



**athletes
for hope**
wellbeing



**A Place
For Us**

Rise of the Paralympic Movement Toolkit

How Para athletes are reshaping sports, identity, and mental health — and how you can be part of it.



www.athletesforhope.org
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This toolkit was created for everyone who believes sport is bigger than a single body, a single season, or a single definition of what an athlete looks like.

July is Disability Pride Month, a time to celebrate disability not as something to overcome, but as part of identity, community, and strength. The Paralympic movement is one of the most powerful examples of what happens when we expand who gets to belong in sport. And yet, for too many Para athletes, the biggest barriers are not on the field of play. They are in visibility, language, access, and mental health support.

This toolkit is designed to change that, one conversation at a time.

It is meant to give you an honest look at the rise of the Paralympic movement, where it started, how far it has come, and how much further it can go. It will equip you with the language and awareness to show up as a genuine ally to disabled athletes in your life. And it will connect you with real resources for adaptive sports, mental health support, and the student-athlete pipeline, so you can take action beyond this page.

Whether you are a Para athlete, a coach, a teammate, a fan, or someone just beginning to learn, this toolkit is for you. You do not need to have all the answers. You just need to be willing to show up.

From all of us at Athletes for Hope and A Place For Us, happy Disability Pride Month. For more resources, stories, and tools to support athlete wellbeing at every level, visit athletewellbeing.org and aplaceforusdisability.org.

This is just the beginning.

With gratitude and pride,

Athletes for Hope Wellbeing
A Place For Us

From Stoke Mandeville to Paris

A movement born from a doctor's belief that sport could heal — and change minds.

- **1948** Sir Ludwig Guttman creates the Stoke Mandeville Games for wheelchair-using WWII veterans. Sport as rehabilitation — and dignity.
- **1960** First official Paralympic Games, Rome. 400 athletes, 23 countries, 8 sports. The world's most underestimated athletic stage opens.
- **2012** London becomes the most attended Paralympics in history. Broadcast deals, sponsorships, and a mainstream audience arrive.
- **2024** Paris opens the ceremony on the Champs-Élysées — outside a stadium for the first time. 4,400 athletes. 169 nations. A cultural moment.



The Paralympic torch relay now officially begins in Stoke Mandeville — the movement's spiritual home — at every Games.

The Numbers are Staggering

From 400 athletes in Rome to a global cultural movement — in one generation.

**400 →
4,400+
Athletes**

Rome 1960 to Paris 2024

45% Women

Female Para athletes at Paris 2024

**549 Medal
Events**

Paris 2024 — 80 world
records broken

169 Nations

Record delegations at Paris 2024

2.5M Tickets Sold

Paris 2024 Paralympic ticket sales

Viewership is Growing

Paris 2024 doubled US viewership vs. Tokyo — surpassing 200M American viewers. Post-Paris research: 73% of viewers had a more positive perception of disabled people after watching. Milano Cortina 2026 was the most widely broadcast Winter Paralympics in history, reaching 126 countries.

But There is Still a Visibility Gap

In the US, NBC aired just 8 hours of Winter Paralympic coverage on linear TV — with the bulk of events available only on Peacock (paid streaming). Most medal moments never reached a casual audience. Jenny Sichel: "In Rio, I don't think anyone in the US could see my race when it happened."

Language Matters – Get it Right

Words shape how we think about people. The disability community has its own evolving preferences.



Use with Confidence

Ask the individual what they prefer when you can.

- "Para athlete" or "Paralympian" – the IPC's own term; widely embraced by the community
- "Disabled athlete" – identity-first language, preferred by ~49% of disabled people surveyed globally
- "Athlete with a disability" – person-first language, preferred by ~33%; honors the whole person
- "Wheelchair user" – not "confined to" or "wheelchair-bound"
- "Has [condition]" – e.g. "has cerebral palsy," not "suffers from" or "afflicted with"



Avoid

- "Wheelchair-bound" or "confined to a wheelchair" – a wheelchair is a tool, not a trap
- "Suffers from" / "afflicted with" / "victim of" – frames disability as tragedy
- "Special needs" – vague, often condescending
- "Handicapped" – outdated; avoid in most contexts
- "Inspirational" as the default reaction – Para athletes are not competing for your motivation
- "High-functioning" or "low-functioning" – oversimplifies complex lived experience

The Mental Health Picture

Para athletes carry a layered mental load that most sports systems are not yet built to address.

33.6% of Elite Athletes

Report symptoms of anxiety or depression — 2019 meta-analysis cited in the IOC Mental Health Consensus Statement (Br J Sports Med, 2019)

15% Weekly Prevalence

Para athletes reporting anxiety or depression symptoms — 44-week prospective longitudinal study, 59 elite Para athletes (Fagher et al., GMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine, 2025)

Dual Stigma

Disability stigma from society + mental health stigma from sports culture. Para athletes navigate both simultaneously — with fewer dedicated support systems than Olympic counterparts.

Isolation & Visibility

Para sport receives far less media coverage. Jenny Sichel: “In Rio, I don’t think anyone in the US could see my race when it happened.” Invisibility compounds loneliness.

