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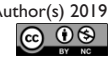
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"We know who is a cheat and who is not. But what can you do?": Athletes' perspectives on classification in visually impaired sport

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Abstract

Classification in disability sport is an issue mired in controversy. Much of the recent public scrutiny of classification systems and processes has been directed towards to the Paralympics, the showcase global disability sport event. But this is not just a Paralympic issue; the controversy of classification pervades disability sport at all levels. Using an embodied approach to disability sport, this article reveals how classification is experienced and regarded by visually impaired football and cricket players. We present findings from two qualitative research projects: one with the England Cricket Team between 2014 and 2016 and one with both grassroots and elite footballers in 2017. Our research reveals significant commonalities in the players' experiences of classification, including: a lack of faith in a classification system which does not adequately capture the diversity of visual impairment; visual impairment classes as social identifiers; rumour and gossip about intentional misrepresentation. The experiences of these visually impaired athletes add an important perspective and original contribution to the current literature on classification which, until now, has focused entirely on the Paralympic context.

Keywords

classification, disability, embodiment, sport, visual impairment

In disability sport, classification is an 'ever-evolving assessment and programming system that strives to make competition equitable and fair' (Sherrill, 1999: 210). If classification

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works as intended, an athlete's performance rather than an impairment mismatch should determine a sporting result. Currently in visually impaired (VI) sport, medical assessment of the two main measures of sight – visual acuity and visual field – determines the eligibility of an athlete and in which class they should compete. The different classes within VI sport at the international level are B1, B2 and B3 – with B1 being the 'most' visually impaired. These classes are based upon the World Health Organization's (WHO) definitions of low vision and blindness and are adopted by all VI sports governed by the International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA) (Ravensbergen et al., 2016; WHO, 2018). Despite adoption of B1–B3 classes at the international level, the organisation of these classes for international and domestic competition is complex and varies across different sports. In football, international competition is organised into blind football (B1 only) and partially sighted football (B2 and B3). VI cricket is made up of both blind and partially sighted players (B1 – B3) within a team, with a quota system and specific rules relating to batting and bowling for B1 players (see Macbeth and Powis, 2017). At the UK domestic level, B4 classified players are eligible to compete in both partially sighted football and cricket with B5 players eligible to play in the Partially Sighted Football League (PSFL) – an issue that will be discussed later.

Partially sighted football and VI cricket do not feature in the Paralympic programme, but they are impacted by any changes to classification made by IBSA, who are working closely with the IPC to review classification systems and processes across Paralympic VI sport. The International Paralympic Committee's (IPC) 2011 Position Stand on classification (Tweedy and Vanlandewijck, 2011) triggered a review of classification systems for athletes with physical impairments. However, as Ravensbergen et al. (2016) stress, the Position Stand did not wholly address VI sport and the unique demands of classifying these events. This neglect of VI sport was not addressed until 2018 when the IPC/IBSA joint Position Stand highlighted: the inadequacy of using only visual acuity and visual field to measure sight; problems with the now outmoded disability specific classification system, a need for sport-specific classification criteria, and a need for test procedures to represent the habitual conditions experienced in the sports (Mann and Ravensbergen, 2018). Several research projects aiming to develop evidence-based classification systems in specific Paralympic VI sports are underway but are in their infancy. These developments in VI sport are taking place against a backdrop of unprecedented levels of public scrutiny of classification systems and processes following classification errors and claims of intentional misrepresentation (IM) in the increasingly popular Paralympic Games. Many critics question not only whether current classification systems and processes are fit for purpose, but whether developing classification systems that are robust and equitable is indeed possible.

It is in this context of evolving classification systems that this article examines how classification is experienced and regarded by players of partially sighted football and VI cricket, two sports of particular interest to the authors. In doing so we provide a significant insight into the extent to which the classification issues reported by Ravensbergen et al. (2016) and Mann and Ravensbergen (2018) are common outside of the Paralympic context, in two of the main national sports in England. The focus on two team sports, in which VI classes are organised differently, enables us to examine how players negotiate classification issues and how social identities and hierarchies relating to VI class are

constructed within teams. Firstly, we review the modest literature on classification and VI sport and establish the dominant issues in this developing field. Secondly, we outline the theoretical and methodological approach of this article and, in doing so, conceptualise an embodied approach to disability sport. Finally, we present our empirical findings in three interrelated themes: *'Lack of faith in classification', 'Classification as social identifiers'*, and *'Rumour and gossip of intentional misrepresentation'*.

