team or a Paralympic team. Using a purposive sampling method, sixteen athletes were identified; however, four did not respond and contact information was not available for two. Thus, ten total participants took part in the study. Three of the players were from the quadriplegic division, three from the men's division, and four from the women's division; all competed internationally with Team USA in the last six years. Due to the small sample size and potentially sensitive information, all identifiers from participants were removed (including gender) in order to protect their identities.

### Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using questions created by two authors who reviewed relevant research on marketing in disability sport. Probing questions were also used to allow for more authentic expression and explore themes not identified in the literature.<sup>7</sup>

After IRB approval was received from the PI's institution, participants were identified using public records of national team membership and contacted through social media and email. Participant consent forms were sent and returned via email. Then, interviews were conducted over the phone and, with the participants' permission, audio recorded. Interviews lasted from 25 to 68 minutes. Example interview questions included: "How do you feel the media promotes your sport?" "How conscious are you about your own personal brand?" "How do you feel the governing bodies and tournament hosts promote wheelchair tennis?" and "What recommendations do you have to improve wheelchair tennis promotion?"

Data collection occurred over a one-month period at the convenience of the participants. Member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review their transcribed interviews and make modifications for clarity and accuracy. Furthermore, trustworthiness was developed with the primary interviewer by way of in group identification.<sup>20</sup> Multiple participants commented "You understand, you use a wheelchair" and related responses. A shared cultural identity, that of disability<sup>19</sup> provided a frame of reference.

### Data Analysis

Ten recorded interviews were transcribed by an automated transcription software program and scrubbed for inaccuracies by a student researcher and co-investigator. Open and axial coding was used to identify themes from the literature and emerging themes from the participants' lived experiences. In working with this population, it is critical to recognize the power dynamics shaping these athletes' lived experience, specifically how wheelchair tennis athletes negotiate their identities juxtaposed with the dominant ideologies shaping the purpose, promotion and marginalization of their sport.<sup>15</sup>

Analysis was conducted by two separate investigators in order to increase validity. This analysis was conformed to Merriam's<sup>17</sup> basic qualitative research. These results were then provided to the PI who consolidated the information. Upon review, the analysts approved the results and discussion.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interview responses uncovered curious personal and collective truths in regard to the research questions, the first of which sought to discover how wheelchair tennis

players believe they are promoted and perceived. Two major themes emerged. The first overarching consensus revealed the athletes are most commonly promoted and perceived as subjects of inspirational stories. The second shared motif suggests that their sport promotion is more successful in quality and frequency of coverage in other countries, whereas the United States falls short of that example, providing relatively mediocre or less professional promotion.

### Inspirational Tropes

When describing how they are promoted, participants used words such as “feel good story”, “sob story”, “charity”, “great feat”, “miracle”, and “patronizing”, referencing their collective sentiment as objects of inspiration. Grasping for the words to describe this phenomenon, participant 5 shares: “I think the general population...has that like, feel good feeling...

kind of like, ‘Oh, isn’t that inspirational?’ ...If you’re playing at a public park, someone’s like, “Wow, that’s really cool. I didn’t know you could do that.”

It is not surprising, then, that the promotion of disability sport athletes in the U.S., - wheelchair tennis included, relies heavily on the inspirational trope. In other words, the athlete is presented in terms of a story about overcoming disability, rather than focusing on the athletic skills and training that led them to become an elite athlete in their sport. The latter, of course, is what would be expected in promotions of able-bodied athletes.

This type of promotion is frustrating for athletes, as it emphasizes their disability and perpetuates a common ideology that less should be expected of individuals with disability, such that they become inspirational simply because they are capable of competing in sport. Participant 1 explains the pitfalls of inspirational promotion and how it supports a limiting perception of the athletes:

*“ But then we get the inspirational [comments] because of the disability. And that it drives me nuts and it’s because of getting past my disability. I’m choosing to do what I want to do with my life. Everybody has different circumstances, has different obstacles. We have to overcome, mine are just a little more obvious than most because it’s visual. If it wasn’t visible, you wouldn’t be saying that...So that kind of inspiration is annoying.*

Athletes generally believed that media is the driving force behind this type of outmoded promotion; the media is aware that it draws more attention and increases viewership, which in turn drives economic gains. As Participant 4 observes:

People bringing disabled individuals to prom and things like that makes national news... I feel like they just want all the credit for that... posting all these stories, then I look at the comments section and that everybody’s wow, this brings tears to my eyes.

