


Development of Psychological Resources of Paralympians: From Engagement to Impact on Performance and Social Integration

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Athletes with disabilities encounter not only the well-known physical, emotional, psychological, and social demands of sport, but also a set of additional challenges that are often less visible. These challenges arise from deeper philosophical and existential questions — questions about fairness, about the need for adapted conditions, and about the gap between expectations and a reality that does not always cooperate.

Recognizing and accepting this reality is not a sign of resignation. On the contrary, it is a crucial step in developing resilience and unlocking one's full potential, both within sport and far beyond it.

- ▶ The role of a sports psychologist in Paralympic sport goes far beyond traditional performance support. Our approach is based on the principle of equal psychological attitudes toward athletes with both “disabled” and “non-disabled” abilities. Every athlete represents a unique configuration of variables — and physical disability is only one of them.

In our work, we focus on several key domains essential for high performance and long-term well-being:

- ▶ **Self-regulation**, including the ability to manage arousal, attention, and performance states.
- ▶ **Psychological resilience**, particularly in the face of repeated adaptation demands and social barriers.
- ▶ **Emotional adaptability**, the capacity to navigate complex emotional experiences that arise in training and competition.
- ▶ **Motivational structures of the athlete’s personality**, helping athletes build sustainable and autonomous motivation.
- ▶ **Acceptance of body image**, which plays a central role in confidence, identity, and athletic expression.
- ▶ Through these areas, we aim to strengthen not only competitive readiness but also the athlete’s overall psychological functioning and quality of life.

Case Example: Work with a Representative of the Ukrainian Deaflympics Team

- ▶ The client was an athlete with a hearing impairment who presented with a significantly increased level of anxiety long before competition events. As the competition approached, this anxiety often escalated into fear, resulting in physical inhibition and situational stupor. These states led to a complete loss of cognitive control and an inability to remain engaged in the game.
- ▶ The elevated anxiety also disrupted the athlete's recovery schedule, sleep quality, eating patterns, and other essential rest routines.
- ▶ We had a **four-month working period before the start of the Deaflympics**, with **weekly 50-minute sessions** and additional meetings upon request.

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Main objectives

- ▶ Restoration and normalization of the recovery schedule
- ▶ Reduction of anxiety levels
- ▶ Development of self-regulation strategies

Key methods used

- ▶ **Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)** as the foundational approach
- ▶ **Mindfulness techniques** to increase awareness and reduce automatic stress reactions
- ▶ **Guided visualizations** to build confidence and pre-performance stability
- ▶ **Breathing exercises** for physiological regulation
- ▶ **Refocusing techniques** to interrupt spiraling worry and regain attentional control
- ▶ **Psychoeducation**, particularly shifting attention from outcome orientation to process orientation

Outcome

- ▶ By the time of the competition, the athlete demonstrated a significantly reduced baseline anxiety level and more stable well-being throughout the event. The athlete summarized the experience with the phrase:
“I felt a sense of control.”


Another case - work with ampfootball


League of the Able: Current Developments in Ukraine


- ▶ Today, the *League of the Able* is actively developing in Ukraine. This is a social initiative of the Ukrainian Football Association (UAF) aimed at supporting the growth of ampfootball — football played by individuals with limb amputations or impaired function of one limb.
- ▶ The project seeks not only to promote ampfootball as an independent and promising sport, but also to support people with amputations, particularly war veterans, in returning to active life. Through participation in sport, athletes receive opportunities for physical rehabilitation, psychological recovery, and social reintegration.
- ▶ The Sport Psychology team has now begun working with the League of the Able teams. While team-wide requests are still in the early stages of formation, individual consultations have already started to emerge, reflecting the growing need for structured psychological support within this community.

Case Example: Work with a War Veteran in Ampfootball

- ▶ At this stage, we have conducted two meetings with a war veteran who lost a limb — specifically his hand — and who is now integrating into ampfootball. His primary request, within the context of sports psychology, concerns **the fear of letting the team down**.
- ▶ Because of his specific role in the game, he is not involved as actively as the field players during certain phases of play. While observing his teammates run, engage, and cover the field, he begins to experience increasing anxiety. With every minute of passive observation, the fear of making a mistake that could lead to the team's defeat grows stronger. These thoughts also emerge outside the sports context, contributing to a heightened overall stress level.

