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Sociology

The Dis/appearing Sporting Body: The Complex Embodiment of Disabled Athletes

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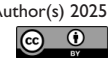

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Abstract

This article critically explores how disability appears and disappears in high-performance sporting environments. Drawing upon symbolic interactionism and embodiment theory, we specifically focus upon disabled athletes' lived experiences of competing in a pan-disability setting and interrogate the interplay between corporeality and social interaction in the materialising of ability, disability and impairment. In this study, 22 (21 male and one female) disabled athletes participated in online semi-structured interviews. The sample was purposively selected from athletes who had been drafted for the Disability Premier League (DPL), a unique pan-disability, draft-based franchise cricket tournament. This article establishes the DPL as a site of sociological importance – a neo-liberal, ableist environment that pushes the boundaries of what a disabled athlete and the disabled body should be. Our wide-ranging findings demonstrate the complex and interactional ways in which the disabled body dis/appears in sporting spaces and the significant embodied repercussions of this process.

Keywords

cricket, disability, disability sport, embodiment, impairment, sociology, sport, symbolic interactionism

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Introduction

Throughout the history of sociology, the body has often been an absent presence (Shilling, 2012): a disembodied, individualised concern that remains hidden from view. The same can also be said for the historic and contemporary marginalisation of disabled bodies, in which the body is routinely essentialised, institutionalised and excluded from society. Even in disability studies, the embodied and the corporeal were initially unwelcome with critics arguing that the dominant social model[1] exiled the body – specifically, impairment – from theoretical discussion (Hughes and Paterson, 1997). As Hughes (2013: 55) notes, 'though disability was made into a social and political category, impaired bodies were consigned to nature'. Subsequently, there has been an ongoing dialogue within critical disability studies about the place of the body and the significance of disabled embodiment (Goodley et al., 2019), particularly the inscription of disability on the body and the materiality of the impaired, lived body (Campbell, 1999). In the context of dissecting and interrogating the project of ableist normativity, the disabled body carries wide-ranging yet largely unspoken corporeal and symbolic meaning. Disability itself can be conceptualised as the product of 'cultural rules about what bodies should be or do' (Garland-Thomson, 1997: 6), in which subcultural norms shape an intersubjective, relational understanding of self and other. Thus, exploring how different social institutions and structures shape such cultural rules is an important line of inquiry for examining the production of disability within subcultures.

But what about disability sport, a social institution that is predicated upon the measurement, classification and valorisation of disabled bodies? To describe the body as 'absent' in this environment would be misleading; however, the ways in which disability and impairment dis/appears – that is, appears and disappears – is of significance. Sport and its normative, ability-based bodily ideals and practices (Fitzgerald, 2005) presents a fertile ground for the examination of disability; the logic and structure of disability sport encompasses a range of dividing practices and cultural discourses through which disabled subjectivities are produced, reinforced and negotiated (Howe, 2008; Peers, 2012). Furthermore, high-performance disability sport, and its related focus on the athletic potential and performances of disabled athletes, is a major site for discourses of inclusion, empowerment and cultural differentiation to collide (see Powis, 2020; Pullen et al., 2020; Purdue and Howe, 2012; Townsend and Cushion, 2022). It is also a context in which it is routinely argued that disability is rendered 'invisible' (DePauw, 1997) through the transposition of an athlete-first discourse (see Rembis, 2013; Townsend and Cushion, 2022). Commonly, such discursive themes are presented in the interests of disability empowerment, while masking the unequal power relations that reinforce ableism in sport (Peers, 2012; Silva, 2023).

While existing research is valuable in unpacking the ways in which disability discourses permeate the structure and culture of sport, less is known about how disabled athletes experience and understand their bodies in settings where *being* disabled is a qualifying criterion for inclusion and yet a source of differentiation. In this article, we address this knowledge gap by critically exploring athletes' embodied experiences of competing in the Disability Premier League (DPL), a pan-disability high-performance setting. First, we introduce *dis/appearance* as this article's guiding concept and establish

its novel theoretical grounding. We outline the study's methodological approach and then present our findings and discussion section, which explores the varied ways in which disability and impairment dis/appear in this setting. Finally, we conclude by considering the significance of our study and reflect upon the pressing need for further sociological inquiry in this field.

Aims and Purpose

The aim of this research is to interrogate how embodied understandings and experiences of disability play out within a high-performance disability sport structure. Relatedly, our purpose is to examine how disability and impairment dis/appears in ways that often highlight, perpetuate and reinforce non-disabled norms and ideologies. In doing so, we will offer novel theoretical and empirical contributions that affirm disability sport as a site of sociological significance.

