

INTRODUCTION

- Paraspport is increasing in awareness and involvement at the grassroots, national, and international levels.^{1,2}
- Participation in paraspport is associated with enhanced physical and psychological health, self-perceptions, quality of life, and social integration for individuals with physical disabilities²⁻⁴
- Despite these benefits and the growing acceptance of paraspport for individuals with physical disabilities, there is limited research investigating the factors that influence athletes' with physical disabilities transition into paraspport.

OBJECTIVE

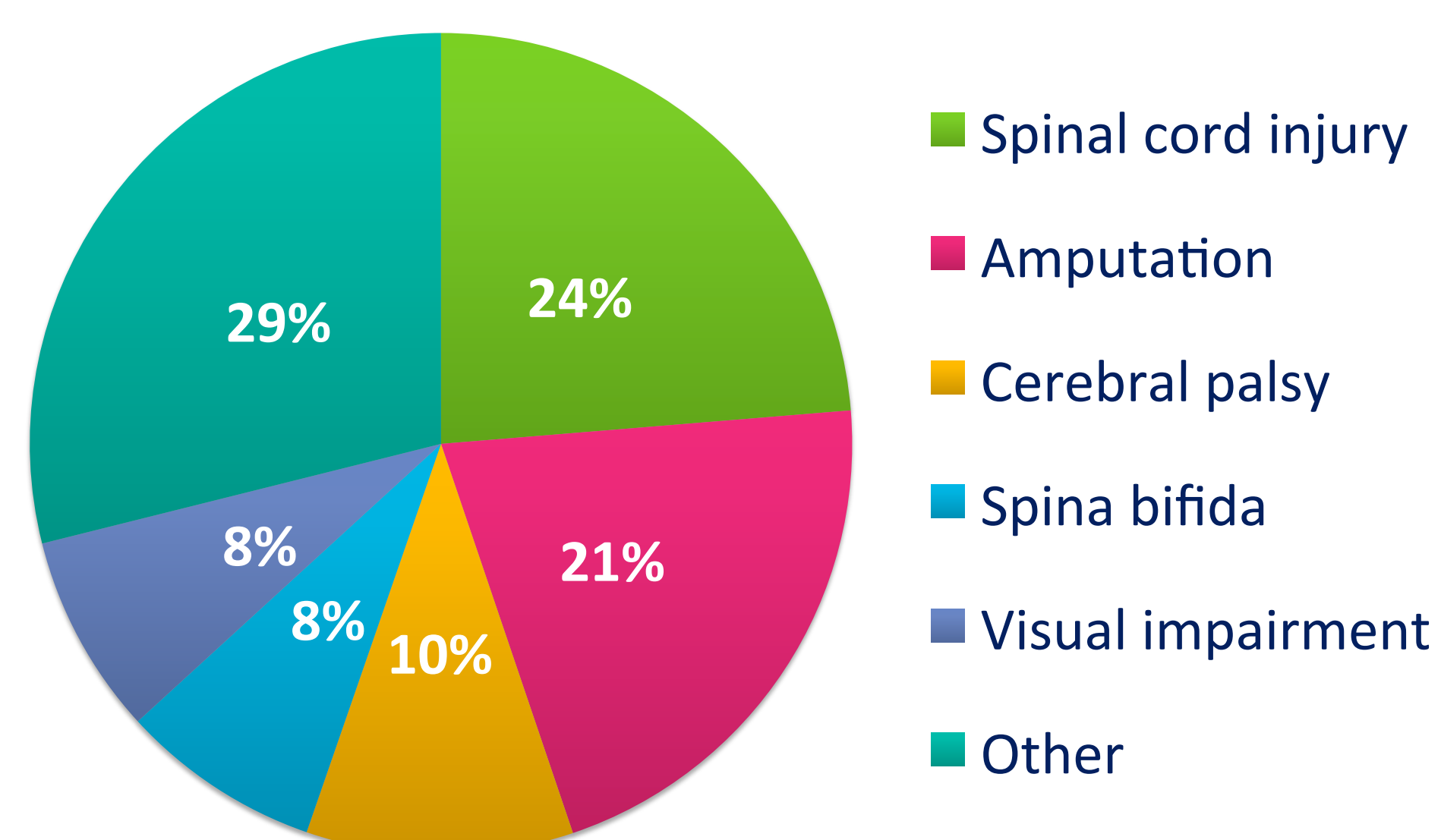
- To explore the training experiences and psychosocial factors associated with transitioning into paraspport among elite paraspport athletes.

