

Evidence-Informed Recommendations for the Management of Classification by National Sport Organizations

**Canadian Disability Participation Project (CDPP) 2.0
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Canadian Disability Participation Project
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des personnes en situation de handicap

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Preface

OVERVIEW

The recommendations described herein provide guidance to National Sport Organizations (NSOs) on how to effectively manage Para athlete classification. The research evidence and process used to develop these recommendations will be presented in Lawson, J. A., Quinn, N., Sales, D., Binsfield, G., Latimer, E., Tinney, J., Dupois, L., & Latimer-Cheung, A. E., (2025). Developing evidence-informed recommendations for the management of parasport classification using the AGREE II Instrument. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*. (Under Review).

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Classification, the process of evaluating athletes' functional abilities and creating competition groups based on the impact their impairment has on sport-specific activities, is central to the operation and success of para sport (Sherrill, 1999; Tweedy et al., 2018). Yet, classification is commonly reported to be complex, misunderstood, as well as a barrier to participation and, in some cases, a cause for leaving sport (e.g., Bundon et al., 2018; Lawson et al., 2022; Patatas et al., 2019; Van Dornick and Spencer, 2019). It is therefore essential those responsible for the management of classification within the Canadian sport system (i.e., sport administrators) increase their knowledge of classification, improve management practices and, in turn, positively influence participants' experience quality.

Guideline Development Process

The six-step AGREE II protocol guided the development of these recommendations: (a) the scope and purpose of the recommendations was identified, (b) knowledge users were engaged throughout the developmental process, (c) rigorous methods of knowledge development (i.e., a partner-engaged systematic approach) were utilized, (d), resulting recommendations are presented here with clarity, (e) recommendations are applicable within National Sport Organizations (NSOs) and may inform future research, and (f) editorial independence was maintained throughout the development of the recommendations (Brouwers et al., 2013).



In September 2022, eight experts in classification and guideline development came together to review current knowledge and resources relating to classification.

The panel included:

- Gwen Bisfield, Coach (Alpine Ontario)
- Lorette Dupois, Classifier (Athletics Canada)
- Erin Latimer, Athlete
- Amy Latimer-Cheung, Researcher (Queen's University)
- Janet Lawson, Researcher (Queen's University)
- Nancy Quinn, Classifier/Researcher
- Darda Sales, Administrator/Coach/ Researcher/Retired Athlete (Queen's University)
- Jessica Tinney, Athlete

The panel listened to research presentations, participated in small and large group discussions, and collectively decided to refine **the scope and purpose of the recommendations** to the following:

- Enhance sport administrators' understanding of classification so that they may act as a resource to coaches and athletes with whom they work.
- Increase sport administrators' appreciation for the significance of classification in para-athletes' developmental pathways.

Following this initial meeting of the panel, the recommendations were drafted and circulated to panelists via email. Panelists had the opportunity to provide feedback via email and/or Zoom and minor revisions were made. No revisions to this second draft of the recommendation were suggested, and so the recommendations were circulated to a broader group of para sport participants via a Qualtrics survey between July-October 2023. Result of the survey were positive, with the majority of respondents expressing moderate-high levels of agreement with each recommendation. A complete depiction of survey responses is included in Appendix A.

QUICK GUIDE TO THE RECOMMENDATIONS

This document outlines seven best practice recommendations NSOs can implement to effectively manage of para-athlete classification. The purpose of this document is to provide sport administrators with guidance on how to implement the recommendations so they may support members of the Paralympic Movement, from athletes to coaches, in learning about and effectively navigating the classification system.

WHAT DO THE RECOMMENDATIONS INVOLVE?

NSOs may implement any or all the seven recommendations in whichever order they choose. Guidance on how to decide which recommendations should be implemented, and in what order, is provided in the following section.

FORMAT OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS:

Each recommendation is supported with the following information:

- **Who** should put the recommendation into action
- **How** to put the recommendation into action
- **When** to put the recommendation into action (this may be decided by the NSO)
- **Example Information** strategies to use and content to include when implementing the recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS

THE SEVEN RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Sport Organizations must have the financial and human resources to support athlete classification.
2. Sport administrators will undergo disability awareness training.
3. Sport organizations must develop and describe a classification pathway for athletes that aligns with the sport's strategic plan and/or model of athlete development.
4. Sport organizations must develop and describe a classifier pathway in alignment with their classification pathway.
5. Sport administrators will undergo training that outlines the classification process for their sport.
6. Sport administrators will understand the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in classification.
7. Sport administrators must demonstrate or be trained in strong communication and conflict resolution skills.