Theoretical Framework

In this article, the concept of *dis/appearance* guides our theoretical approach. This concept builds upon existing multidisciplinary explorations of how the disabled body appears and disappears – such as notions of *dys-appearance* (Leder, 1990), *disAppearance* (Titchkosky et al., 2022), *dis-attention* (Kerschbaum, 2022) and *excessive appearance of disability* (Michalko, 2009) – to provide a sociological lens to theorise disabled athletes' lived experiences. Utilising disability-focused embodiment theory (Siebers, 2008) and symbolic interactionism (SI) (Charmaz, 2019; Coleman-Fountain and McLaughlin, 2013; Healey and Titchkosky, 2022), our understanding of dis/appearance – which we define as the appearance *and* disappearance of impairment and disability – centralises the interactional, situatedness of encounters: what it means to *be* disabled emerges from the corporeal norms of a social environment. Specifically, our approach is informed by Coleman-Fountain and McLaughlin's (2013) synthesis of embodiment and SI in understanding the interactional production of disability. Drawing upon the work of Erving Goffman and other interactionists, they posit a perspective that seeks to explore 'how particular kinds of embodiment get framed as different, by whom and in what contexts, and what the implications of those framings are, stigmatising or otherwise' (Coleman-Fountain and McLaughlin, 2013: 137). The authors argue that, rather than being oblivious to macro-structural concerns, social interaction is integral to the mattering of impairment and disability *and* in sustaining institutional inequalities. The stories that we tell about our bodies – both to ourselves and to others – do not happen in isolation: these narratives are constructed through institutional processes and structures and embodied in everyday interaction (Coleman-Fountain and McLaughlin, 2013; Waskul and Vannini, 2006). Therefore, to critique notions of ability, normalcy and difference in disability sport, we must understand how athletes re/present their disabled sporting bodies and the high-performance organisational context in which interactions are situated.

Our conception of embodiment draws upon Siebers's (2008) theory of complex embodiment. Siebers centralises the corporeal – including the 'physical realities' (2008:

58) of being disabled – in his epistemological exploration of disability and disabled identity:

> (T)he theory of complex embodiment views the economy between social representations and the body not as unidirectional as in the social model, or non-existent as in the medical model, but as reciprocal. Complex embodiment theorises the body and its representations as mutually transformative. (2008: 25)

Siebers argues that while identities are socially constructed, they are made meaningful *because* they are complexly embodied. A central feature of Siebers's theory, and one that we will return to throughout our discussion, is the *ideology of ability* that 'at its simplest (is) the preference for able-bodiedness. At its most radical, it defines the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons' (2008: 8). This pervasive ideology, which in critical disability studies is defined as ableism (Campbell, 2009), fundamentally marks disability as Other, an undesirable form of embodiment and an affront to ability. Significantly, it is also the ideology of high-performance disability sport and its culture of contradictions, in which disability *and* sport and disabled *and* athlete are antithetical.

However, despite contemporary interactionism presenting 'a clear articulation of body/embodiment' (Waskul and Vannini, 2006: 3) through a range of theoretical approaches, disability sport scholars have overlooked the role of embodiment in SI. Existing research is preoccupied with Goffman's stigma and how disabled athletes *manage* (Taub et al., 2004) or *negotiate* (Lundberg et al., 2011; Niedbalski, 2020) stigmatised identities. Only Rembis (2013), in his critical analysis of 'passing' in elite disability sport, recognises the need to develop a 'social semiotic interactionist approach' to understand disabled athletes' embodied experiences. While not overtly aligning with SI, Rembis's exploration of how elite athletes – whom he views as 'reflexive agents' in the process of identity formation – complexly 'pass' as non-disabled emphasises the relational and socially situatedness of embodiment. Yet, as Kerschbaum (2022: 73) contends 'not all of the ways that disability materialises or matters to everyday encounters are about identity'. Although identity in disability sport is a relevant area of enquiry – which is evident in our findings and discussion – our theoretical approach and use of dis/appearance seeks to move the debate beyond the acceptance or rejection of stigmatised labels and towards a *lived* understanding of disability sport.

Methodology

Research Context

The Disability Premier League (DPL), which was launched by the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) in 2022, is a pan-disability cricket tournament involving physical disabled (PD), learning disabled (LD) and D/deaf athletes. In contrast to the regionally based county game, this 'pioneering' competition comprises of four franchise teams: Black Cats, Pirates, Tridents and Hawks. Uniquely, athletes are categorised into tiers, which are based upon impairment type and level of experience and are selected using a

draft process. To ensure fair competition, head coaches make selections in turn until each franchise has a squad of 16 with an equal number of PD, LD and D/deaf representatives. Across the tournament, every player must play a minimum of two fixtures, and, during games, each represented impairment group must bowl at least 20% (a minimum of four overs) of the team's overs.