Physical-Mental Overlap

Para athletes experience injury and illness at high rates — and the research shows each worsens the other. Mental distress increases injury risk; injury increases mental distress.

In Their Own Words

AFH Wellbeing Ambassadors who are leading the conversation.

"Equipping athletes with the knowledge and skills to strengthen their mental health is crucial for their overall success and longevity in their careers."

Isaac Jean-Paul is a Paralympic high jumper and long jumper, currently training for the 2024 Paris Olympics. Isaac is also the head sprint coach for San Diego State University's Adaptive Sports Program, as well as a published author and motivational speaker.



Isaac Jean-Paul
Para Long Jump & High Jump
World Record Holder (T13)
Tokyo 2020 Bronze Medalist
AFH Wellbeing Ambassador



Jenny Sichel
Para Rowing
Rio 2016 Silver Medalist
AFH Wellbeing Ambassador

"Why can't we add something into coaching certification where coaches have to go through mental health first aid training? And just — normalize the conversation."

Jenny Sichel is a 2016 Rio Paralympic Silver Medalist in the PR3 4+, a five-time World Rowing Championship Silver Medalist, and a seven-time member of the US Rowing Para National Team. She recently made the switch from the boat to the launch and once again represented Team USA at the Tokyo Paralympics as the coach for the PR1 W1x.

The Tools of the Trade

Para athletes use specialized equipment, classification systems, and support networks to compete at the highest level.

Assistive Technology

Carbon fiber running blades (prosthetics for sprinters), racing wheelchairs, handcycles, tandem bikes (for visually impaired cyclists with sighted "pilots"), adaptive oars, and sport-specific prosthetic designs — each engineered for the demands of a specific event.

Support Teams

Paralympic performance depends on a full team: coaches, physiotherapists, classifiers, sports psychologists, nutritionists, and equipment technicians. Since Paris 2024, Paralympians receive more equitable funding — but gaps in mental health staffing remain significant versus Olympic programs.



Classification System

The IPC classification system groups athletes by functional ability — not diagnosis. Athletes are assessed by trained classifiers and placed in a sport class (e.g., T13 for visually impaired track athletes). This ensures athletes compete against others with comparable functional ability, not comparable diagnoses.

Adaptive Training Environments

Access to appropriate training facilities is itself a barrier — research shows longer travel time to training facilities directly increases injury risk in Para athletes. Accessible gyms, adaptive pools, and Para-specific coaching programs are not uniformly available even at elite levels.

How to Show Up for Para Athletes

Being a genuine ally is about engagement — not inspiration. Here's what that looks like in practice.

Watch & Share

Follow Para athletes year-round, not just during Games. Share their content. Viewership directly affects sponsorship and funding. Para athletes competing at Paris 2024 finally received equitable prize money for the first time — visibility made that possible.

Talk About the Sport

Ask about the athlete's event, training, and goals — not about their disability. Treat Para athletes like elite athletes, because they are. Curiosity about the sport and their performance is almost always welcome.

Fund the Gaps

Adaptive equipment can cost \$10,000–\$80,000+. Organizations like Challenged Athletes Foundation (challengedathletes.org) provide grants for prosthetics, wheelchairs, and adaptive gear. A Place For Us (aplaceforusdisability.org) supports the student-athlete pipeline.

Check Your Language

Use what you learned on the previous slide. When you don't know someone's preference, "Para athlete" and "athlete" are both respected defaults. If you're corrected, receive it as a gift, not a criticism.

Support Mental Health Infrastructure

Advocate for mental health resources at every level of sport — Para and otherwise. AFH Wellbeing Ambassadors like Isaac Jean-Paul and Jenny Sichel are building this culture. Follow them, share their work, and bring their voices into your spaces.

Take the Next Step

Resources to go deeper — across sport, mental health, and disability advocacy.

AFH Wellbeing

[**athletesforhope.org/afh-wellbeing**](https://athletesforhope.org/afh-wellbeing)

Ambassador stories, Wellbeing Fellowship, and mental health resources for athletes at every level.

A Place For Us

[**aplaceforusdisability.org**](https://aplaceforusdisability.org)

Peer mentoring for students with disabilities from high school through college.

Challenged Athletes Foundation

[**challengedathletes.org**](https://challengedathletes.org)

Grants for adaptive sports equipment, prosthetics, and coaching for athletes with physical challenges.

International Paralympic Committee

[**paralympic.org**](https://paralympic.org)

Movement history, athlete profiles, classification guides, and the A Winning Mindset podcast series.

Move United

[**moveunitedsport.org**](https://moveunitedsport.org)

Established 1956 — the national leader in community-based adaptive sports, serving people of all abilities across 70+ member organizations.

GLASA

[**glasa.org**](https://glasa.org)

Great Lakes Adaptive Sports Association: year-round adaptive sports programs and competitions for youth and adults across the Midwest.

ParaCollegeSport.com

[**paracollegesport.com**](https://paracollegesport.com)

USOPC/NCAA hub for growing Para sport programs at the college level.



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