Now if the media’s intention is to boost publicity at all costs, there is arguably considerable value in utilizing the inspirational trope. Despite frustrations, most of the participants agreed that inspiration sells. It comes, however, at a steep cost. While the inspiring story may capture hearts and minds in the moment, it tends to frame wheelchair tennis in an ableist way instead of a progressive one, and ultimately allows the viewer to objectify rather than respect the athlete. Participant 10 summarizes:

“ *When you talk about media coverage, this is one of the first things that they go to. It’s an easy sell. It’s a narrative that able-bodied people - who will always make up the vast majority of viewership, readership etc. - can participate in, have an emotional reaction to. But it actually leaves the disabled individual as a prop in a play... You’re the thing that is designed to elicit an emotional reaction.*

Although athletes understood why the media portrayed them using the inspiration narrative, few athletes desired its continued use as the foundational baseline for promotion. While four participants favored keeping the inspirational narrative, they also emphasized that follow up stories about their athleticism should be highlighted. For those who admit inspiration is effective in marketing but refused to be objectified in future promotion, they proposed simply removing the inspiration component in favor of framing them as elite athletes, like their counterparts.

In stark contrast, previous research by Hardin and Hardin <sup>11</sup> and Cottingham <sup>6</sup> found that athletes of wheelchair basketball and wheelchair rugby fully loathed the inspirational trope, regardless of any reason. One possible explanation is that athletes in an individual sport (wheelchair tennis) may be responsible for their sponsorship and resource acquisition compared to team sports. Thus, aware that the inspirational trope drives more media viewers and potential sponsorships, there may be a greater willingness to compromise in order to gain more viewers, which in turn leads to the acquisition of immediate resources needed to support training and competition.

### **Professionalism Gap between Domestic & International Promotion**

According to our participants, countries such as Japan, Australia or Western European countries market their athletes on a more professional level, with higher quality promotion and greater representation of their sport and

team. Comparatively, the United States falls short of this standard, as Participant 1 explains:

They [internationally] have full sponsorships along with the able-bodied counterparts. So they are seen in the media coverage as equal to the able-bodied. Their tournaments there [are] also at least live streamed if not put on public TV for it to be seen. So it’s more normalized as opposed to in the States where it’s- how much coverage do we have? Even of the games up until this point for Paralympics is slim to none and even then, it’s after the fact...Exposure, media coverage, it is not there in the States.

Athletes tended to describe the gap through their travel experience. They explained that when they traveled internationally, other athletes, fans, and community members recognized them because they had been promoted adequately on advertisements, commercials, and billboards. U.S. athletes traveling through those countries were able to feel more connected with other professionals because of the support systems in place for those athletes, including a much greater provision of financial resources compared to the U.S.

Whilst exposures from countries who have hosted mega disability sport events (e.g., Paralympic Games) promoted athletes in terms of equality, visibility, social & economic support, disability sport promotion in the U.S. is still in short. The inadequate promotion can be generally characterized by the inspirational trope, lack of adequate coverage, and lack of normalization of disability or disability sport. Naturally, the question arises as to why other

countries appear to have superior promotion, support, and resources for athletes with disabilities. While no existing research directly addresses this question, our participants helped uncover several reasons.

First, the U.S. has no governmental ministry of sports. The ministry of sports is a governmental entity found in a majority of countries. These ministries play an important role in regulating sports including promoting disability sport. Clearly, several countries with established ministries have placed great value on disability sport, and this is evident in the quality promotion and coverage that allows for greater recognition, increased spectatorship, and support for disability sports and their athletes.

Second, the U.S. government does not fund its Olympic nor Paralympic Committees. This may be, in part, due to cultural reservations about mingling sports with politics. Further, the robust capitalist mindset deeply entrenched in the U.S. value system allows for private entities to drive the market, with limited governmental regulation or interference. In terms of disability sport, promoters in the U.S. are faced with the challenge of justifying their worth and vying for coverage and resources in the midst of free market competition. This puts disability sport up against, instead of alongside, mainstream able-bodied sport media.

Third, the U.S. does not have a strong public media. Whereas countries like England tout world-renowned, trusted stations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the U.S. does not have well-known public media except for the National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), neither of which have a sizeable sports promotion division and are overshadowed by a variety of alternative popular media. Yet public media plays an important role in that their mission is rooted in public service, with the goal of not only informing citizens, but educating and enlightening them as well. Most disability sport programming is found on public media. Thus, it comes as no surprise that countries with strong public media surpass the U.S. in disability sports promotion.