Positionality

In interpreting and representing the experiences of disabled cricketers, we assume a relativist ontological and social constructionist epistemological position (Sparkes and Smith, 2014), which accepts that while material things exist independent of ourselves, it is actors who ascribe meaning to such entities and actively construct social realities. We recognise that multiple subjective realties of being a disabled cricketer exist and acknowledge that what is studied is not independent of us as researchers. Accordingly, we must first position ourselves in relation to the phenomena under study and our participants. While we – the authors – currently self-identify as non-disabled, we have sought to develop a *disability consciousness* (Berger, 2008) throughout our academic careers. This has included being reflexive of our own sense of embodiment, our non-disabled worldviews and nurturing empathetic research practices with disabled participants in the field (see Brighton, 2016; Macbeth and Powis, 2023; Townsend and Cushion, 2021). Additionally, at some stage in our lives, each of us have identified as serious non-disabled cricketers or have been intimately engaged in the field of disability cricket as coaches and support staff (see Powis, 2020; Townsend and Cushion, 2021), which supported the development of access, trust and rapport with this study's participants.

Data Collection

Having achieved institutional ethical acceptance, Ben approached a 'gatekeeper' (Cresswell and Poth, 2023) whom he had developed a trusting relationship with throughout the course of a previous study. This enabled access to players and coaches that had been involved in the DPL's inaugural season (2022) and who were available for selection for the upcoming season (2023). As part of a purposive sampling strategy, the 65 (64 male and one female, PD: 28, LD: 18, D/deaf: 19) players who had participated in the DPL to date were contacted via e-mail and invited to take part in the study. In total, 22 (21 male and one female, PD: 12, LD: 5, D/deaf: 5) disabled athletes responded to our invitation and participated in online semi-structured interviews. Prior to data collection, participants were provided with an information sheet and a consent form, through which written informed consent was obtained. To facilitate inclusiveness, accessible arrangements – such as the provision of British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters – were offered to all potential participants. Tellingly, this offer was not taken up by any player, possibly because, for disabled people, such arrangements can feel stigmatising and as additional huddles to overcome (Tregaskis and Goodley, 2005). This may also explain our sample's slight overrepresentation of PD players and underrepresentation of LD and D/deaf players. Given that the accessibility of online research methods for disabled participants is well established (Butler-Rees and Chatzitheochari, 2022), interviews were conducted

using Microsoft Teams, lasting from 25 to 79 minutes. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and supported with other observational and methodological notes to provide contextual relevance.

Analysis

Given the specific theoretical framework employed for this study, abductive analysis (Brinkmann, 2014; Earl Rinehart, 2021; Timmermans and Tavory, 2022) was used to make sense of our data. In our abductive process, which is conceptualised as a third way of thinking about qualitative analysis that is neither data driven nor hypothesis driven (Brinkmann, 2014), we situated our participants' embodied experiences within the *community of inquiry* (Timmermans and Tavory, 2022) – that is, the prevailing sociological understandings of disability, embodiment and sport – and moved between data and these theoretical propositions until this article's framing was established. While there is no standardised protocol for abductive analysis (Timmermans and Tavory, 2022), the continual movement between data and a range of theories requires time for familiarisation and defamiliarisation with empirical evidence (Earl Rinehart, 2021), as well as an in-depth knowledge of existing theory and attention to methodological design (Timmermans and Tavory, 2022). Ben, who conducted the analysis, read and re-read each transcript to familiarise himself with the data and proceeded to establish important patterns of meaning through coding and engagement with existing research. This initial analysis and early theoretical framing were then presented to the research team. Subsequently, we collaboratively re-engaged with data and theory (Timmermans and Tavory, 2022) to refine our analysis, resulting in three themes that structure the following discussion.

Findings and Discussion

The Contestation and Negation of Disability in the DPL

In the DPL, unlike the majority of high-performance sporting events – such as the Paralympics – the term *disability* takes prominence. It is strikingly emblazoned on the playing kit, equipment and advertising in bold, bright lettering – a seemingly purposeful decision to emphasise disability rather than 'premier league', which is written in a smaller typeface. For many DPL players, this was a source of contention:

> We want to be judged as cricketers and not disability cricketers. Because if we put disability first, it's often the story that comes first and the cricket second. We want the story to tell the cricket first. And then our disability, our journey, second. (Duncan, PD)

Duncan's athlete-first perspective (Rembis, 2013) – in which a disabled person assumes an athletic narrative that transcends impairment – is rooted in wanting recognition for his sporting abilities through a non-disabled lens. His reference to 'the story' is central to our understanding of disabled athletes' complex embodiment. It is through stories of the body (Coleman-Fountain and McLaughlin, 2013; Rembis, 2013) and the embodied enactment of these stories that disability materialises (Kerschbaum, 2022) – or, in other

words, appears or disappears (Michalko, 2009; Titchkosky et al., 2022). Freddie (LD) also shares Duncan's sentiment: 'We're there to focus on playing cricket, I think sometimes we might bring it (disability) up occasionally in the conversation about each other's disability, but I think mainly we focus on the cricket.'