Classification and VI sport

In the growing body of research on classification in disability sport (for example, see Beckman and Tweedy, 2009; Howe, 2008; Howe and Jones, 2006; Sherrill, 1999; Tweedy, 2002; Tweedy et al., 2014; Tweedy and Vanlandewijck, 2011; Vaillo, 2014; Wu and Williams, 1999) there is a predominant focus upon athletes with physical impairment and limited attention to other impairment groups. Some of the problems with classification are likely to be generic and experienced by many athletes with disabilities, but it is important to understand the specific experiences of athletes in other impairment groups. Not only this, but it is crucial to acknowledge that *within* any specific impairment group, athlete experiences and views of classification may differ dramatically depending on the nature and severity of impairment and the sport(s) they practice. In other words, research on classification in 'disability sport' needs to better capture the considerable heterogeneity within it.

The only detailed analyses to focus exclusively on classification in VI sport, the focus of this article, have been published in the last few years. Ravensbergen et al.'s (2016) Delphi study analysis of experts involved in the classification process (including coaches, athletes, classifiers and administrators in Paralympic sport) revealed overwhelming agreement that 'the current VI classification system does not fulfil the IPC's aim to minimise the impact of the impairment on the outcome of competition' (390). The authors raised a number of other key issues including: the need for sport-specificity to account for the unique visual demands of different sports, a call for further tests of visual function (beyond the sole reliance on visual acuity and visual field tests) to determine an athlete's class, whether the age at which an impairment was acquired should be included in classification and whether an impairment must be permanent to make an athlete eligible for competition. IM – an issue which is further explored in this article – is identified by the experts in the Delphi study as a growing issue and one which is a direct consequence of the problems in the current system. These issues highlight aspects of diversity across VI athletes that had been not captured in previous literature and formed the foundation of the subsequent joint IPC/IBSA Position Stand (Mann and Ravensbergen, 2018). Although many of the same issues are reiterated, the 2018 Position Stand stresses the need for test procedures to 'better represent the habitual viewing situation experienced' in different sports, and proposed three conceptual research models that could be used in combination to 'establish the relationship between impairment and performance during VI classification research' (Mann and Ravensbergen, 2018). Across both studies, VI athletes are partially represented. Whilst Ravensbergen et al.'s (2016) study included athletes (8 of the 25 panel members) and the panel represented all 13 VI sports within the Paralympic programme, it is not clear which specific sports the athletes competed in. Therefore, although these

studies provide the most detailed contributions to literature on classification in VI sport, there is considerable scope for sociological research that centralises athlete experiences of classification, in specific sports and at different levels of competition.

In the growing body of sociological research on VI sport (Macbeth, 2008, 2009; Macbeth and Magee, 2006; Powis, 2018b), classification issues have featured, but have not been an explicit focus. Alongside a range of equality issues within VI football, Macbeth (2008, 2009) highlighted several problems specific to classification. Most notably, the difficulty in accounting for diversity within each class and the potentially exclusionary impact of combining classes (B2 and B3) at domestic (B2, B3 and B4 at the time of research) and international levels (B2 and B3) for players with more severe visual impairment. Ultimately, Macbeth (2009) argues that, within VI football, unevenness amongst competitors, at both grassroots and elite levels, can depend as much on disability-related variables, as it does on talent, training, skill, fitness and motivation. These issues bear some resemblance to the findings reported by Ravensbergen et al. (2016) and Mann and Ravensbergen (2018), in terms of questioning whether the classification system is fit for purpose, but Macbeth (2009) provides a more comprehensive, athlete-centred focus within a specific sport.

