

Coaching Athletes with Vision Impairment

Definition

Vision impairment can range from no vision – blindness – or very low vision to slight visual spectrum disorders.

The timing of the onset of the vision impairment is an important factor in coaching consideration. Athletes who were born with visual limitations may have some difficulty with conceptual constructs. Someone with vision impairments later in life will have more contextual information to draw from. For instance, a coach will be able to ask the athlete to visualise an object as the athlete will have a visual concept. An athlete who has been blind since birth will require more descriptions.

To be eligible to compete at the Paralympic Games, athletes must have at least one of the following diagnoses:

- Impairment of the eye structure; and/or
- Impairment of the optic nerve or pathways; and/or
- Impairment of the visual cortex of the brain.

Athletes are classified according to their level of corrected vision and must have an impairment in BOTH eyes that meets the minimal disability criteria of:

- Visual acuity that is less than or equal to LogMAR = 1.00 (6/60); and/or
- Visual field that is less than a radius of 20 degrees

Athletes will be required to provide medical documentation from their ophthalmologist prior to seeking a classification.

Coaching Considerations

Coaches can help best when they understand the specifics of the vision impairment – start by asking the athlete to describe their vision. They may have acuity problems (vision is not clear) or field issues (they cannot see through the full range).

Illumination

The amount of light available to enter the eye is critical to visibility. By simply increasing the level of light during training can have a significant impact. Conversely athletes that are sensitive to light will be negatively affected by too much illumination. In these cases,

items such as sunglasses or hats can be simple solutions. Additionally, time of the day that outdoor training occurs can have an impact. Sunlight angled lower in the sky may increase glare and affect the athlete's performance. Specific coaching or compensatory strategies can help athletes to perform when these conditions are present in competition.

Contrast

The degree of colour difference between an object and the background. Glare can cause objects to blend together. Athletes with low vision really need good contrast. Therefore, using brightly coloured balls or objects against darker backgrounds will assist the athlete. Training on an athletics track will be easier than training on grass due to the high contrast in lane lines. It is very hard to get this contrast on grass with white marking. If a coach can find out which colours are best seen by the individual this can help. Using larger markers is a good option. Consider painting implements like a discus or ball in the colour that is seen best.

Field of View

Some athletes may have visual field issues affecting vision. For example, some can see through a small central field (like a pin hole) and others might have only peripheral ranges. Providing visual demonstrations within the appropriate field is important.

Size

Using larger print may enable information or images to be seen more clearly.

Communication is Critical

Use precise vocabulary and descriptions. Be prepared to modify demonstration techniques, provide tactile demonstration or have the athlete stand close enough and copy a demonstration from the coach. Any tactile input should have prior consent from the Athlete. Consider using iPads or similar devices for feedback in the training environment as the athlete can enlarge or manipulate the image as needed.

Ask the athlete how they would describe something and adapt language to match the athletes to improve understanding.

Speak clearly and at normal volume. There is no need to shout.

Familiarity

In order to assist with independence and trust in the training environment it is important to have some consistency so that the athlete becomes familiar with layout. This allows them to focus full effort on the session without being concerned with environmental factors. Working with a buddy (e.g. in gym) is helpful.

If you have content to add, please contact keren.faulkner@paralympic.org.au

Resources

Paralympics Australia <https://www.paralympic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Vision-Impairment-APC-Classification-Information-Sheet-June-2018.pdf>

Paul Ponchillia, Coaching Athletes with Visual Impairments, Western Michigan University. Department of Blindness & Low vision Studies, 2016.