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Please cite this publication as follows:

Sparkes, A., Brighton, J. and Inckle, K. (2017) Imperfect perfection and wheelchair bodybuilding: challenging ableism or reproducing normalcy? *Sociology*. pp. 1-7. ISSN 0038-0385.

Link to official URL (if available):

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0038038517737476>

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## **Imperfect perfection and wheelchair bodybuilding: Challenging ableism or reproducing normalcy?**

### **Abstract**

This article explores the impact of the binary configuration of disabled bodies as opposite and unequal to able bodies, and whether or not contemporary bodybuilding provides a space where this dualism can be overcome. Drawing on life history interviews with Dan, a professional wheelchair bodybuilder, we consider how his hyper-muscular upper body may position him as a supercrip and thereby reinforce bodily and gender norms. Simultaneously, Dan's powerful, disabled body and a competitive context that applies standard judgment criteria across all bodies potentially subverts this normative configuration. We reflect on the contradictions engendered by Dan's corporeality by drawing on notions of the bodybuilder as body-garde involved in a process of enfreakment that disrupts and transcends contemporary bodily ideals. Here, variable self-reflexive bodybuilding projects can accommodate contingent conceptualisations of perfection, including disability, with implications for disabled bodies and identities more broadly.

*Key words:* body-garde, disability, enfreakment, perfection, contemporary bodybuilding, wheelchair bodybuilding.

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## Introduction

In his classification of organised bodybuilding culture over the last 130 years, Liokaftos (2017) discusses three periods. In the early period (1880s-1930s) a blueprint for building the perfect body was provided by works of classical art that provided timeless aesthetic standards of an unsurpassable natural order and form for both shaping and displaying the male body. Such bodies were often distanced from what were perceived as the disproportionate and unnatural bodies of strongmen. According to Liokaftos, the early aesthetic of the perfect body in this period, 'echoed a model of embodied practice based on notions of grace, balance, health and moderation' (p. 62).

These classical roots were gradually supplanted in the middle period (1940s-1970s) of bodybuilding as a shift occurred towards a celebration of muscle for muscle's sake and a view that big is good but bigger is better. Here, Liokaftos (2017: 91) argues, there was a shift from a post-war model of ideal manhood and amateur competition to one of pure bodybuilding that embraced 'professional competition, performance specialization, and a technologically enabled aesthetic of unlimited growth whereby perfection is imagined no longer as a return to a set, objective ideal but as an open-ended project'.

Moving on to bodybuilding's late period (1980s-present) Liokaftos (2017) suggests that fuelled by a paradigm of elite sport performance there has been a breaking of physical boundaries and a redefining of what is considered possible in terms of muscular development. One result of this has been the production and celebration of a contemporary, hard-core, extreme and freaky body. For Liokaftos, this was evidenced in the corporeal form of six-time Mr Olympia champion Dorian Yates who inaugurated in the early 1990s what is referred to in dominant bodybuilding culture as the 'Era of the Freak.' Locks (2012a: 15-16) describes such bodies as follows:

The contemporary bodybuilding aesthetic – which I term Post-Classic – focuses on the body as an incongruent set of muscles, a fragmentary physique which is now so defined that during various poses, the muscle fibers are clearly visible beneath the skin. With their broad shoulders and narrow hips, the enormous muscles of the torso (chest and back) together with bodies so defined that substructures of muscles reveal further substructures, these bodies exemplify the most desired hypertrophic look of the contemporary bodybuilder; A 'shredded mass.' ...While the classical body signified order, proportion and symmetry, so the new hypermorphic body of Post-Classicalism signified excess, disproportion, and exaggeration.

Clearly, how physical perfection within bodybuilding is regarded has changed over time. Equally, as Monaghan (2001) points out, even though contemporary male and female bodybuilders may be unified in a quest to develop lean muscle, they are a heterogeneous group. Conceptions of physical perfection are therefore 'spatially and temporally contingent, varying from one individual to the next and also for the same individual during the course of their bodybuilding career' (p. 74).

