

# Leading by Example: A Call to Action for the New Committee "I.S.Mu.L.T. Sport and Disability" to Promote the Benefits of Sports for Individuals with Severe Disabilities

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The positive impact of sports on physical and mental well-being is widely acknowledged both in the general population and among individuals with disabilities (1). Sports participation provides physical, psychological, and social benefits for participants, creating the basis for personal empowerment of people with disabilities (2). Regular participation in sports offers benefits that extend beyond the physical realm, encompassing psychosocial aspects as well (3, 4). It promotes higher social interaction and independence, and increased self-confidence. Team sports, in particular, contribute significantly to character development, body awareness, group dynamics, and self-esteem, enhancing feelings of security and gratification (5). All of these features may positively influence the overall quality of life (QoL) (6). These people also recognize the disease as less cyclical and more chronic. This knowledge enables the development of strategies to keep people more involved in the community (7).

Individuals with severe degrees of disability face challenges such as poor health, limited community participation, and

reduced quality of life (8). A poor QoL leads to emotional and mood disorders, while a high QoL is linked to a reduced perception of symptoms and an increased awareness of the course of the disease (9). Regardless of the disease, people with severe disabilities frequently perceive a negative body image. Physical differences resulting from impairments can lead to self-consciousness, negative self-perception, and dissatisfaction with their bodies (10). Low body image can harm their self-esteem, self-confidence, and overall psychological well-being (11). Generally, QoL results in significantly higher satisfaction in individuals with physical disabilities who practice any kind of sport respect than who do not participate (12). A similar finding was found for children and adolescents, including those with cerebral palsy (13), and for adults with neuromuscular diseases (2).

Medical treatments, even though necessary, may add constraints to these individuals' lives, imposing several access to the hospital facilities (14). Unfortunately, most medical professionals and caregivers frequently perceive these subjects

as unfit to participate in sports, especially if strenuous muscular effort is required. Consequently, physicians arbitrarily recommend avoiding competitive physical activities, when they rarely suggest sports as a viable option for these subjects (8).

Sports participation can greatly contribute to disability empowerment (15). The Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) Manual published by the World Health Organization focuses on empowerment as a primary goal (16). The integration of people with disabilities into the most common activities in the community is the most significant element in achieving this target. Organized sports give participants opportunities to gain independence and self-confidence (17). Empowerment is closely related to self-efficacy as the belief in one's own ability to perform a certain task or accomplish a certain goal. Empowered individuals tend to enhance their perceived competence in various domains such as academic, social, vocational, and behavior (18).

Social capital is another key benefit of sports involvement for people with disabilities. It is defined as “the relationships and the benefits derived from these relationships in conjunction with external variables (organizational characteristics, living situation, family involvement, personality characteristics, perceived level of disability)” (19). The benefits of participating in organized sports include social inclusion, which is closely linked to social capital (20). Disability communities also derive social capital through their direct participation in sports and through their extended involvement with others in their sports communities using social networking platforms. Through sport it is possible to bridge the gap between the disabled young person and the outside world, trying to reduce the distance created. Organizations can foster trust and cooperation among these individuals.

The specific assessment of the impact of sports activities in the life of individuals with different disabilities in terms of clinical and neuropsychological and functional status (even in terms of biomechanical aspects), the correct and adapted medical management in case of injuries and the analysis of the quality of life may help to overcome possible reservations about competitive sports activities of people suffering the different forms of disabilities, of their caregivers and of the healthcare professionals, too. This could also be the scientific basis for the formation of integrated social and health policies aimed at improving the management courses of these people, realizing the main rehabilitation objectives of integration into community life. The multifaceted complexity of these patients necessitates multidisciplinary management that involves a number of health professionals that interact with each other. Hence, adapted sports activities may help achieve total integration into the community and should be included in the multidisciplinary rehabilitative program (21).

Studying individuals with disabilities and the relationship between cognitive and motor abilities and sports holds the potential for developing evidence-based eligibility and classification systems that address the impact of impairment on athletic proficiency in Paralympic sports (22). By recognizing and supporting their participation in sports, we can empower individuals with severe disabilities to lead fulfilling and active lives, breaking barriers, and encouraging inclusivity. Sports benefits extend beyond the physical realm, positively impacting their overall quality of life and promoting a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

We invite the scientific community to take an active role in promoting sports benefits for individuals with disabilities with the newly established committee “I.S.Mu.L.T. Sport and Disability”. Our aims will be: 1) educate and inform, updating on the latest evidence regarding the benefits of sports for individuals with disabilities and taking the initiative to educate physicians, patients, and caregivers on adaptive sports programs, specialized equipment, and resources available in your community; 2) encourage sports as a health intervention, emphasizing the positive impact of sports on overall health and for mental well-being; 3) address concerns and barriers, examining adaptive sports options and modifications that can accommodate their specific needs and abilities, also collaborating among healthcare professionals; 4) collaborate with sports organizations, establishing successful relationships with sports organizations and disability sport programs with appropriate resources and support networks within the community; 5) advocate for inclusive sports, emphasizing the development of inclusive sports programs within the social community, actively participating in disability-inclusive sports events and supporting athletes with disabilities (leading by example).

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## DATA AVAILABILITY

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## CONTRIBUTIONS

AF, AGV, BI: conceptualization. AF: writing – original draft. AGV, BI: writing – review & editing. AF: visualization.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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