Duncan and Freddie's contestation of the *disability-first* discourse is reflective of an environment in which success depends on how well athletes can tactically emulate (Campbell, 2009) the 'norm' and meet societal expectations of 'conduct, competition, appearance, and performance' (Rembis, 2013: 112–113). For Mark, who is also PD, disability is something he wholly rejects:

> If you said to us at the start, 'go play disability sport', we'd all say, 'We are not disabled, what are you on about?' I'm not disabled. I don't need a wheelchair or whatever. So that's where I think it really limits us. And that's why I think Disability Premier League is the worst name it could have had.

Mark's conception of disability is telling – both in his understanding of the signs of disability (Kerschbaum, 2022) and its presence in the tournament name. When later discussing international physical disability cricket, he argues: 'essentially, you're saying you play for the England less able team. It's so hard to explain, but it literally means "can't" doesn't it?' Mark's *defensive othering* (Campbell, 2009) inadvertently reproduces the ideology of ability (Siebers, 2008) in which ability is the baseline of humanness. However, his interpretation of ability and his own embodiment is not unexpected. As Mark describes, growing up with an impairment 'was never allowed to be an excuse', particularly when playing mainstream sport, and it was not until he was 17 years old that he received a classification to play disability sport: 'it was like "Well done, you're disabled. You've passed." It was so strange.' The appearance of disability in his story is as a diagnosis, as trouble, as something gone wrong (Michalko, 2009); but, conversely, also an opportunity to fulfil his professional sporting ambitions. As he frankly explains:

> I have not got involved in disability sport to play with disabled people. I've gone into disability sport to play international cricket with like-minded people. I've not suddenly at 17 said I'm going to associate myself with 70 disabled people and that's all I want to do.

In Rembis's (2013) exploration of passing in disability sport, he discusses the costs of living with a *double consciousness* as an elite athlete *and* as a disabled person. Yet, in contemporary high-performance sport, it is more extreme: for many players, the double consciousness is as a disabled athlete *and* as a non-disabled person. Mark's classification as disabled was in order to play international-level sport, an institutional requirement that has no bearing on his identifying as non-disabled. Dayle and Rich, who both started playing disability cricket in their 30s, also had never considered themselves to be disabled. However, it was through interactions with fellow cricketers that 'disability' appeared in their sporting stories:

> He said to me, 'don't take this the wrong way, you've got a lot of limitations with your batting – your knees and your strength'. He said 'have you ever looked down the route of disability

> cricket?' . . . So, I went for an assessment, and it came back with a category 28 lower limb injury, which meant I was eligible for disability cricket. (Dayle, PD)

> I said, 'do you know if I qualify?' And he was like, 'yeah, there's players in the squad that have the same thing'. And that was like Christmas when they said that! (Rich, PD)

As Campbell (2009) argues, at times disabled people will strategically adopt labels of 'disablement' to gain access to particular social benefits – which, for Mark, Dayle and Rich, is access to high-performance sport. This pathway to disability sport, in which athletes are spotted in mainstream sport by a coach or scout and encouraged to be assessed for an eligible impairment, is becoming more common in high-performance settings. Crucially, it is a naturalised form of talent identification that is reliant upon formal and informal encounters, in which sporting bodies are socially, culturally and medically demarcated as *disabled* sporting bodies.

However, for those athletes who grew up participating in disability sport, the label of 'disability' was viewed more positively: 'I think you've got to remember; I've played disability cricket since I was very young. And me, personally, I'm proud of my disability and I feel like every player that plays disability cricket feels like that' (Freddie, LD). Similarly, Joe (PD), who first played disability cricket at the age of 10, acknowledged that his 'opportunities to see people with different disabilities' helped shape his perspective. When discussing the potential stigma of playing disability sport, he contended:

> It ultimately depends on how long you've been in disability cricket and your experience of it when you first started. I think disability – I know it's certainly engrained into us – it's nothing to be ashamed of. You are different to other people, to 99% of the population, however much it might be. Even though I don't consider myself disabled. I don't have anything like disabled parking. But when you go into a disability cricket environment, there's something special about it, because it is the abnormal, it isn't normal, it is a different environment.