Recommendation #1: Sport organizations must have the financial and human resources to support athlete classification

Who should put this recommendation into action:

- NSOs must ensure all administrative staff and volunteers have the capacity to access all trainings described herein and enact relevant changes or implement new practices to reflect these recommendations
- All sport administrators must have access to the following trainings and be responsible for enacting relevant changes or implementing new practices to reflect these recommendations

How should this recommendation be implemented:

- Human and financial resources may be designated for classification within in a sport's strategic plan and on an ongoing basis

Examples of financial and human resources dedicated to supporting athlete classification:

- Financial resources
 - Funding specific to accessing classification events - e.g., travel, registration; funding to support classifier training)
 - Human resources
- Additional staff persons
 - Time provided to staff during onboarding or ongoing training to access trainings described within this document
 - Job descriptions reflective of the skills and competencies

Recommendation #2: Sport administrators will undergo disability awareness training

Who should put this recommendation into action:

- Disability awareness training programs should be developed by those with lived experience of disability and subject-matter experts (e.g., academics, athletes)
- All administrative staff and volunteers within an NSO will be required to complete this training

How should this recommendation be implemented:

- Sport administrators must access this training as a part of their onboarding with a new organization and bi-annually (may be embedded within an organization's quadrennial plan) or provide proof of equivalent training or professional development

Examples of how disability awareness training can be delivered:

- Format and location (e.g., online vs in person) can be sport-specific
- Content can include general information, such as information on inclusive language and the various models of disability
- Content must be tailored to a given sport – e.g., it must describe the impairments most commonly present within a sport along with relevant secondary conditions, mobility aids, etc.

Recommendation #3: Sport organizations must develop and describe a classification pathway for athletes that aligns with the sport's strategic plan and/or model of athlete development

Who should put this recommendation into action:

- The classification pathway will be determined by a given sport's leadership team and sport-specific classification experts (e.g., administrative head of classification, classifiers, and former athletes with international classification experience)
- This pathway should be readily accessible to those within and outside of the Paralympic Movement (e.g., sport administrators, coaches, potential athletes, etc.)

How should this recommendation be implemented:

- A classification pathway should be developed and published on an NSO's website prior to further sport-specific classification resources being developed

Examples of the types of information to be included in a classification pathway:

- At what stage of an athlete's development should they undergo classification
 - Consider the levels of classification within the sport: provincial, national, or international
 - Considering the athlete's stage of development including their: age, length of time post-injury, level of training and competition
- For youth athletes, identify when the athlete becomes the primary contact for classification rather than their parent or guardian
- Whether classification is reserved for high-performing athletes (i.e., is a part of a performance pathway), or is available to all athletes (i.e., is a part of a participation pathway)
- How classification aligns with the NSO's strategic plan

Recommendation #4: Sport organizations must develop and describe a classifier pathway that aligns with the sport's classification pathway

Who should put this recommendation into action:

- The classification pathway will be determined by a given sport's leadership team and sport-specific classification experts (e.g., administrative head of classification, classifiers, and former athletes with international classification experience)
- This pathway should be readily accessible to those within and outside of the Paralympic Movement (e.g., sport administrators, potential classifiers etc.)

How should this recommendation be implemented:

- A classifier pathway should be developed and published on an NSO's website alongside their classification pathway

Examples of the types of information to be included in a classifier pathway:

- When, where, and how interested individuals may become classifiers.
- Prerequisite skills/certifications for classifiers
- Costs associated with training and financial support available from the NSO
- Length of time to national/international certification
 - E.g., X number of hours under observation

Recommendation #5: Sport administrators will undergo training that outlines the classification process for their sport

Who should put this recommendation into action:

- This information will be developed by sport-specific classification experts (e.g., lead classifier, former internationally classified athletes)
- NSO support is required to ensure staff compliance in completing/maintaining this training (e.g., by offering time in the employee's schedule to complete the training)
- All sport administrators within an organization must complete this training

How should this recommendation be implemented:

- Classification processes may be outlined in a self-paced online or printed manual available during organizational onboarding
- This training should be updated bi-annually and as needed to reflect changes to the classification system

Examples of the types of information to be included in this instructional manual:

- A clear definition of the purpose of classification
- A comprehensive timeline for classification (see Recommendation #3, p. 9)
- Average length of time to classification
- Description of the paperwork required for an athlete to be classified
- Typical assessment procedures used during classification
- How to support an athlete when responding to an unexpected classification outcome
 - E.g., interpersonal skills required to support the athlete
 - E.g., appeal and protest procedures