The most revealing accounts of the process of classification in disability sport have emerged from Howe (2008) and Peers (2012) who discuss their own experiences through auto ethnographic vignettes. Howe (2008) describes entering a sterile room to be processed as an object of medical science and being treated 'as a specimen pickled in formaldehyde and placed on a shelf in a biology classroom' (503). Whilst bodily intrusion is commonplace in all elite level sport, disabled athletes undergo regular and invasive treatments to 'prove' their physical abilities. Adopting Foucault's 'three modes of objectification', Peers (2012) documents her narrative journey from being spotted as a potential Paralympic athlete through to the combative classification meetings and dehumanising medical examinations, where she finds herself continually trying to justify her 'correct' classification and feels under constant surveillance from all around her. As will be discussed later in this article, this medicalised process serves to objectify an athlete by testing and measuring their deviation from 'normality'.

These personal accounts provide valuable in-depth insights into the experiences of athletes within specific impairment groups (both physical), but they represent very individual perspectives, and research on the experiences of more athletes within other impairment groups is warranted. There is also need for a departure from the context of the Paralympics. Although it is in this context that issues with classification are revealed to the wider public, by concentrating on this showcase event the current body of academic literature neglects the experiences of players at grassroots level, or elite level in sports and events that do not appear on the Paralympic programme. This paper represents a shift in focus by investigating how classification is experienced and regarded by VI athletes participating in two sports outside of the Paralympic context.

Theoretical framework

Drawing upon phenomenology, sociology and contemporary disability theory, an embodied approach to disability sport (Powis, 2018b) forms this article's theoretical framework.

This interdisciplinary approach centralises disabled athletes' corporeal experiences of sport and physical activity (PA) and, in doing so, counters the inadequate conceptualisation of the body in dominant disability theories (Hughes and Paterson, 1997; Shakespeare, 2013). Our understanding of embodiment is underpinned by the phenomenological notion of the *lived body* (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1945]): rather than the body being an inanimate object without agency, it is our vantage point of perception. By theorising *through* our bodies, embodiment provides a lens to capture the entwined material and social aspects of experience. In the context of disability, we recognise the material basis of disabled peoples' experiences alongside the role of discourse and interaction in endowing certain bodies with value. This is particularly pertinent when examining both the process of classification in disability sport and the social implications of being classified.

This framework has three components. Firstly, we engage with the notion of impairment. For athletes, their bodies and physical performance are under constant scrutiny from teammates, opponents and medical professionals and they are often reduced to their form of impairment or classification. Despite this, impairment should not be understood as a fixed biological state nor ignored by social theorists: impairment emerges out of social, cultural and political conditions (Cole, 2007). To be categorised as a 'B1', 'B2' or 'B3' is a social construction, as is the process of classification and the resulting quota system; yet, these categories significantly structure these sporting subcultures.

Secondly, our approach draws upon the concept of *ableism* (Campbell, 2009; Goodley, 2014; Wolbring, 2008, 2012) to deconstruct the *able-bodied/disabled* and *sighted/blind* binaries. As Campbell (2009: 5) explains, ableism is 'a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human.' In sport and PA, this is manifest through dominant understandings of physicality and the idealised 'sporting body' (Berger, 2009; Brittain, 2004; Seymour, 1998). The nature of a binary is that it contains two distinct composites; however, this is an inaccurate standpoint. There are a multitude of visual impairments – some of which are unstable, degenerative and situation-dependent – thus it is untenable to conceptualise a singular experience of blindness. The fluidity between sightedness and blindness is clearly evident within VI sport and, as will be discussed later, is a point of contention amongst VI athletes.

Finally, our approach seeks to prioritise the traditionally marginalised voices of disabled people (Fitzgerald, 2009) and recognise the potential for agency in resisting dominant disabled discourses. As Zitzelsberger (2005: 400) asserts, disabled people "are productive in conforming to, reiterating and contesting normative standards of 'acceptable' bodies through which they are seen and known". To understand the extent to which athletes accept or reject notions of disability through sport and PA, we must centralise the importance of our participants' personal accounts. Instead of focusing upon the technicalities of classification – like much of the existing literature – we present the athletes' perspectives of this process and their embodied experiences of being classified.