In this quote, Joe illustrates the corporeal tensions in *being* a disabled athlete. While immersion in disability sport can lead to a non-tragic view of disability, athletes are entangled in a set of cultural norms that define and shape their embodiment as disabled athletes. Joe's use of 'different', 'special' and 'abnormal' portrays disability as a state of Otherness in which he does not belong. Even in an ostensibly 'disabled' environment, compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006; Siebers, 2008) persists: 'ability appears unmarked and invisible because it is the norm, while disability, as an affront to ability, feels the full and persistent force of an ideological impulse to erase from view any exception to ability' (Siebers, 2008: 102–103). This overt focus on disassociating from, or depoliticising, disability emerges from the same ideological and institutional norms of embodiment – that is, what the *normate* (Garland-Thomson, 1997) athletic body should and should not do. In doing so, athletes are emphasising their normalcy and marking certain bodies – including their teammates – as abnormal. As our theoretical framework outlines, the construction of difference – and the subsequent privileging of bodies – is an interactional process (Coleman-Fountain and McLaughlin, 2013): the appearance and disappearance of disability in the DPL always occurs in the company of others.

Pan-Dis/appearances: The Materialising of Ability, Disability and Impairment

As established earlier, the DPL is a pan-disability tournament involving athletes from three impairment groups – physically disabled (PD), learning disability (LD) and D/deaf.[2] Although the DPL also has its own regulations, there is no evidence-based system to classify across the three impairment groups and limited attempts to provide equitable playing conditions for all participants. In fact, the ideology of all pan-disability sport, especially in a high-performance setting, is inevitably ableist: athletes with physical, intellectual and sensory impairments are brought together only by the notion that they are not 'normal'. Notably, it is also a setting in which disability and impairment continually emerge through interaction (Coleman-Fountain and McLaughlin, 2013). For the athletes involved, this novel and somewhat disordered environment was confronting:

> Just because I have clubfoot doesn't link me to someone who has a D/deaf disability, and it doesn't link me to someone who has Asperger's or autism. And they've essentially gone 'You're all the same. Look at these disabled guys.' Literally, you could do that by putting women in our competition. This is the disabled and women's DPL. You guys are a minority. Okay, there you go. You're in as well. (Mark, PD)

Likewise, Harry (D/deaf) had reservations about playing in a tournament that homogenises its diverse participants:

> With the DPL, I was very sceptical when it came out. Because I was like, we are all not the same. We've all been lumped into the same category. It didn't help that I was reading at the time, and I'm not comparing the two, but I was reading (Frantz) Fanon who talks about oppression in the sense that oppressing a group is saying you all have the same single story. And that's what it felt like the DPL was going to be doing.

Evoking Frantz Fanon's critique of colonial categorising of *blackness* and *whiteness*, Harry's scepticism of being institutionally 'lumped' (Kerschbaum, 2022) together as disabled athletes was astute. As earlier, while stories are central to the mattering of disability, it is others' perceptions of these narratives and the interactional contexts in which they materialise that is meaningful. Similar to dis/appearance, Kerschbaum (2022: 7) talks of this process as waves of *dis-attention*, in which entanglements among 'beings, environments, materials and meaning' interact in everyday life. Drawing upon her embodiment as a D/deaf academic, her dynamic conception of how disability materialises is pertinent to our participants' corporeal experiences of the DPL. For Harry, in contrast to D/deaf cricket, his disability emerges *because* of the pan-disability environment:

> D/deaf cricket is all about the community. As I said earlier, it's the only place where people make an effort with communication. And people really understand each other. Whereas pan-disability doesn't do that. I can never understand what it's like to have no leg or to have a learning disability.

Away from a D/deaf sporting culture – in which many D/deaf people identify as a linguistic minority (Foster et al., 2018) and BSL is commonly used alongside or instead of verbal communication – Harry's hearing and ways of communicating are 'impaired' due to the environment's embodied norms. Although each franchise has a BSL interpreter, it is the spoken word that dominates interactions on and off the pitch. He also stresses that this is not necessarily a universal experience for all D/deaf athletes. For non-speaking D/deaf players, the DPL's hearing-centric environment, which imposes a reliance upon interpreters, is even more exclusionary. Conversely, Simon (D/deaf), who had only recently started playing D/deaf cricket, the DPL is comfortingly familiar: 'it felt a bit more natural to be around those I can talk to'. However, when in the impairment-specific national squad, he frequently requires his teammates to 'translate' signed communication. Importantly, in these scenarios, the athletes' impairments do not change; it is the interactional context that does.