The historical analyses of bodybuilding provided by both Liokaftos (2017) and Locks (2012) highlight, however, that notions of the perfectible and the perfect are considered only in terms of the 'able' rather than disabled body. This comes as no surprise since the ideological construction of the perfect able body places the disabled body as the binary opposite, the negative and feared 'other.' In this article, therefore, we draw on ethnographic and interview data to interrogate the meaning and impact of disabled bodybuilding as an identity that challenges binaries of bodily perfection and the 'able' and disabled body.

### **Researching the built disabled body**

Given the corporeal nature of our research topic we contextualise our investigation with the following ethnographic account of a male wheelchair bodybuilder doing a guest posing session on stage during a competition.

Dan smoothly rolls over the polished wooden floorboards and comes to a standstill in the centre of the stage. Spotlights shine onto his muscled, hairless, tanned and oiled body. The rousing introduction of Queen's song *One Man* is blaring out of amplified speakers and reverberates around the theatre. The audience, attempting to make sense of what they are seeing, wait in anticipation. Dan remains motionless in his wheelchair, head down, lats and biceps tensed and held out to the side, his finger tips resting near the axles of his wheels.

As the song drops and the heavy sound of guitars rip through the air, Dan proudly raises his head and like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, straightens his arms and slowly arcs them upwards, finishing over his head reaching to the sky. Holding for a second or two to build up the suspense

further, he aggressively flexes his arms downwards hitting a front bicep pose so hard it looks as if the huge muscles in his arms are ready to burst through his wafer thin skin.

The crowd, sensing the drama of the moment, roar with their appreciation of the perfected body in a wheelchair that they see in front of them. People next to me are clapping their hands together hard, some are clapping above their heads, others are standing up around me, mainly men, shouting 'Go Dan, 'Awesome Man,' and 'Tense it, tight' This continues throughout the entire routine.

Elegantly executing the rest of his posing routine in time with music, Dan accepts the rapturous applause and heads off stage. The crowd settles and begin to talk about what they have just seen. One says, 'How is he able to get in such shape in a wheelchair?' Others express their amazement at his physique and performance: 'Wow! Fair play to him.' (Field notes)

During this routine, Dan included the following pose that provides evidence of his investment in, and dedication to, the bodybuilding lifestyle that has resulted in his hyper-muscular upper-body.

Insert figure 1 about here

Significantly, Dan's legs are not visible in this picture. When posing Dan always hides their lack of musculature by wearing baggy tracksuit bottoms. The imperfect, imperfectable and disabled part of his body is hidden so that the external gaze becomes focused of his perfectable and able hyper-muscular upper-body. So we might ask, how does this position Dan as a bodybuilder who is disabled in his quest

for an imperfectly perfect body and what can we learn from his experiences? Does his performance and the reaction of the audience suggest that contemporary bodybuilding may provide an arena in which able-bodied norms of perfection are disrupted, and a space created for a disabled bodily perfection to emerge that challenges the normative able/disabled binary?

As what might be described as a 'supercrip' athlete (Howe, 2011), is Dan challenging ableism and its inherent binary oppositions by introducing a different and empowering body aesthetic? Or, is he engaged in a strategy of 'enfreakment' (Richardson, 2012) that serves to reproduce and reinforce normative notions of what constitutes the perfect male able body in western cultures? Alternatively, does this enfreakment, as a core characteristic of contemporary bodybuilding, offer a creative and empowering space for an emerging aesthetic that challenges and exceeds the binaries of disability/ablebodiedness? What are the implications of this non-binary potential for Dan and others who might follow his example? In order to address such questions, we need to consider aspects of Dan's life history, how he came to be on stage that night, and what becoming a disabled bodybuilder means to him. Before this, a brief word regarding the larger study of which Dan is a part is warranted.