The research

The qualitative data in this article are drawn from two studies investigating the lived experiences of VI cricketers (2014–2016) and footballers (2017), respectively. Although

these studies have some differences in methodological approach – as is outlined below – there is qualitative consistency between them: primarily, the use of in-depth semi-structured interviews with players who occupy a central position in the research. In both studies (Macbeth, 2008, 2009; Powis, 2017), we identified issues of classification as a central empirical theme and, when comparing our data, a number of significant commonalities in players' experiences of and views on classification processes emerged.

The first study is a ten-month ethnography with the England Visually Impaired Cricket team (sixteen males). This dual-phased research, which utilised participant observation and semi-structured interviews, was designed to gather an in-depth insight into the team's social dynamics and to grasp the dominant issues of this space. Access to the team's monthly training weekends was granted by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB), during which the researcher adopted the role of support coach. As a participant in this social setting, the researcher was endowed with a unique status within the group (see Powis, 2018a) and built strong relationships with players and staff. Comprehensive field-notes were recorded throughout this first phase of the ethnography. Semi-structured interviews were then used in the second phase and directly explored the players' experiences and opinions of the areas of interests – including the classification process – that had emerged through participant observation and previous literature. All sixteen members of the squad took part in individual face-to-face interviews (ranging from forty-five minutes to two hours in length).

The second study utilises in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of partially sighted footballers. The purpose of this study was to revisit a number of themes that emerged from Macbeth's previous research into partially sighted football (published between 2006–2010) and, following discussion between the two authors, to further examine the players' views of the classification process and provide comparative data with VI cricket. Seven partially sighted male footballers – including representatives of three Partially Sighted Football League teams (PSFL), the league secretary and two current England internationals – were interviewed using a mixture of face-to-face and telephone interviews (ranging from 52 minutes to one hour 47 minutes in length). Access to this snowball sample was provided by the PSFL secretary and one of the England internationals, who both acted as gatekeepers. In both studies, interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed verbatim. To protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms have also been used.

The field-notes and interview transcripts were collaboratively analysed using Braun et al.'s (2016) six-phase model of thematic analysis. Once familiar with our data, we systematically coded all 'documents' to broadly identify all classification-related data and then proceeded to organise the coded data into candidate themes. Initially, we identified five themes which, after reviewing the representative 'fit' of these categories, was reduced to three overarching themes: *'Lack of faith in classification', 'Classification as social identifiers'* and *'Rumour and gossip of intentional misrepresentation'*. As evident in the following section, these themes structure this article's analytical discussion.

Discussion

Lack of faith in classification

The organisation of classes in VI cricket and football, and the classification process itself, led many players in our studies to have a lack of faith in the current system. VI

sport – and disability sport more broadly – is dependent on classification to ensure equity and legitimise success (Vaillo, 2014); consequently, the problems experienced by VI players lead to significant frustration, tensions and, for one player in particular, a desire to leave their sport. By drawing upon the players' perspectives, we identify the most pertinent issues within VI classification and, in doing so, reinforce Ravensbergen et al.'s (2016) assertion that the current system is not fit for purpose.

Players in both sports regard classification to be complex and confusing. Whilst the specific measures of visual acuity and visual field for each sight class may be known by players, some admit to a lack of understanding of the classification process and others have experienced classification errors in the past. James, who participates in both football and cricket, highlights the centrality of classification in the players' experiences of VI sport:

> the sight class stuff is something every visually impaired person talks about all the time… looking at classifications can be an absolute minefield… it's just a constant challenge isn't it, to have that transparency?

James' quote stresses how complex and confusing classification can be, even for an experienced player who has represented England at both sports. It is also clear that discussing classification is a dominant social practice for VI players, as will be discussed in more detail later. An implication of the players' limited understanding and confusion is that some seem to lack the knowledge and confidence to question the class bestowed upon them by classification 'experts' who, as Peers (2012: 181) maintains, 'exercise power not only through interrogating the disabled subject, but also through surveying the disabled body during their examinations'. If players do not entirely understand how classification works, their own interrogations of visual impairment are effectively restricted, along with their power to contest the normative standards of 'acceptable' bodies (Zitzelsberger, 2005).