Recommendation #6: Sport administrators will understand the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in classification

Who should put this recommendation into action:

- Classification experts (e.g., para sport lead, head classifier) within a sport will be responsible for compiling and maintaining this information
- NSO support is required to ensure staff compliance in maintaining this reference manual.
 - E.g., By offering X hrs/year to update competency in this area or adding a line to future job descriptions
- All sport administrators within an NSO must gain access this reference manual

How should this recommendation be implemented:

- Information may be outlined in a self-paced online or printed manual available to administrators on an ongoing basis and during organizational onboarding.
- This reference manual should be updated bi-annually and as needed to reflect changes to the classification system or staff

Examples of the types of information sport administrators should understand and have access to:

- Contact information for those responsible for handling classification inquiries at the CPC and a given sport's international federation
- Contact information for the NSO's lead classifier
- Description of classifiers' roles and responsibilities within the NSO
 - Education and outreach
 - Domestic classification
 - Liaising with international federations and/or the IPC
- Description of sport administrators' responsibilities related to classification
 - What paperwork sport administrators are responsible for filing
 - The timelines for registering athletes for classification at key events
 - Communication and interpersonal skills required to interact with athletes
- Information on where to direct individuals interested in becoming classifiers and the pathway to becoming a certified classifier (see recommendation #4)
- The roles and responsibilities of coaches during classification
 - Pre-/during-/post-classification responsibilities
- The roles and responsibilities of athletes during classification
 - Pre-/during-/post-classification rights and responsibilities, such as pursuing medical documentation of their impairment, arriving at classification well-rested and prepared to exercise, their right to ask questions of during classification
- The roles and responsibilities of parents/guardians of youth athletes
 - Pre-/during-/post-classification responsibilities such as pursuing medical documentation of their child's impairment, communicating with coaches and classifiers on behalf of their child during classification

Recommendation #7: Sport administrators must demonstrate or be trained in strong communication and conflict resolution skills

Who should put this recommendation into action:

- Communication and conflict resolution training must be developed and delivered by experts in the field
- Communication and conflict resolution training must be made available to all staff within an NSO
- All staff and volunteers should be screened for communication and conflict resolution skills during the hiring process

How should this recommendation be implemented:

- Strong communication and conflict resolution skills should be advertised for in all job descriptions
- Interview questions and reference checks should highlight applicant's communication and conflict resolution skills. As well, proof of certification or training in communication and conflict resolution should be preferentially screened for during application processes
- Training processes may be sport-specific and range from online modules to in person training sessions provided during organizational onboarding
- External training opportunities should be made available to current employees to enhance their communication and conflict resolution skills

Examples of strong communication and conflict resolution skills to be used when interacting with athletes (their parents), classifiers, and coaches:

- Strong written and verbal communication skills
- Understanding of confidentiality
- Use of person-first language
- The ability to navigate conflict and come to a mutually agreed upon resolution,
- Empathy, respect and sensitivity towards others and their individual psycho-emotional wellbeing

IMPLEMENTATION

Case Study A: A small, para sport specific National Sport Organization (NSO)

METHOD

In late July 2023, representatives from NSO A agreed to evaluate their readiness to implement the recommendations. Following this, an in-person meeting was scheduled for mid-August. At the start of the meeting, discussion focused on how the group would like to establish consensus or agreement on each recommendation. Agreement was determined to be defined by a lack of dissenting opinions and guided by the question “Can I live with this?”.

Given that NSOs may wish to implement the recommendations in different orders depending on their capacity and current practices, the first portion of the meeting focused on establishing the fit of the recommendations within NSO A and implementation priorities. All participants were asked to provide their individual responses to questions regarding change commitment (see Appendix B) before a group discussion was held to determine the organization’s overall response. In the latter half of the meeting, an implantation plan was developed, with participants being assigned ‘ownership’ of tasks and project timelines being clearly defined.

RESULTS

Change Commitment

All recommendations were determined to be compatible with NSO A’s values, necessary to implement, of benefit, timely, cost-effective, and result in improvement. Altogether, NSO A demonstrated high commitment to change (i.e., implementation of the recommendations. During discussion, it was noted that some recommendations have already been implemented, or are currently being implemented (e.g., the description of a classification pathway).

Establishing Recommendation Priorities

While it was agreed that all recommendations should be implemented, it was decided that it will not be possible to implement all recommendations at the same time. So, the group discussed which recommendations represent ‘quick wins’, ‘major projects’, ‘fill ins’, and ‘hard slogs and which recommendations need to be in place prior to others (e.g., needs must be established before requests for additional funds are submitted to the board, therefore, assessing human and financial resources should come after other recommendations are implemented). Finally, an implementation order was determined

beginning with quick wins and then major projects. The group decided to leave 'fill in' items until a later date.