This article draws on data generated from a 4-year ethnographic study designed to explore the experiences of people who had become disabled through spinal cord injury (SCI) and the meanings they gave to their subsequent involvement in disability sport as part of a process of reconstructing their body-self-culture relationships over time. Like Moola and Norman (2012), we were aware of the lack of contact between disability studies, the sociology of embodiment, and sport sociology and how this reproduces the invisibility of disabled athletes. Accordingly, we endeavoured to creatively engage with the work of the following: those in disability studies who take

the body to be simultaneously biological, material and social in character (e.g., Thomas, 2007); those who advocate embodied and carnal forms of sociology that address the active role of the body in social life and shift from theorising *about* bodies to theorising *from* lived bodies (e.g., Wacquant, 2015; Williams & Bendellow, 1998), and those sport sociologists that have focused on disabled athletes (e.g., Berger, 2009; Howe, 2011). In combining such work our intention was to incorporate their most useful features to guide, but not determine, our study.

Following university ethical approval, a number of governing bodies in England were contacted to facilitate access to disability sport clubs and individual disabled athletes. One of these was Wheelchair Bodybuilding Inc who put James Brighton in touch with Dan. At the time, having won the 2009 World Wheelchair Bodybuilding Championships, he was the only International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness (IFBB) professional in the UK and, therefore, constituted for our purposes what Stake (2005) describes as an intrinsic case study from which naturalistic generalisations can be developed. The study was explained to Dan who, given that his elite status in bodybuilding made him identifiable, agreed that his actual name be used. He has read this article and agreed to its publication.

James observed Dan compete as a guest at a regional bodybuilding show to see how he performed on stage and to monitor the public's reaction to him. Just as Berger (2008, 2009) used a life history approach in his study of disabled athletes to explore their lived experiences over time and to illuminate how society spoke itself through their bodies, so James also conducted three life history interviews with Dan. These were conducted at his home where he was invited to chronologically reconstruct his life, in his own words and according to his own relevancies. The



interviews totalled 6 hours, were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then subjected to a thematic analysis. Based on this, we now provide an overview of Dan's story.

### **Getting to know Dan**

Despite describing himself as a 'pretty normal guy' who enjoyed sports and socialising with friends Dan recalls how in 1999, aged 21, he felt small in comparison to other men and 'heartbroken and belittled' when told he didn't look old enough to buy cigarettes or beer. Such experiences, as for many young men, motivated him to go to the gym to build muscle. Enjoying increases in muscle mass and the social benefits that training with a community of likeminded friends provided, he became more serious. As Dan's body metamorphosed his confidence and self-esteem grew, feelings that were further strengthened by the recognition of others regarding his muscled self. As Dan stated: 'when you get to a certain point it don't matter what you wear, people go "My God! He must work out because look at the size of his traps."'

Over the next five years Dan committed him self to intense weight training and became further socialised into the bodybuilding habitus described by Monaghan (2001). Dan officially identified himself as a 'proper' bodybuilder when he competed in a regional show in 2004, finishing 5<sup>th</sup> in the Newcomer category. His increased muscularity, judged competitively under the gaze of professional judges further legitimised his identity as a bodybuilder. As he put it: 'I looked like a bodybuilder now, rather than someone training to be one'. Significantly bodybuilding not only transformed Dan's physical body, but also his self-identity and masculine status. He metamorphosed from an anxious or failed masculinity to a hardcore identity imbued with power and impact. This potential for body and identity transformation becomes significant again later in Dan's story after he becomes disabled.

Aged 31, Dan fell from a roof and shattered his vertebrae at T12 (Thoracic vertebrae. Level-12). This resulted in him becoming Paraplegic. After 6 months of rehabilitation at a specialist spinal unit he returned home. As time progressed Dan started thinking about his altered sense of embodiment and it became harder for him to cope. Having worked so hard to 'put on size' in the gym, following SCI, Dan lost 25.5kg of bodyweight from atrophied muscle mass. Seeing himself in the mirror he did not recognise his post-SCI body as his own and became disassociated from it. A period of depression followed and he had negative feelings about not being able to go to the gym.

During this period, Dan's relationship with his spouse became strained and one year after his SCI, they temporarily separated. For the next six months Dan did nothing. The catalyst for him to 'getting his head together' came when he decided to return to the gym, initially just to 'have a laugh with the guys'. For Dan, 'those 6 months I spent on my own got me motivated, got me doing everything, and now I realise I don't have to sit here and whinge every day. I can do anything that I put my mind to I have to get on with it, suck it up'. Part of shift involved him giving up his desire to 'walk again, be back at work, and lead a normal life.' After intensive rehabilitation Dan recognised, 'I just knew I would never walk again, I just knew I wouldn't. I knew I wouldn't move me feet. Whatever will be will be... I thought I may as well concentrate on what I can do, not what I can't'.

