

Sport separation, past experiences and pre event expectations; conversations with the Para-Equestrian Dressage riders

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Introduction: The multi-sport structure of the Paralympic Games is one of the main elements that differentiate the Paralympics from other major sporting competitions for Para-Equestrian Dressage athletes. As equestrian sports require unique venues and facilities, they are often situated varying distances away from the athletics stadium which is often seen as the most iconic Paralympic image and a symbol of the heart of the Games. In 2008 the equestrian team were based in Hong Kong approximately 1225 miles away from the Paralympic Stadium in Beijing, in 2012 the distance between the equestrian venue (Greenwich) and the Paralympic stadium (Stratford) will be approximately 6 miles. It is unknown whether these different levels of physical separation affect an athlete's sense of belonging and inclusion and ultimately their personal 'Paralympic experience'.

Aim: The aim of this study was to explore if past experiences would influence future expectations of 'Paralympic experience' specifically in relation to the physical separation of equestrian sport at the Beijing 2008 Paralympic Games.

Method: Five members of the British Para-Equestrian Dressage team were interviewed post selection but prior to going out to Hong Kong. All riders were asked about their expectations of what life would be like for them based in Hong Kong during the 2008 Paralympic Games. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and validated by the participants. Transcripts were then exposed to content analysis to identify key themes (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001).

Results: Below are some rider quotes, selected on the themes of 'past experience', 'future expectations', and 'separation from Beijing'.

Simon Laurens

41 year old Grade III rider, Beijing will be his first Games.

I'm mostly looking forward to the competition itself I don't really like being beaten. If you're going to compete at this level, there's only one reason and that's to win. All I can say is I'm going to give it 120% even if it means coming back in a body bag I shall give it everything I've got. [Not being based in Hong Kong] it does kind of exclude us, for god sake we're 8 hours away it's not like we can just pop in the car and go and have a look. I'm going to miss that because it's just going to be another huge Para-Dressage competition. It's the Olympic games and you're going there live but you're not going to get to see anything else or soak up any of the other atmosphere because I can imagine the atmosphere is going to be amazing for us but gosh can you imagine what its going to be like when you've got all the other sports involved and all the other people involved.

Sophie Christiansen

20 year old Grade 1a rider, previously competed in Athens

I went to Athens when I was 16, I was like the baby of the team. That was an utterly life changing experience just being so young. I used to be quite shy and embarrassed about my speech and everything but it gave me real confidence, having to cope with the media and stuff so it really changed my life. Being with other disabled athletes it boosted my confidence because you literally look around and there are people much worse off than you and you just felt that what are you moaning for? I mean if they can do it I can, so it really gave me a boost. I've been working towards this [Games] for four years, I am a bit sad that it's not all together with the other sports because they say it won't feel like a Paralympics but we'll see. I hoping all the hard work will pay off because when it does that is literally the best feeling in the world.

Ricky Balshaw

21 year old Grade 1b rider, Beijing will be his first Games.

I think at the end of the day you're there to compete at your sports so whether or not there's other things going on, it's probably better that there's not because you won't be as distracted. So yeah it's just another competition really and you just focus on your sport. I know that our competition day is four days from the end of the Games so we get to go back into Beijing then and as I say chill in the village.



Debbie Criddle

42 year old, Grade III rider. Debbie has previously competed at Sydney & Athens.

I think in Sydney we missed a lot by not being with the main squad although we had the freedom, it's like pros and cons, it's a quieter set up you could concentrate more you had more time to yourself than in Athens (where the team stayed in the main Athlete Village). If we're lucky I think we'll go to Beijing, and experience the whole thing, which I think is good, especially for the newcomers because, again it's a totally different thing staying in the Paralympic village than just doing your own kind of thing. Well much more noisy and you do become aware of the other sports.

Anne Dunham

44 year old, Grade I rider. Anne has competed in every Games since Atlanta

In Atlanta, the Paralympics didn't have much status, in fact they were even dismantling some of the stuff around us at one point. In Sydney it did matter, it was as important as the Olympics had been, so it was just such a fantastic experience. Hong Kong will be a different atmosphere, it won't be as big. But we will get to see all the other athletes because we're going up for the closing ceremony. So we'll get the experience of being in the village with everybody and the awe-inspiring thing of seeing how some of the third world people cope with doing their sport. That's always such a humbling experience because ... they manage with just a stick to help them and it's an old stick they've just picked up and polished and there's you with a push wheelchair, I mean if I was in the third world I'd just be sat in a hut and shuffling around on my bum so I'm just looking forward to that, being in the village because that's always such a great experience.

Discussion & Conclusion

Prior to competition the concept of sport separation did not distract the Para-Equestrian Dressage riders from their medal focus. They appeared to be able to separate 'competition expectations' from 'Paralympic experience'. However, it was felt that the 'Paralympic experience' would be different in Hong Kong compared to Beijing with a sense of separation during the competition and an anticipated sense of inclusion when in Beijing for the closing ceremony.