In both VI cricket and partially sighted football – as in many disability sports – different VI classes are combined to address low participation levels and enable viable competition. As Jack (footballer) considers, 'I think that at a domestic level, it's good to have the bigger range of classifications 'cause it, it just increases participation levels.' Rather than combined classes, it may be feasible and more desirable to organise competition by individual class; however, this would require an increased number of participants. Players in both sports (cricket and international football) debated the impact of combined classes and quotas upon players with more severe visual impairments, specifically low B2s. Clive, a B2 cricketer, describes the resentment towards him from another B2.

> I've kept someone out the team who is a low partial and he said to me 'Well I can't play international cricket because you're here' which is quite hard to take. At the same time, I thought I don't make the rules. I'm not cheating. I'm within the guidelines… I know I have probably ended someone's career who was a very, very good cricketer.

He goes on to discuss the need for classification to be sport-specific, explaining that having tunnel vision benefits him 'because cricket relies a lot on central sight' and captains and coaches are strategic in selecting certain 'partials' on this basis. Conversely,

within domestic football, it is the lack of a quota system which is marginalising with low B2 players in direct competition for selection against B3, B4 and B5 players. Adam (footballer) acknowledges that if B2s in the PSFL are 'playing against better players with better eyesight, then they're probably getting less contact on the ball.' Whereas combining classes works to ensure viable competition on the one hand, it also contravenes notions of equity and inclusion for many B2 players.

The 'fairness' of classification is further challenged by the inclusion of a B5 class within the PSFL. Matt (footballer), when discussing this contentious issue, reiterates the players' confusion with this process:

Matt:	… it stretches from B1 to B5 now… which has been questioned because IBSA have just brought in their new classification guidelines, which seem actually to be very high, so…
Interviewer:	In what sense sorry?
Matt:	Well, I mean, we, we have a few players that have been classified as B5 but have driving licenses… So you would question well are they actually visually impaired?

Matt makes a significant point: what constitutes a legal visual impairment? British Blind Sport (BBS) describe the B5 class as having 'no top limit' and, as a result, 'is banned in almost all visually impaired sports' (BBS, n.d.) Although there are justifiable reasons for inclusion of the B5 class in the PSFL as many of these players' visual impairments are degenerative and are 'restricting their ability to go and play mainstream 11 a side' (Alex), the controversy lies in the diversity of the B5 class, and the inclusion of those who have, or are rumoured to have, driving licences. Elliot (footballer) asserts that there are effectively 'two sides to B5' and the animosity surrounding this issue is part of the reason he intended to leave the league. Despite the potential for his own team to benefit from having a player who is at the more sighted end of the B5 class, frustrations exist regardless of whether these players are members of their own or other teams.

The players' testimonies highlight that grey areas exist not only between the binaries of sightedness and blindness, but within specific classes – reinforcing the salience of our anti-essentialist approach. Within the B5 class, the socially constructed binary is particularly revealing. A clear distinction is made between those constructed as 'legitimate' B5s, based on either having a degenerative condition and/or not holding a driving licence due to the severity of their visual impairment, and those who, despite being officially classified into the B5 class, have their visual impairment scrutinised because they hold a driving licence. The construction of binaries by players develops a system that endows certain bodies with value and legitimacy and discriminates against others. Despite the social discrimination levied at some 'B5' players, when a group of players demonstrated resistance to their inclusion in the PSFL, they were overpowered; as Elliot recaps 'we've got quite angry about this and … brought it up at the league but we've been sounded out.' This situation emphases how definitions of impairment and what is considered an 'acceptable' body for participation are continually being negotiated and socially constructed within the PSFL and all VI sport.

Classification as social identifiers

As the previous section has revealed, discussions of classification and sight categories dominate the VI sporting space. Whether it be the rush for players to update their classification in the build-up to a major tournament or in-depth team strategy meetings evaluating the minutiae of visual acuity, it is inescapable. Classification also pervades the discourse adopted by the players and coaches: players are commonly identified by their classification. Significantly, they also self-identify with these labels. To be a 'B1' or a 'B5' – or one of the other classifications within this range – is an established social identity. This use of original terminology is commonplace in disability sport.

> Communities of adaptive, wheelchair, and Paralympic sport have also created terminology to describe their specific identities, embodiments, and capacities, which may or may not correspond to terms used in communities outside of sport or within other sport contexts. (Peers et al., 2014: 276).