METHODOLOGY

- Participants ($N = 39$, ages 14 to 64 years) were recruited from a variety of Provincial Sports Organizations across Canada in the Fall 2015. Eligibility criteria included: (a) identifying as having any type of physical disability (congenital, acquired; traumatic, non-traumatic), (b) having experience competing in elite paraspports; and (c) being a Canadian resident.
- Participants completed a 20-item Paraspports Transition Questionnaire (available in English or French) using an online platform (FluidSureys[®]) that targeted factors related to: disability background, age of onset of paraspport, social support, motivations to engage in paraspport, and barriers to initiating and maintaining participation in paraspport.
- Data Analysis:** Descriptive statistics (i.e., frequencies and means) were conducted to examine sample characteristics with respect to disability and involvement in paraspport. Thematic content analysis⁵ was conducted to identify the types of barriers and social support received across the athletes' paraspport experience.

RESULTS

Figure 1. Type of Physical Disability



Sample Characteristics

- $M_{age} = 28.6$ years
- 44.7% male
- 71.1% English speaking
- 56.4% with an acquired physical disability

"AT WHAT AGE DID YOU START PARASPORT?"

- Athletes reported starting paraspport at an average age of 18.4 years, with age of first exposure ranging from 5 to 48 years
- Athletes with a congenital disability reported participating in paraspport earlier than athletes with an acquired disability (on average, at approximately 13 versus 22 years, respectively)
- Athletes with an acquired disability began participating in their paraspport of choice, on average, 4.4 years after acquiring their disability

"WHY DID YOU FIRST GET INVOLVED IN PARASPORT?"

- Competition and self-improvement**
"I grew up being an athlete and participating in competitive sports. That part of me is still the same post-accident. I am still a competitive athlete and always want to push myself further."
- Personal enjoyment**
"I love sport and can't imagine my life without it."

"WHO SUPPORTED YOUR EXPOSURE TO PARASPORT, AND HOW?"

Coaches

- Mentoring
- Information about and introduction to paraspport

Parents

- Transportation, financial support
- Mothers: Encouragement, psychological support

Physiotherapists

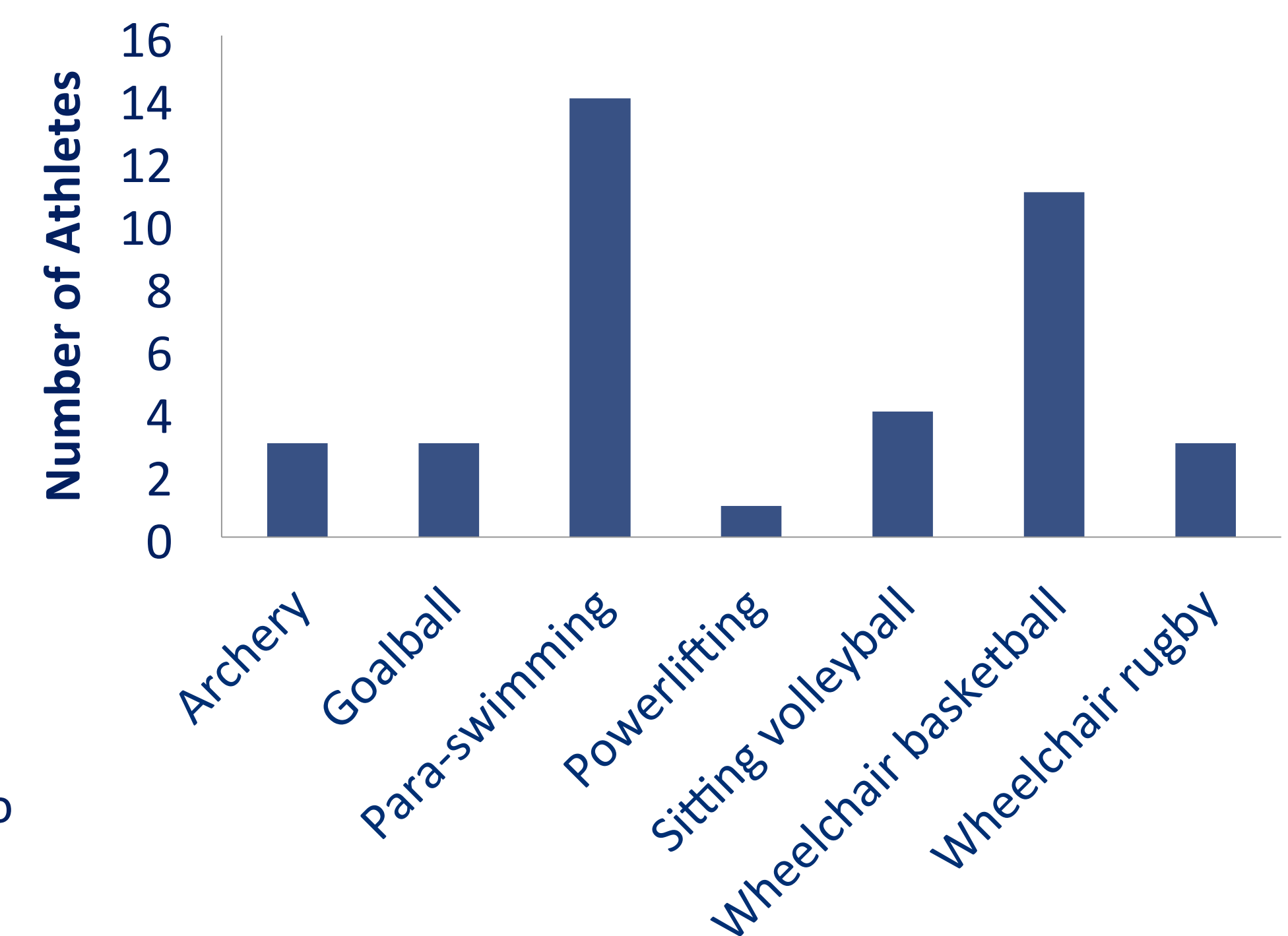
- Information about opportunities
- Emotional and psychological support