When considered together, governmental advocacy and public media effectively publicize disability sport, and athletes receive financial remuneration from governmental lines through ministries of sport. Without a sport ministry, government funding, or public media, disability sport in the U.S. lacks the professional promotion athletes experienced internationally.

In the context of wheelchair tennis specifically, the supporting domestic organizations are the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committees (USOPC) and the United States Tennis Association (USTA). Both are non-

profit entities that do not receive governmental funding. Consequently, they focus on promoting sports in such a way that they are most likely to generate sufficient and immediate returns on investment. This is based on what mainstream media already supports. Within a predominantly able-bodied male sports context, disability sport received limited resources and occasional promotions. Summarizing the situation from the athlete point of view, participant 3 states that U.S. tournaments “generally don’t have a budget to do anything other than social media.”

In sum, in terms of promotion and perceptions, participant responses yielded two recognizable themes. First, athletes are promoted as an inspirational story and consequently, perceived in terms of their disability. While this type of promotion is primarily exploited by media to sell an emotion and strengthen their bottom line, it also no doubt contributes to the second theme: athletes believe that other countries do a better job of promoting them than the United States. How then can promotion be improved? This leads to the next research question: What strategies do wheelchair tennis players believe should be utilized to promote their sport? Reported strategies included improve frequency and quality of media coverage, activism, self-marketing & promotional training, and integration.

### **Improve Frequency and Quality of Media Coverage**

While it is important to recognize that participants noted improvement in disability sports promotion in the U.S. over the years, specifically with progress in the area of social equity for athletes of disability sport, participant 9 noted “it’s not enough, and if you go look at those events or any social media event, you’ll have one to every 80 social media post or PR push is able bodied to one Para, one wheelchair sport.”

There is evidently a lack of disability sport representation compared with able-bodied sports promotion, and as previously noted, the lack of frequent and quality media coverage becomes all the more apparent when compared with certain countries. Considering the international arena, this may be due to the fact that other nations are not pressured to turn a profit on promotions in the same way as domestic governing bodies. As participant 4 observes:

No, I think we don’t cover it enough, so what they do show is like really brief, and doesn’t go into depth ... it’s just very broad and sometimes it just feels just really like they ... showed a clip

just to get like diversity and inclusion factor. But they don't really care. They don't want to look further into the sport.

Despite these realizations, most participants offered limited recommendations on how to improve media coverage, the

sole suggestion being to target larger events (such as the Paralympic games) and systematically work down from there. Participants did, however, express the importance of social media and the need for normalization. Simply covering wheelchair tennis more aggressively and frequently may in fact develop normalization. As Participant 4 noted:

*“ To get the feel of the sport, so just seeing the support, you know, and a general competition and just normalizing, just getting it out there and having people see it on daily basis. Like I think that would be the best thing.*

Normalization also occurs through educating the media on portraying athletes appropriately, not limiting through the lens of the supercrip or inspirational narrative. Achieving normalization through better frequency and quality coverage, however, would likely take coordinated efforts with consistent messaging from governing body administrators, athletes, fans, and sponsors. Participant 8 iterates:

I think it's kind of a combination of a lot of things that need to come together. So more sponsorships backing us, more commercials of us on TV then the narrative changes when you're on the news as opposed to, you know, telling people's backstories.

Unfortunately, as far as we know, no such collaborative committee exists that works to unify stakeholders and their messaging based on research. Second, managing a cohesive strategy would likely be far more difficult in wheelchair tennis than in team sports due to having so many independent voices without team structures to funnel content through. It might make sense to establish a committee made up of these various stakeholders to develop strategies and/or a media guide.

Beyond striving for normalization through consistent coverage and messaging, a more self-sufficient way of gaining recognition is through social media. Athletes highlighted a growing social media presence in the evolution of disability sport marketing, and recognized the platform

for allowing athletes to easily engage fans and sponsors, as well as promote events. Participant 5 remarked:

Just certain YouTube videos and things like that have been circulated around the internet on social media about, you know, getting Novak Djokovic or Roger Federer getting them in an actual sports wheelchair for tennis and having them see what it feels like to hit a ball. Like that kind of went viral and I think that was important to represent what wheelchair tennis is- how hard it is first of all, and then it can be exciting to watch.