As Peers et al. recognise, such terminology may be specific to the sporting context. For example, in VI cricket, blind and partially sighted athletes compete on the same team and the terminology reflects this. Rather than using 'blind' or 'partially sighted', 'B1' and 'Partial' are used to signify two distinct social groups. In this context, the B2 and B3 classified players are subsumed into a single group of 'Partials'. In VI football, 'Partial' is not a common identity label because B1 classified players (blind football) and B2–B5 classified players (partially sighted football) do not compete together. However, despite differences in terminology, the use of classification as social identifiers is prevalent in cricket and football.

Consequently, the adoption of these social identifiers in both sports leads to pervasive and detrimental embodied expectations. Due to the classification quota systems explained earlier, there is great competition for starting positions and players, especially those B3–B5 classified, are required to meet the 'expectations' of their particular sight category. Rohan, a B3 classified cricketer, talks about the pressures of meeting the demands imposed upon a 'B3'.

> It is frustrating for me, like when we were out in South Africa, I'm a B3 so I field on the boundary. So, I think, because I'm a B3, I should be able to field on the boundary and I should be able to see the ball, I should be able to do this. I found myself sometimes getting really frustrated that I lost the ball.

He acknowledges that all players are under pressure to perform; but, due to their relatively high levels of sight, the expectation upon B3 classified players is to do significantly more than their teammates. Rohan, when scrutinising his own visual acuity, demonstrates a form of self-surveillance by repeatedly saying 'I should be able…'. He has learnt that the 'B3s' need to be able to field in the deep because no-one else can and is frustrated when he cannot meet the embodied expectations reinforced by team management, coaches and the players themselves.

These embodied expectations are also present within the B1 classification; however, there is a distinct difference. A number of B1 classified players seek to limit expectations and, in doing so, reinforce the status quo. Jatin, a B1 cricketer, accuses both opposition and teammates of cheating the classification system – as will be further explored later

– and qualifies his accusations with a simple argument, 'I'm not being bitter, but that is how it is. I know my capacity and I play like a B1. I'm a steady player, but I am not outstanding.' According to Jatin, 'B1s' should play in a certain way and, if these expectations are breached, rather than recognising a teammate's talent or hard work, there must be some form of foul play. While an elite sporting environment, such as this, should be the place where physical boundaries are challenged, certain players are not willing to accept such advances in performance. Whilst such identifiers are social constructions – as posited in our theoretical approach – the players accept these parameters of performance as a reality. The stereotypes of the sight categories are so engrained that players place unrealistic or, conversely, limited demands upon their corporeal abilities.

The inaccuracy of these embodied stereotypes is underpinned by a 'one size fits all' classification system. As discussed earlier, the current system is not sport-specific thus the unique visual demands of each sport (Ravensbergen et al., 2016) are not recognised and the visual diversity within each category is overlooked. James, a B2 footballer, describes how having poor central vision impacts his batting performance in cricket but acknowledges that in football 'I might look like I'm moving more sighted, when I'm not, I'm just using that little bit of what I've got.' James is aware of how his particular visual impairment results in him potentially exceeding embodied expectations in football, whilst falling short of them in cricket. Alongside the specific sporting demands, the effect of the athletes' age, onset and type of impairment and the environment are also ignored. In our research, the fluidity and unpredictability of the environment emerged as a fundamental factor in performance. Marcus, a B3 cricketer, discusses how the glare of the sun impedes his ability to locate the ball in the field thus he must rely on his teammates' instructions. Kamran and Xander, B1 cricketers, also identify the significance of the weather upon performance and how high winds can lead to disorientation – an experience that Xander describes as 'feeling devoid of anything.' James (B2 footballer), explains how the colour contrast between the futsal court and the ball is central to his performance. He describes his experience of using a black futsal ball on a yellow floor at a multi-sports event and feeling like former England footballer Paul 'Gazza' Gascoigne. However, when playing with a white or yellow ball on a blue floor – as used in the partially sighted league – he sometimes struggles to see the ball.

