“‘A small leap for disabled man’: The athlete led evolution of the sports wheelchair and adaptive sports”

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After attending a year and half of Zoom-based talks and virtual conferences, I was delighted to be able to present in-person at the British Society of Sports History annual conference on the 26th-27th of August 2021. Held at St Mary’s University in Twickenham, London, this was an open themed conference, with speakers covering a variety of topics around sport, physical recreation and culture from a historical perspective. The Disability History Association Conference Award helped in covering my travel, accommodation and attendance costs for this conference – as originally my excitement for an in-person conference was dulled by the reminder of their associated expenses!

My paper was entitled “‘A small leap for disabled man’: The athlete led evolution of the sports wheelchair and adaptive sports” and was based on my PhD research into the social, political and technological history of the sporting wheelchair, undertaken as a joint collaboration between the University of Glasgow and the National Paralympic Heritage Trust. My research concerns the evolution of sports-dedicated wheelchairs as distinct technical objects separate from medicalised or everyday wheelchairs. In doing so, this history explores the athletes who modified their hospital wheelchairs for competitive advantages, establishing a cottage industry which made and sold specialised sports wheelchairs, and the growing professionalism which separated Paralympic sport from the medical institution. The paper presented at this conference explored the early sections of my research, briefly detailing the origins of user-customised wheelchairs, and the ways athletes used this to challenge the rules of the games themselves, which were initially designed by able-bodied doctors and physicians.

The quote in the title of the paper – ‘A small leap for disabled man’ – was a line taken from one of the oral history interviews I have conducted during my PhD. I felt like it encapsulated how I currently understand the history of sports wheelchairs: devices initially made by and for disabled people, in order to improve technologically stagnant medicalised wheelchairs and advance wheelchair sports as an athletic endeavour. Wheelchair-based sport originated as a new form of rehabilitation after World War II, and the rules of the sport were designed by medical professionals accordingly. Many athletes, however, were keen to move these sports beyond the control of the medical institution. Technological innovation acted as a site of resistance for these athletes, as increasingly specialised wheelchairs enabled improved performance, which in turn facilitated the shift away from sport as only a means of rehabilitation. Furthermore, as athletes modified their wheelchairs for sport, making them faster, lighter and more responsive, they found these changes also benefited everyday wheelchair use, leading to improved lightweight everyday wheelchairs.

This paper was a new piece of writing, developed alongside some initial chapter writing for my PhD. The paper utilised a mixture of quotations from my oral histories and images gathered during my research. Utilising oral histories in this research has been vital in order to represent the experiences and perspectives of these individuals, as this historical narrative is under-represented in broader sporting and disability history.

The conference was a fantastic opportunity to meet other academics and independent researchers in the history of sport, and to present my research to new audience. My paper was well received, and I was fortunate enough to receive the conference’s ‘Sporting Inequality’ Award. This award is designed for any research into under-developed areas within sports history, primarily around topics of gender, sexuality, race and disability. As the only paper concerning adaptive, para or disabled sport, I feel honoured to have received this award, particularly given the quality of other papers. As a recipient of the award, I have invited to publish my paper in the society’s journal. I hope this opportunity will broaden the awareness of this research and this historical narrative more broadly. Furthermore, I had a fantastic social experience at the conference, finally meeting other PhD students I had made contact with during the pandemic in person, as well as getting the opportunity to explore a part of London that was new to me.

Without the financial assistance given by the Disability History Association, I wouldn’t have been able to cover the costs of this conference, and for their support I am very grateful. This conference was a fantastic opportunity, and I hope it helped to emphasise the importance of disability history within other fields, such as the history of sport.