As an example, in the first year of the DPL, the captains of the four franchise teams were representative of the PD, LD and D/deaf impairment groups. Yet, in the following iteration, the franchises were all captained by physically disabled athletes. During the interviews, we raise this issue with the players. For Nick (LD), who was a captain during the previous season, the news came as a surprise: 'it's a little bit disappointing because I wasn't told, I wasn't consulted with on this decision'. He went on to describe his challenging experience of leading a pan-disability team:

> It was very hard to break the cliques and try to get them to integrate with the group. . . I can remember during the very last weekend of the round robin stages for the DPL, I just had an emotional breakdown. It was scary, albeit part of it was just frustration that day hadn't gone well for my team. From a management point of view, for my well-being, I think they were just trying to look out for me, which I appreciate, but I feel like I could manage it now.

Oscar (D/deaf), another former captain, did not have any objections to the changes:

> I understand the context of disability. It might mean that D/deaf people are disadvantaged in those leadership and communication roles but, at the same time, you've got physical disability disadvantage when it comes to running between the wickets, when it comes to out-fielding. Then you've got the learning disability disadvantage when it comes to strategy and trying to maintain focus without letting emotion get the better of you. So, at no point am I complaining about it.

In the DPL, the interplay between embodiment and interaction is most apparent in how athletes frame the bodies and, therefore, the impairments of others. Here, Oscar's generalisations of the players' 'disadvantages' emerge from the embodied norms of athletic ability *and* of being PD, LD and D/deaf. These institutional categories, which are produced and reproduced in this setting, underpin the marking of some athletes as Other and the hierarchal privileging of certain embodiments (Coleman-Fountain and McLaughlin, 2013). While Oscar's equivalency of impairment may suggest a 'level playing field', it noticeably neglects the role of power and domination in how disability interactionally dis/appears. Contrastingly, Harry provides a more critical viewpoint on the captaincy decision:

> Harry: I think that it shows the nature of the disabilities quite clearly. Not the nature of the disabilities, but the nature of how we respond to disabilities. It's interesting that they're gone 'we'll focus more on winning', which is fair enough, as that is what the DPL should be. But that leaves questions for the ECB to work out why there isn't leadership abilities within the other impairment groups.
>
> Interviewer: Do you think for both D/deaf and LD, that's based on stereotypes? Or, from what they saw last year, they want to make a change?
>
> Harry: It's cultural, isn't it? Being a leader in a changing room, it's all about communication between the coaches and the team. Like the LDs, deafness, our disability, is about communication, right? I guess the PDs don't have that problem because their disabilities are physical. It might be just easier for the coaches to be able to communicate through them. It's easier to get their plans because the coaches are all, except Pauly, not disabled. Of course, they're going to find it easiest to talk to someone who can communicate in their world. And that's very harsh.

Unlike Oscar, who agreeably situates his embodiment within the accepted norms of the social setting, Harry focuses on the institutional power in the demarcation of who can and cannot lead in the DPL. As he identifies, by removing the captaincy from D/deaf and LD athletes, the coaches and organisers are privileging those players who can perform 'in their world' – that is, high-performance sport. This is an ideological choice wholly based upon ability (Siebers, 2008): the ability to lead, the ability to be productive, the ability to emulate non-disabled standards. As we have established throughout this section, the materialising of ability, disability and even impairment is not incidental or inherent: disabled athletes' complex embodiment and the ways in which bodies are perceived is tied to inequalities of power. Whether through formalised social roles (coach, organiser, captain) or in everyday athlete interactions, the DPL environment is contingent on unequal markings of difference.

'Severely, Severely, Severely Disabled' to 'Able-Disabled': The DPL's Corporeal Boundaries

In our final section, we now turn to how the DPL's corporeal boundaries – that is, who is in and who is out – are sustained in this competitive environment. Owing to the variety of bodies both within and across impairment categories (PD, LD, D/deaf), players and coaches are presented with an ontological dilemma: what are the corporeal boundaries of acceptability? For Philip (PD), there are clear distinctions between athletes:

> I think the tournament, if anything, has highlighted that the PD lads are so good, like they are proper players. The whole England squad are genuine proper, proper players. And then a couple of the LD lads as well, proper players, but then it's the range and ability from the PD lads compared to the LD lads. The D/deaf lads are all quite similar, I think.