As the examples above demonstrate, there is diversity in VI sporting experiences and nuance within each sight category. Yet, this is absent from the classification system and, strikingly, absent from the players' stereotypical and dichotomous conceptions of classification. Though Clive, a B2 cricketer, stresses that B1 to B5 are sight classifications rather than playing classifications, this is not apparent in these sporting spaces. In fact, B1 to B5 are simultaneously sight classifications, playing classifications and social classifications – all of which are embodied by the players. The binary distinctions between these categories, reinforced by the members of these spaces gloss over the diversity of VI experience and serve to alienate players with particular impairments.

Rumour and gossip of intentional misrepresentation

As we have shown so far, the complexity of classification, confusion surrounding it, and players' lack of faith in the system, mean that there is a degree of speculation regarding other's visual impairment. This speculation – underpinned by embodied expectations – fuels rumour and gossip which may culminate in accusations of IM by both opposing players and

teammates. In both sports, while some players stress that everyone is subject to (or of) the same classification tests, others are certain that these tests can be cheated and, therefore question the whole process of sight classification. In a football context, Matt declares that he has known people who have 'blatantly lied to an optician… probably to try and get into the England developments or England teams… And there's certainly been at least one that's been caught out… when it's gone to like an IBSA check.' Similarly, Jatin makes the point that 'I can control what I see and not see when I'm going to the opticians' and, in doing so, a player can purposefully receive a lower sight classification. He goes on to emphatically claim, 'We know who is a cheat and who is not. But what can you do?' Although, one could provide false information when identifying letters on the chart during a Snellen test, classification testing is more advanced than one singular visual acuity test with field of vision and light refraction also being tested. Despite the implications that lying may have upon various aspects of an individual's life, such as being legally allowed to drive, Jatin and Matt are sure that some players cheat the system.

Adam, former England international footballer, asserts that the coordination of classification processes in elite VI sport has recently improved, but is certain that there have been historic cases of IM. This opinion is also shared by Thomas and Marcus, both B3 cricketers. There have been no official complaints or reported cases of IM within the England cricket and football teams and no cricket players make any reference to an individual actually being banned for cheating. However, Adam makes strong claims about the integrity of particular countries, specifically Belarus who were prolific at European and World Championships between 1998 and 2012 (IBSA, n.d.):

Adam:	…it's got better, last four years, they've really stricken down on it, in the early days, did it work? No. Do I think I lost medals because of other countries? Yep. Eastern European, Russia, Belarus…
Interviewer:	I was gonna say, what's happened to Belarus…
Adam:	They're gone, 'cos they've been found out.

Despite Matt's earlier claims, Adam does not reveal any accusations levied at England players either from within the squad or by opposing teams. He implies that England are one of the reputable countries – a status which Adam suggests is recognised internationally with IBSA knowing 'which countries are legit.'

In cricket, the most uncompromising accusations directed within the England squad are towards B1s, usually by 'Partials'– something that is not observable in VI football due to B1s competing separately. Sandy, a B1 classified player, is clearly aware of the existing gossip surrounding his own classification and feels exasperated by his peers' accusations behind his back.

> It is frustrating at times… Why would anybody pretend that they couldn't see to play blind cricket? I don't know how you feel about it Ben, but I've had as many eye tests as anybody could imagine and want to have or not want to have. They all come back… the last one that came back was worse than the previous one.

He makes the point that he has been tested numerous times and is taken aback by the fact that someone would want to lie about their sight. Being branded as a cheat by his

teammates questions his integrity and trustworthiness. Sandy, who uses a guide dog in everyday life, is understandably upset that some of his peers feel that his sight is better than he claims. This behaviour is not confined to VI cricket and football. In the context of wheelchair basketball, Peers (2012) found herself continually trying to justify her 'correct' classification and was under constant surveillance from all around her: 'both my classification and diagnosis are debated by my teammates, coaches, adversaries and even fans. Everyone is an expert on disability and classification, it seems' (184). In Sandy's case, it is particularly interesting to note that the accusers' behaviour is counter-intuitive. To accuse a fellow teammate of cheating the system, unless there is a genuine case of cheating, is wholly disruptive and marginalising. Gossip commonly targets those individuals of a higher social status or a potential rival (McAndrew et al., 2007); however, within the VI cricket team, the roles are reversed. As evident above, players with the highest sight levels accuse their B1 teammates of cheating with no clear individual gain. Yet, it does serve an important function: to preserve the set social and 'bodily' structure. Within a sports team, individual and group interests overlap and, depending on the context, the use of gossip is both self-serving and group serving (Kniffin and Wilson, 2005). The group's norms and values, that position the players with most sight at the top, are undermined if the blind players can play as well, if not better, than their partially sighted teammates. It is within the interest of those with social power to retain that position. Gossip is used to defend and reaffirm the group's norms (Kniffin and Wilson, 2005) and, in the context of cricket, reinforce the marginality of the blind players.