### **Activism, self-marketing & promotional training**

From external media attention to personalized social media, participants shared that activism is one of the most personal and meaningful strategies they can employ to improve how disability sport athletes are promoted and perceived. Nine of the 10 athletes self-described as activists. Participant 3 shows passion in using their role as an athlete to actively advocate for the sport, despite pushback or lack of support:

They're like, "You should do those things when you retire. But not now, you should just be focusing on playing." I don't agree. I have the greatest voice as an active player; when I retire it's easy to push me to the side.



Athletes focused their activism on promoting the sport to recruit potential players or supporters, as well as educating the public on the nature of disability sport and its athletes. Participant 4 remarks on the need for education: “People just don’t know what I do. I tell them I play wheelchair tennis, and they go, ‘Is it on a shorter court? Do you play with the regular size racket?’” As the general public tends to assume excessive accommodations for disability sport, one important aspect of activism is to change expectations of people with disabilities, to rewrite the narrative such that they are no longer portrayed as objects of inspiration; rather, as the skilled athletes they are, on par with their able-bodied counterparts.

Current athletes are increasingly expected not only to self-advocate, but to self-market as well. The idea of athletes with disabilities engaging in activism is not new; however, the transition from advocacy to promoting and marketing for a brand is new. As athletes become more involved in actively focusing on their brand, most participants admitted they were not adept at managing their brand, nor at promoting themselves. An elevated expectation to self-promote did not necessarily come with training to effectively do so. They lacked the knowledge and marketing expertise, insecure about their ranking and social media following, and were often discouraged by initial rejections when seeking sponsorships.

The majority of participants did speak of having sponsors that supported them; however, they predominantly provided in-kind commitments (e.g., rackets & wheelchairs) as opposed to cash flow. Ultimately, athletes struggle with acquiring sponsors and marketing themselves to the extent needed to thrive and comfortably sustain themselves as elite athletes.

Consequently, promotional training becomes a clear strategy necessary to improve athlete’s ability to advertise. Of our 10 participants, nine stated they wanted more support in managing their brand and guidance on how to self-promote. Testimony from Participant 1 demonstrates the lack of and clear need for such training:

When you’re first starting, you know about rackets and chairs, but other than that, you’re kind of guessing. We’ve got some people on tour. They’re sponsored by makeup companies, but who would have thought to go there? So just knowing first where to go. But also how to initiate that interaction, because if you make that initial email or a phone call or whatever it is first, and you have no idea what you’re doing, they’ll shut you down two seconds flat. Never give you a second glance. Plus it’s going to kill your confidence because they won’t even respond. So why would you try doing it again?

Specific requests for promotional training included a sponsorship packet, brand training, how to engage with the media, and how to attract more followers on social media. There was consensus that this training could come from the USOPC, the USTA, and/or the ITF.

### Benefits of Integration

In addition to activism and promotional training, athletes identified the strategy of integration as a means to better promote themselves. We identified two primary forms of integration. The first was integration of wheelchair tennis into existing governing body structures, and the second was integration of the disability sport within traditionally able-bodied only events.

### Integration within Governing Bodies

It should be noted that while the governing bodies, USTA and ITF, have incorporated wheelchair tennis for over 20 years, the structure of integration has evolved over time. Until recently, much of the digital structure (i.e. websites) and staffing had still been segregated, distinctly setting apart wheelchair divisions from more traditional sectors. Although there is still dedicated staff for wheelchair tennis, the disability sport has become almost fully integrated in the USTA, and substantively within the promotional structures of the ITF. Among the study participants, there was near universal support for integration within the USTA as the National Governing Body (NGB). As participant 1 demonstrated:

The United States Tennis Association has really elevated our sport. We have staff that’s located in the headquarters in Orlando. There’s a wheelchair tennis presence there. They’re doing a great job of social media, the integration of wheelchair tennis with able-bodied tennis, you know, it’s great, just great stuff. You know, that the press release that came out from the USDA for the Tokyo games- Just had all the athletes, the chair users and the able-bodied athletes in there.

Support notwithstanding, at the time of writing this publication, the full effects of integration were still novel, uncertain, and not without criticism. For instance, several athletes felt that integration made it more difficult to find the desired wheelchair-specific content. With ITF social media promoting wheelchair tennis on traditionally able-

bodied platforms, it became cumbersome to find wheelchair specific results and webcasts. There was interest from several players in maintaining wheelchair specific feeds to access this information. According to multiple participants, a fully inclusive model for media promotions may not actually be ideal for individuals who are interested in wheelchair tennis specifically.