Suggested implementation order:

Quick wins

1. Sport organizations must develop and describe a classification pathway for athletes that aligns with the sport's strategic plan and/or model of athlete development.
2. Sport organizations must develop and describe a classifier pathway in alignment with their classification pathway.

Major projects

3. Sport administrators will undergo training that outlines the classification process for their sport.
4. Sport administrators will understand the roles and responsibilities of all parties involved in classification.
5. Sport organizations must have the financial and human resources to support athlete classification.

Fill in items

6. Sport administrators will undergo disability awareness training.
7. Sport administrators must demonstrate or be trained in strong communication and conflict resolution skills.

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation is currently underway. Updated web content related to classifier pathways has been drafted, informal education related to classification has been provided to NSO A staff, and a business case is being prepared. Upon completion of the business case, the document will be used by the implementation team to advocate for increased human and financial resources for classification (e.g., in annual budgets, grant applications).

Case Study B:

A large, integrated National Sport Organization (NSO)

METHOD

In late July 2023, Case B was approached and asked to participate in an evaluation of their readiness to implement the recommendations. Approval to participate was granted by Case B's leadership team and a hybrid meeting was subsequently scheduled for late November. This meeting began with a discussion of how to determine consensus. As only two of four participants were present for the first portion of the meeting, it was decided consensus would be met upon mutual agreement and any discrepancies would be resolved by the remaining representatives once they were able to join the meeting.

The first portion of the meeting was reserved for establishing the fit of each recommendation within the NSO as well as the organization's implementation priorities. Participants were asked to provide their individual responses to questions regarding change commitment (see Appendix B) before a group discussion was held to determine the organization's overall response. In the latter half of the meeting, during which time two additional representatives of the NSO were able to join, an implantation plan was developed, with participants being assigned 'ownership' of tasks and project timelines being clearly defined.

RESULTS

Change Commitment

All recommendations were determined to be compatible with Case B's values, necessary to implement, of benefit, timely, cost-effective, and result in improvement. However, it was noted that endorsement by members of the organization's leadership team would need to be sought before certain recommendations could be implemented (e.g., Recommendation 1: Further human and financial resources be secured). At the same time, other recommendations were already being implemented to a degree – e.g., a classification pathway for athletes had already been developed. Overall, a high degree of change commitment was assessed, yet barriers/challenges to the implementation of certain recommendations were identified.

Establishing Recommendation Priorities

Implementation order was restricted in part by the level of authority held by those participating. Certain recommendations (e.g., Recommendation 1) were said to require the support of senior members of the NSO's leadership team, and so, establishing a business case for the recommendations was determined to be a priority more so than the recommendation itself. Meanwhile, two recommendations were already partially in place, but require further dissemination efforts (Recommendation 2 and 3).

Recommendation 4 was also identified as a priority given the plethora of Canadian classifiers whose skills are underdeveloped. Recommendations 5-7 will be revisited at a later date.

IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of the recommendations within Case B is underway with progress made towards complete implementation of recommendations 1-4.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Investigation into para sport participants' experiences with classification provides novel insight into a unique, yet important aspect of para sport. Moreover, the development of recommendations for the management of classification has resulted in the identification of critical gaps in practice, such as the lack of adequate financial and human resources available within NSOs to adequately support athletes' in becoming classified. The recommendations provided within this document may provide guidance to NSOs on how to address such gaps and, ultimately, improve the experiences of and retention of athletes with disabilities in sport.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The implementation of the recommendations within Canadian NSOs should be evaluated on an ongoing basis to establish an effect.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Summary of Survey Responses

Table 1. Survey Responses

Demographics Characteristics		Number	Percentage
Age		34±12.7 years	
Gender	Male	13	38%
	Female	21	62%
Ethnicity	White	26	76%
	Asian	1	3%
	No response	7	21%
Highest Level of Education	High School	1	3%
	College	8	24%
	University	18	52%
	Post-Graduate Degree	7	21%
Province/Territory of Residence	Alberta	2	6%
	British Columbia	15	44%
	Nova Scotia	1	3%
	Ontario	12	35%
	Quebec	3	9%
	No response	1	3%
Primary Sport	Alpine Skiing	4	12%
	Athletics	4	12%
	Canoe/Kayak	2	6%
	Hockey	1	3%
	Rowing	2	6%
	Shooting	1	3%
	Swimming	9	26%
	Wheelchair Basketball	3	9%
	Wheelchair Fencing	1	3%
	Wheelchair Rugby	3	9%
	Other	4	12%
Primary Sport Role	Administrator	4	12%
	Athlete	25	74%
	Classifier	0	0%
	Coach	5	15%
Sport Context	Grassroots	2	6%
	Provincial	11	32%
	National	7	21%
	International	13	38%