In response to the accusations levied at B1 cricketers, Xander argues that the real problem are those players who are classified at the higher end of the B3 category and, in his words 'could drive a car but actually come to play', as discussed previously in relation to B5s in domestic football. Brett, also a B1 cricketer, is in agreement and asserts '… if I was being absolutely honest, I've some question marks about some of our own [partially sighted] players'. An interesting dynamic is present in cricket when blind players are accusing partially sighted players of cheating. Whilst these may be genuine accusations, it is an opportunity for the B1 classified players to turn the tables and accuse higher sighted players. Jatin, Brett and Xander, the three players who openly claim that there are cheaters within the squad, are all registered as blind; yet, they still make accusations despite being unable to watch the players they are scrutinising. Although observation is a multi-sensory process, without visual perception, it is extremely difficult to gauge if a teammate can see more than they claim. So once again, there is seemingly little basis to these accusations. Rather than preserving the group dynamic through gossip, they are challenging it and, by doing so, disrupting the partially sighted players' higher status. As John, a B2 cricketer, admits, 'it just seems to be a real culture in this sport. They like to have a moan and I don't know where that has come from.' Yet, as we have demonstrated, accusations of IM are meaningful social interactions and continue to play a significant role in these sporting spaces.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined a number of issues pertaining to classification in VI football and cricket. Unlike previous research, we have prioritised the voices of VI

athletes and have drawn upon their experiences of classification and the consequences of being socially categorised. As acknowledged earlier, there is a worrying dearth of research accounting for disabled athletes' perspectives on classification; this article is the first to make a contribution to this knowledge gap. We have provided evidence that the diversity of visual impairment, the complexity of classification and the confusion experienced by many players has created an endemic culture of rumour and gossip. Yet, with no publicly available official records of IM in VI football and cricket, we are unable to verify even the most vehement of these accusations. To understand this complex and sometimes fractious culture, we turn to the significance of these social interactions and the fundamental role of embodied expectations. B1–B5 are more than just sight classifications: they are established forms of identity – with expected social and physical characteristics – which serve to structure these spaces. Accusations of IM are often used to reinforce these expectations and marginalise those players who transcend the binary categories. Whether it be the pressure of competing for a place in the squad, the embarrassment of being outperformed by a teammate with less sight or the frustration being having to play with and against players who have 'too much sight', the players seek to maintain the existing embodied expectations.

To contextualise the current public debates relating to classification in disability sport, we must grasp the social, cultural and political impact – upon both athletes and teams – of being classified. While the evidence presented at parliamentary committees or public hearings will grab the headlines, it is the subtle and marginalising consequences of classification that deserve equal attention. Further research is needed into disability team sports and how classification is used to structure the hierarchy of sporting spaces. This is particularly prescient in team sports, such as wheelchair basketball and rugby, where players are numerically classified and are given a 'value' pertaining to their level of sporting function. In these sports, and the two that were the focus of this article, it is the range of players with differing impairments in the same team that is of academic significance. There is also a need for more VI sport specific research that builds upon the issues identified here: first, the inclusion of the B5 class in a minority of VI sport and the long-term effects upon these sports because of this decision; second, in the context of VI cricket, whether separate blind and partially sighted games are desirable and/or achievable; and, third, how might a sport-specific VI classification system work and what steps are needed to make this a possibility. As acknowledged earlier, developing a new system of VI classification is complex and research in this area is in the incipient stages (Mann and Ravensbergen, 2018). However, it is crucial that athletes are placed at the centre of this process so that these issues are addressed and sport-specific classification in VI sport becomes a less complex, divisive and marginalising experience.

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