## Event integration

In the context of event incorporation, there was universal support for integration in the most renowned tennis events, such as Wimbledon (the oldest tennis tournament in the world), and the Grand Slam tournaments, the world's 4 most eminent yearly tennis events.

Almost every player referenced the Grand Slams; however, wheelchair draws are relatively small, allowing four to eight players. Qualification for the Grand Slams is determined by international rankings and a single wild card that can be offered for each division. Few current American players qualify outright as they are outranked by international competitors. Hence, three primary suggestions were made to improve event integration among U.S. athletes: 1) to push for integration into more professional events (i.e. WTA and ATP events) using the same approach that has been effective within the Grand Slam structure; 2) to hold wildcards for American players whenever possible; 3) to showcase more of American athletes by giving them more publicities on and off court. As Participant 9 suggests:

I think those two federations are a little bit behind Australian tennis and LTA, as far as publicity and notoriety when it comes to their athletes' name in the Grand Slam. And I just don't understand why that would be but I feel like it should be the publicity and the PR should be pushed as much as possible for the local players.

In short, there is a considerable investment in cobranding at events by the NGBs and the players, both for the promotional benefits, but also likely because of the additional resources these events provide. That being said, the number of targeted events is still limited and draw sizes are constrained. Consequently, only a small portion of even elite players fully experience cobranding with elite able-bodied tennis. Thus, to fully utilize the benefits of integration requires a further push for domestic wheelchair athletes on and off court. Participants demonstrated a thoughtful understanding of the social and cultural barriers that impact wheelchair tennis marketing and promotion. One of the greatest challenges identified, rectifying quality and frequency of media promotional coverage, will require fully integrated efforts from all stakeholders if the U.S. is to close the gap in professionalism of wheelchair tennis sport marketing. The balance between inspiration and athleticism narratives should educate the general public with the full story. Governing bodies should further promote integration as athletes need to be seen as equal in every aspect, while making it easy to access wheelchair specific sport content on a shared platform. Adequate investment in marketing could start with helping athletes build their personal brand, as they are mostly brand conscious in the social media era. Resources in providing training and credibility for athletes could make a difference in sponsorship acquisition.

We believe that this manuscript represents the only cohesive review of how wheelchair tennis players believe they are promoted and how they prefer to be marketed. Our findings demonstrate wheelchair tennis players' awareness of the challenges and opportunities of promoting their sport. While our study presents the perspectives of over 60% of elite American wheelchair tennis players in the United States, the total number of participants was small. In addition, as prior mentioned, the country has unique considerations compared to other nations. Future research should consider exploring more athletes and from other countries. Further, other publics involved in the promotional process- such as agents, event administrators and members of governing bodies should be interviewed with the same research questions to explore their views on effective sport promotions.

---

## REFERENCES

1. Brittain I. Communicating and managing the message: Media and media representation of disability and Paralympic sport. In: Darcy S., Frawley S., Adair D, ed. *Managing the Paralympics*. Palgrave Macmillan, London; 2017:241-262. [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-43522-4\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-43522-4_11)
2. Byon, KK, Carroll MS, Cottingham M, Grady J, Allen JT. Examining gender differences in the effect of spectator motivation on sport consumption behaviors at collegiate wheelchair basketball games. *Journal of Venue & Event Management*. 2011;3(1):11-28.
3. Chatfield SL, Cottingham, M. Perceptions of Athletes in disabled and non-disabled sport contexts: A descriptive qualitative research study. *The Qualitative Report*. 2017;22(7):1909-1924.