Length of Time Involved in para sport		10.6 ± 8.9 years	
Disability	Yes	25	74%
	No	9	26%
If yes,	Congenital	6	24%
	Acquired	19	76%
If yes, nature of disability	Physical	24	96%
	Intellectual	1	4%

Table 2. Level of Agreement with Recommendations

Recommendation	Clarity (M ± SD)	Comprehensiveness (M ± SD)	Best Practice (M ± SD)
1	4.40 ± 0.40	4.33 ± 0.87	4.54 ± 0.91
2	4.43 ± 0.89	4.33 ± 1.01	4.3 ± 1.08
3	4.47 ± 1.16	4.39 ± 1.15	4.47 ± 0.89
4	4.25 ± 1.15	4.30 ± 0.92	4.16 ± 1.16
5	4.50 ± 0.78	4.39 ± 0.83	4.37 ± 0.97
6	4.41 ± 0.97	4.60 ± 0.65	4.45 ± 0.88
7	4.17 ± 1.15	4.40 ± 1.00	4.43 ± 0.99

M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation. 5-Point Likert Scale

Open-ended Feedback

Recommendation #1:

- More classification opportunities
- More funds from NSOs to support international classification opportunities
- Acknowledge discrepancy in funding for lower income countries

Recommendation #2:

- Flexibility in application (type of training, pro-d) will make implementation easier for NSOs
- Likely to promote a culture of inclusion and diversity amongst sport administrators.
- Be mindful of workload/demand of trainings that need to be maintained over time.

Recommendation #3:

- This recommendation will provide clarity to athletes and ensure they are appropriately challenged.
- Must recognize that many sports don't do domestic classification, and this should be reflected in Long Term Athlete Development.

Recommendation #4:

- Currently, there are limited classifiers and opportunities to learn from them. This recommendation may address this.

Recommendation #5:

- Discussion would be an important element of such training (i.e., not a module to be completed individually).

Recommendation #6:

- This may bridge the gap between athletes/coaches and administrators.

Recommendation #7:

- The "why should it be delivered" section answered my main question as an athlete about why this is included. The answer to that question is an example of something I've had an issue with, and I see how this would be a part of best practice.

Appendix B

Assessing Organizational Readiness for Implementing Change

Participants were prompted to answer each of the following questions derived from the Organizational Readiness for Implementing Change questionnaire developed by Shea et al. (2014) using yes/no.

Questions on organizational change commitment:

1. Is this recommendation compatible with [NSO's] values?
2. Does [NSO's] need to implement this recommendation?
3. Will this recommendation benefit [NSO]?
4. Does [NSO] believe it is necessary to implement this recommendation?
5. Does [NSO] believe implementing this recommendation will work?
6. Is it timely to implement this recommendation?
7. Will implementing be cost-effective?
8. Does [NSO] believe implementing this recommendation will make things better?
9. Does [NSO] believe implementing this recommendation is a good idea?
10. Does [NSO] value this recommendation?
11. Is [NSO] committed to implementing this recommendation?

Appendix C

Assessing Organizational Readiness for Implementing Change (Efficacy)

Participants were prompted to answer each of the following questions derived from the Organizational Readiness for Implementing Change questionnaire developed by Shea et al. (2014) using yes/no.

Questions on organizational change efficacy:

1. Can your organization keep the momentum going to implement this recommendation?
2. Can your organization manage the politics of implementing this recommendation?
3. Can your organization support people as they adjust to this recommendation?
4. Is your organization invested in implementing this recommendation?
5. Can your organization coordinate tasks so that the implementation of this recommendation goes smoothly?
6. Can your organization keep track of progress while implementing this recommendation?
7. Does your organization have the time needed to implement this recommendation?
8. Does your organization know what financial resources are needed to implement the recommendations?
9. Do you/does everyone within your organization know what they have to do to implement this recommendation?
10. Is everyone within your organization able to complete the tasks assigned to them in order to implement this recommendation?
11. Does your organization know what intellectual resources (e.g., skills, capabilities, trainings) are needed to implement this recommendation?
12. Does your organization have the expertise needed to implement this recommendation?
13. Does your organization have the supplies, equipment, or other resources needed to implement this recommendation?