While hierarchies of impairment have previously been explored in disability sport (Mastro et al., 1996; Powis, 2020; Purdue and Howe, 2013) we are the first to examine

how the privileging of bodies materialises in a pan-disability environment. Expectably, Philip's loaded use of 'proper' in valorising the players' abilities is based upon non-disabled norms of embodiment. But, for the players and coaches, what does a 'proper' and, conversely, an 'improper' athletic body look like? Categorisation of athletes is not simply an issue of visibility, which we will further examine later, but emerges from wide-ranging *signs of disability* (Kerschbaum, 2022). This concept, which is integral to understanding disabled athletes' complex embodiment, once again emphasises the interplay between the body and interaction. Throughout our interviews, material signifiers of disability were frequently cited as key markers of difference. In the neo-liberal environment of high-performance sport, in which competitive individualism is the norm (Andrews and Silk, 2018), disabled athletes are continually pitted against each other on the field of play. Markedly, they are also competing for legitimacy and a justification of their personhood, whereby athletes often present themselves as distinct from their fellow competitors:

> You're not going to get those that are severely, severely, severely disabled. Or maybe they are severely disabled, but it impacts their life to a point that they can't play cricket to a good standard. Because everyone's playing a good standard of cricket, so they must have learnt how to deal with it. It just wouldn't work having someone in a wheelchair playing the DPL because it wouldn't be safe. Or just someone that was so disabled that they needed a full-time carer, let's say, you can't have 12, you wouldn't have them standing next to them at point. (Simon, Deaf)

> In my head, disability is someone in a wheelchair or like someone with a severe, severe impairment, where they're unable to go about life without assistance. (Mark, PD)

The similarities of Simon's and Mark's quotes are compelling: first, the repeated uses of 'severe' and, second, the references to personal assistance and the wheelchair as notable signs of disability. In their interactional making of disability as stigmatised and unwanted (Healey and Titchkosky, 2022), the disabled body signifies dependency, lacking autonomy; an extreme and individualised Otherness that is beyond the corporeal boundary. This is reflective of what Michalko (2009: 71) theorises as the excessive appearance of disability: 'From not enough sight, not enough use of our legs, not enough hearing, to too much embodied difference, too grotesque, too many letters scrambled in our brains; disabled people are excessive; we are too much and not enough.' While the DPL's neo-liberal ideology has accelerated and deepened these stigmatising processes (Charmaz, 2019; Rembis, 2013), its high-performance approach has also irrevocably altered the boundaries of acceptability:

> We try to go mainstream by picking a lot more agile players with disabilities . . . taking the wheelchair aspect away and picking lads who are more able-bodied. (Carl, PD)

> There are some that push the boundary of 'Do they count?' They're the ones who maybe are the least disabled on the scale, if it is a scale, because then we know that our team is going to be that 1% better than anyone else. I think especially the DPL does push that to probably the extremes. (Simon, Deaf)

Rory (PD) refers to the athletes described above as 'able-disabled people'. During our interview, he considered the changes to disability cricket during his two decades in the sport. Alongside organisational and financial improvements, Rory highlights the bodies that now dominate the sport:

> What I have noticed is that there are more able disabled people now. Certainly, for physical disabilities, there are more subtle disabilities, from my point of view, whereas there were probably more obvious disabilities when I first started. So, it was amputees, arm missing, cerebral palsy, quite obvious physical disabilities, whereas now they're more subtle ones.

Much like being deemed *too disabled*, signs are prominent in Rory's marking of athletes who are *not disabled enough* for disability sport. His distinction between obvious and subtle disabilities – which he later defines as 'internal stoma type disabilities' or those who 'have been in an accident and got a bad knee' – captures how corporeal boundaries are informally and interactionally constructed. Rory, who has cerebral palsy (CP), deems his impairment's materiality as integral to his status as a disabled cricketer. However, he also recognises that the acceptable forms of embodiment are becoming even more exclusionary. He gives an example of how players who are 'more physically able in terms of their hands and their wrists' now dominate top order batting positions because they can most successfully emulate the power hitting of contemporary non-disabled cricket. As he admits, for CP athletes and others who do not fit this embodied mould, the future looks worrying:

> It's not going to get weaker; it's going to get stronger. The fielding is going to get stronger. They're going to able to hit the ball faster, bowl faster. . . As it becomes more elite, more professionalised, the expectations are going to rise and it's going to become harder.

In moving towards what DePauw (1997: 425) conceptualises as the *(in)visibility of disability in sport* – 'a point at which athletes with disabilities are visible in sport as athletes or a time when an athlete's disability is no longer visible' – we are left with a spectacle in which disability has disappeared. In striving for (in)visibility, certain bodies are made invisible in high-performance disability sport (Purdue and Howe, 2013; Rembis, 2013), which runs counter to the purpose of the DPL as a *product*:

> You look at the DPL and you saw comments on YouTube, people didn't even know what people's disabilities were, right? You couldn't tell apart the D/deaf people, the learning disability, the physical disability teams. So how would they even know who to have a role model for, because they don't even know what their disability is. (Mark, PD)