RESULTS

"WHAT PARASPORT DO YOU PLAY?"

- Most athletes (61.5%) competed in either wheelchair basketball or para-swimming
- Para-swimming was common among athletes with congenital disabilities ($n = 12$), whereas wheelchair basketball and sitting volleyball were common among athletes with acquired disabilities ($n = 13$)
- 77% competed at the elite level in the same paraspport they were introduced to as a novice

Figure 2. Paraspports athletes competing in at the 2015 Para Pan Am Games



"...BIGGEST OBSTACLES YOU HAVE ENCOUNTERED...?"

Throughout athletes' participation in paraspport:

Lack of resources (e.g., programs, facilities, equipment, and knowledgeable coaches)

Initiation

Perceived challenges with learning new or adapting skills

Self-confidence, concentration, emotional readiness

Continued Participation

Financial

Lack of time

Stress management and pain

DISCUSSION

- This is the first known study to examine factors related to elite athletes' experiences with transitioning into paraspport.
- Our findings demonstrated that the first paraspport that athletes participated in is typically the one they pursue in the future. This highlights the importance of initial sport contact and a positive first experience among individuals with disabilities. Alternatively, this could highlight a lack of sport sampling. Further research is needed to understand whether para-athletes benefit from sampling rather than specializing in one sport.
- Coaches played an integral role in most athletes' paraspport experience, emphasizing the importance of providing coaches with appropriate training and education to enhance their ability to guide individuals through their athletic development. Parents and health care professionals should continue providing various types of support to facilitate athletes' participation in paraspport.
- Other future directions include: (a) considering how best to target and enhance exposure to paraspport in earlier childhood of individuals with congenital disabilities, (b) the role of health care professionals in achieving a shorter transition period to paraspport for athletes with acquired disabilities, and (c) addressing issues surrounding a lack of available resources in order to support the initiation and maintenance of athletes' participation in paraspport.
- These findings can be used as a catalyst to develop opportunities for facilitating the process of recruiting and supporting individuals with physical disabilities into paraspport.

REFERENCES

- Misener, L. (2017). Managing legacy and the Paralympic Games. In *Managing the Paralympics* (pp. 93-111). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Blauwet, C., & Willick, S.E. (2012). The paralympic movement: Using sports to promote health, disability rights, and social integration for athletes with disabilities. *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*, 4, 851-856.
- Groff, D.G., Lundberg, N.R., Zabriskie, R.B. (2009). Influence of adapted sport on quality of life: Perceptions of athletes with cerebral palsy. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 31, 318-326.
- Perrier, M.J., Sweet, S.N., Strachan, S.M., & Latimer-Cheung, A.E. (2012). I act, therefore I am: Athletic identity and the health action process approach predict sport participation among individuals with acquired physical disabilities. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 13, 713-720.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our gratitude to the athletes who took time out of their schedules to participate in this study.