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- ▶ The athlete has no previous experience with such a situation. Nevertheless, he actively constructs *theoretical scenarios* of potential mistakes, imagining negative reactions from teammates and the coach. These imagined outcomes are built upon his own internal assumptions rather than real evidence — yet they significantly intensify his emotional load.
 - ▶ It is important to highlight that the work of a sports psychologist extends far beyond the field or court. The psychological processes that unfold in an athlete's daily life — their beliefs, fears, stressors, and interpersonal expectations — inevitably influence their performance and their capacity to grow within the sport. Supporting athletes like this veteran involves addressing both the sporting experience and the broader psychological context that shapes it.

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- ▶ At this stage, two sessions were conducted with a war veteran who had lost a limb - specifically, his hand. His primary request, in the context of sports psychology, centered on a **fear of letting the team down**.
 - ▶ During certain phases of the game, his role requires less active involvement compared to the field players. As he observes his teammates running, covering distance, and engaging intensely in the match, his anxiety increases. With each minute of reduced engagement, the fear of making a mistake — one that could potentially lead to the team's defeat — becomes more intense. These anticipatory thoughts also occur outside the field, contributing to an overall elevated level of stress.

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- ▶ Although he has no previous experience with this type of situation, he mentally simulates *theoretical* negative outcomes: imagined mistakes, the assumed reactions of teammates, and possible criticism from the coach. These scenarios are based not on real events, but on his internal assumptions.
 - ▶ It is important to emphasize that the work of a sports psychologist extends far beyond what happens on the field. The athlete's daily life, beliefs, stressors, and personal history inevitably influence performance and psychological readiness.

Interventions and Progress

- ▶ A hypothesis was proposed that **increasing the athlete's level of involvement** might help produce rapid changes in his emotional state. Together, we considered the strategy of maintaining *constant verbal communication* with teammates during play. This approach helps increase engagement, reduce internal rumination, and anchor the athlete in real-time action.
- ▶ Through structured cognitive modeling, we explored his catastrophic thinking patterns. Initially, his internal narrative stopped at:
“If I make a mistake — I fail. Everything will be bad.”
We expanded this model through guided questioning:
 - ▶ *What exactly might happen?*
 - ▶ *What would you do next?*
 - ▶ *How would your teammates actually react?*
 - ▶ *What evidence do you have for these assumptions?*
 - ▶ *What would your coach realistically do in this situation? Why do you think so?*

This deeper analysis revealed gaps in his reasoning and helped weaken the emotional impact of the initial catastrophic thought.

Next Steps

The upcoming sessions will focus on:

- ▶ **Mastering self-regulation techniques**
- ▶ **Psychoeducation to reshape his image of competence and role within the team**
- ▶ Strengthening a more balanced, realistic internal dialogue
- ▶ Reinforcing an active, confident behavioral model during play




Results and Effects of Psychological Support

- ▶ Individual outcomes
- ▶ Stabilization of the emotional state
- ▶ Improvement in technical confidence
- ▶ Increased sense of competence

Prospects for the Development of Sports Psychology Work with Athletes with Disabilities

When discussing the future development of sports psychology in the context of disability sports, it is important to distinguish between two key directions:

1. work with **professional athletes** — representatives of national teams, Paralympic and Deaflympic programs;
2. work with **amateur athletes**, such as participants of the *League of the Able*, for whom sport serves as a means of rehabilitation, emotional stabilization, and rebuilding social belonging — particularly for military veterans transitioning out of their combat units.



In the professional sphere, we are currently observing a steady increase in interest from athletes regarding their own mental health and psychological readiness. There is growing awareness of the role of psychological factors in both training and competitive performance. This tendency is evident across all levels — from youth development programs to elite adult competitions.

However, an equally important challenge lies in **creating conditions that enable every athlete to realize their athletic potential and personal aspirations**, regardless of the presence of a disability. This includes building accessible psychological services, integrating mental health support into training systems, and ensuring cooperation between coaches, medical teams, and psychologists.

The development of sports psychology in disability sports is not only about performance enhancement. It is about restoring agency, strengthening resilience, and enabling individuals to return to active, meaningful life roles — both in sport and far beyond it.



Thank you!