Here, Mark highlights the in/visibility paradox at the heart of the DPL. While the coaches and organisers have engendered an environment in which those who most closely embody the norm are allowed to pass (Rembis, 2013), if the athletes' impairments are imperceptible, the tournament's 'disability' selling point also dissipates. Another element of this paradox is the tensions between the perceived in/visibility of the three impairment categories:

> The physical disability group is an easier group to sell to a mainstream population because people can go 'I haven't got my arm.' It's a more visible story that people can latch on to whereas deafness, people don't understand it at all. (Harry, D/deaf)

> When you walk down the street you could easily see somebody with a physical disability. Same for someone who's visually impaired and/or D/deaf, if you're looking for the right cues. But you wouldn't be able to spot somebody with a learning or intellectual disability. (Nick, LD)

> Because they're physically disabled you can see it, so you understand it. Obviously, the D/deaf lads you see it because they've got their hearing aids in, or they won't be able to hear you. So, a lot of the learning disability side of it is the fact that they can't see it. (Russell, LD)

In these quotes, the three players all demonstrate how impairment and disability are emergent in interaction (Coleman-Fountain and Mclaughlin, 2013). Interestingly, they articulate these encounters of dis/appearance through the figurative perceptions of others. These stories of the body are constructed to make sense of the environment and their places within it, even if the narratives do not necessarily correlate with the homogenous body culture identified above. Counterintuitively, the athletes claim that their 'invisible' impairments are a disadvantage compared with physically disabled athletes – a group in this setting that seeks to emphasise their own invisibility. Whether it is arguments of preferential treatment (Nick and Russell) or being associated with PD athletes for publicity (Harry), the value of the body as a visible signifier of disability is highly contested. So, to summarise the DPL's corporeal boundaries, there are those who are too disabled, not disabled enough and the wrong type of disabled: it is no wonder that disabled athletes' embodiment is so complex.

Conclusion

To conclude, we now turn to this article's theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically, *dis/appearance* – which is shaped by SI and embodiment – offers a novel approach to critically explore disability, sport *and* disability sport. While this concept has been previously employed in varied ways, our usage uniquely centralises how disability and impairment materialise in embodied interactions. In moving beyond a binary acceptance/rejection of identity, we demonstrate the value of embodiment theory in bringing sociological understandings of disability to life. Evidently, viewing embodiment as a simple synonym for the body is insufficient: a dynamic, disability-centred approach is required. Similarly, the concept of dis/appearance has further application beyond high-performance sport. For example, disabled people's embodied experiences of work, education and other social institutions could all be analysed through this theoretical lens.

Empirically, we establish the DPL as a site of sociological importance: a neo-liberal, ableist environment that fundamentally and irrevocably pushes the boundaries of what a disabled athlete *and* the disabled body should be. Our focus upon how athletes' complexly and interactionally embody these corporeal ideals in this setting has produced meaningful insights. Whether through interaction, paradoxes of in/visibility or the marking of corporeal boundaries, it is our participants' illuminating embodied experiences

that make disability *matter*. Notably, the DPL's pan-disability approach – in combination with high-performance practices and discourse – serves to heighten the dis/appearance of disability and impairment. Equally, despite promises of inclusivity, its contrived lumping of athletes together based on 'difference' has made disability cricket more exclusionary, particularly for those athletes that cannot emulate non-disabled norms. Yet, in December 2024, the ECB announced their intention to streamline the PD, LD and D/deaf national teams into one pan-disability team and encouraged the rest of the world to follow suit. Considering this announcement, our findings offer a timely and cautionary perspective into the potential consequences of further organisational change.

To build upon this study's key findings, further qualitative inquiry is required. First, although we acknowledge the role of institutional power in disabled athletes' complex embodiment – for example, the ideological framing of ability – future research should provide detailed analysis of how institutions' practices underpin the interplay between body and interaction in disabled sport. For example, both the DPL's unique draft process and coaching practices merit in-depth sociological investigation: specifically, the consequences of employing neo-liberal discourse and structures in a pan-disability environment. Expanding upon this article's focus upon athletes' experiences, coaches' perspectives on these practices – including player selection, the privileging of bodies and high-performance ideals – would be compelling. Finally, researchers and practitioners need to consider the future of high-performance disability sport. As the DPL illustrates, if disability dis/appears, then what are we left with? For athletes, coaches and organisers alike, this existential question requires serious contemplation.

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Notes

1. See Brighton et al. (2023) for an overview of theoretical approaches to disability, including the social model.
2. While pan-disability cricket is played recreationally, the ECB claim that this is the first tournament in which players from these impairment groups are competing together (Howson, 2022). This contrasts with international cricket, which is currently organised into specific PD, LD and D/deaf formats.

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