4. Cottingham MP, Byon K, Chatfield S, Carroll M. Examining the influence of relationship to disability on the motivations of wheelchair basketball spectators. *Disability Studies Quarterly*. 2013;33(3).
5. Cottingham M, Gearity B, Byon KK. A qualitative examination of disability sport executives' perceptions of sport promotion and the acquisition of sponsors. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*. 2013;22(2):92-100.
6. Cottingham M, Pate JR, Gearity B. Examining 'inspiration': Perspectives of stakeholders attending a power wheelchair soccer tournament. *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*. 2015;4(1):59-88.
7. Creswell JW. (2012). Educational research: planning. *Conducting, and Evaluating*.
8. Evaggelinou C, Grekinis D. A survey of spectators at the International Stoke Mandeville Wheelchair Games. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*. 1998;15(1):25-35.
9. Flindall RA. Portraying "Paralympism"? An analysis of the evolution of Paralympic athlete media representations since the 1980s. *Diagoras: International Academic Journal on Olympic Studies*. 2020;4:75-101.
10. Goggin G, Newell C. Crippling Paralympics? Media, disability and Olympism. *Media International Australia*. 2000;97(1):71-83.
11. Hardin MM, Hardin B. The'supercrip; in sport media: wheelchair athletes discuss hegemony's disabled hero. *Sociology of Sport Online-SOSOL*. 2004;7(1):v7i1\_1.
12. Hargreaves JA, Hardin B. Women wheelchair athletes: Competing against media stereotypes. *Disability Studies Quarterly*. 2009;29(2).
13. Kama A. Supercrips versus the pitiful handicapped: Reception of disabling images by disabled audience members. *Communications*. 2004;29(4):447-466.
14. Lins S, Melo CF, Alves SG, Silva RL. "Our voices, our meaning": The social representations of sports for Brazilian athletes with disabilities. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*. 2019;36(1):42-60.
15. Lynch S, Hill JL. 'I had to pop a wheelie and pay extra attention in order not to fall.' embodied experiences of two wheelchair tennis athletes transgressing ableist and gendered norms in disability sport and university spaces. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*. 2020;13:507 - 520.
16. McKay C, Pate J, Mirabito T, Anaza E. Engaging with wheelchair basketball: Analyzing viewer attitudes and actions toward "The rebound: A wheelchair basketball documentary." *Sport in Society*. 2020:1-19.
17. Merriam SB. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 2009.
18. Pappous A, Marcellini A, De Léséleuc E. From Sydney to Beijing: the evolution of the photographic coverage of Paralympic Games in five European countries. *Sport in society*. 2011;14(03):345-354.
19. Peters, S. Is there a disability culture? A syncretisation of three possible world views. *Disability & Society*. 2000;15(4):583-601.
20. Tanis M., Postmes T. A social identity approach to trust: Interpersonal perception, group membership and trusting behaviour. *European Journal of Social Psychology*. 2005;35(3):413-424.
21. Wann DL, Cottingham M. The impact of team identification and knowledge of an athlete's physical disability on spectator's impressions of players. *Journal of Contemporary Athletics*. 2015;9(3):161-171.
22. Yamashita R, Muneda M. What motivates wheelchair basketball spectators? Analysis of moderating effects on intention to attend Tokyo 2020 Olympic Paralympic Games. *International Journal of Sport and Health Science*. 2019;7:217-226.

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### Dr. Mike Cottingham

Dr. Mike Cottingham is an Associate Professor in the department of Health and Human Performance at the University of Houston. He is also the director of the Lab of Adaptive Athletics at UH, a research lab that hosts disability sport programs along with national and international events. Dr. Cottingham has over 40 publications and 70 national and international peer reviewed presentations, to date. He is recognized as a global scholar in studying how society perceives athletes with disabilities and disability sport spectatorship.



**Tiao Hu**

Tiao Hu is a doctoral student and teaching fellow at the University of Houston. Her research interests focus on disability sport sponsorship and marketing. She holds a master's degree from the University of Georgia and is a former disability sport practitioner.



**Doté Williams**

Doté Williams, second year doctoral student in the University of Houston Kinesiology Department, is a public-school teacher with a research focus in interscholastic sport administration. Doté is currently researching community and belonging in high school sport administration.



**Dr. Don Lee**

Dr. Don Lee is an Associate Professor at the University of Houston in the Department of Health and Human Performance. His primary research interest includes measurement, branding, and spectator purchase behaviors within the realm of collegiate/professional sports.



**Dr. Joyce Olushola Ogunrinde**

Dr. Joyce Olushola Ogunrinde is an Assistant Professor of Health and Human Performance whose works investigate the intersections of culture, health, and sport management. Her desire is to uncover the emic ways individuals participate in sport and leverage that knowledge to create more sustainable sport-for-health programs. Her research includes exploring the role of community in sport participation, determining the intersectional effects of race, gender, and class on the benefits received from sport participation, examining the lived experience of Black coaches, and uncovering the meanings of health and sport to middle school girls.