Dan's decision to abandon concrete hope of 'a normal life' in which he could walk, hold down a job and thereby embody normative masculinity, was a catalyst for transformation. Once again bodybuilding provided Dan with the apparatus to rework his body and identity in ways that both challenge and reinforce norms of masculinity and the able-bodied/disabled binary. For example, Dan's decision to 'concentrate on

what I can do' epitomises the supercrip, triumph-over-tragedy, stereotype of disability (Berger, 2009; Howe, 2011). Yet his built body also exceeds what is expected of a disabled man and repositions him both within normative masculinity *and* the enfreaked contemporary bodybuilding habitus.

### **Back to the gym: Becoming a disabled bodybuilder**

The decision to go back to the gym was made jointly with his spouse during reconciliation, in the hope of providing Dan with a sense of purpose and routine. He knew little about wheelchair bodybuilding, but going to the gym was 'all he knew' in his adult life. It allowed him to continue something he was good at that previously had powerfully transformed his body and sense of self.

As Dan reacquainted himself with the gym he discovered that he could do many of the exercises and re-engage with many of the broader practices (e.g. nutrition) he did as an able-bodied bodybuilder. While he could not train his legs anymore, his upper body responded quickly. Indeed, his upper body soon became more muscular than when he competed as a bodybuilder pre-SCI:

I'm miles bigger now than when I did my show 4 years ago. Crikey, look at the photos of me now compared to then! The last show I did [as wheelchair bodybuilder] I was 86 kilos on stage and I've got no legs. So it was just all my upper body really. So I'm pretty big really. My arms (biceps) are almost 20 inches (in circumference), back then I would be lucky if they were 17 inches. So I have really put on the size. You look at me then and you look at photos of me now, the difference is incredible.

This creates an interesting paradox whereby Dan's disabled, post-SCI body, is more successfully built than his normative able body - an experience which challenges the simplistic binary between the able and disabled body and also highlights the disruptive potential of the contemporary bodybuilding aesthetic. Having gained a hyper-muscular upper-body, Dan decided that he wanted to re-validate his competitive bodybuilder status.

A year of hard training later, in 2009 Dan was preparing for his first show as a wheelchair bodybuilder. He saw this as 'setting a small goal' in order to plan and prepare for a competition and 'be the best he could be' as well as an opportunity to gain critical feedback on his body from the judges for improvement. Here, the gaze of the judges is based on the perfect upper body. As the International Federation of Bodybuilding (IFBB) state in Article 11 of their Men's Wheelchair Body Building Rules for 2016:

When assessing a competitor's upper body, a judge should follow a routine procedure which will allow a comprehensive assessment of the upper body as a whole. During the comparisons of the mandatory poses, the judge should first look at the primary muscle group being displayed. The judge should then survey the whole upper body, starting from the head, and looking at every part of the physique in a downward sequence, beginning with general impressions, and looking for muscular bulk, balanced development, muscular density and definition.

The downward survey should take in the head, neck, shoulders, chest, all of the arm muscles, front of the trunk for pectorals, pec-delt tie-in, abdominals

and waist. The same procedure for back poses will also take in the upper and lower trapezius, teres and infraspinatus, erector spinae. (p. 7)

In terms of the *product* of bodybuilding (the competition ready body), Article 11 indicates that disabled bodies are quantified and classified as perfect under the *same assessment criteria* as able-bodied bodybuilders. The parity of criteria between able and disabled competitors not only makes contemporary bodybuilding exceptional among competitive sports it also transgresses the binary between able and disabled bodies. This parity of judgement is also important to Dan:

The thing with wheelchair bodybuilding is that you are judged the same as every other bodybuilder, except from the waist up, so the rules and everything are exactly the same everything needs to be symmetrical and in proportion. You could have 20-inch arms and no shoulders; you're going to look an idiot.

Although his goal for his first competition was 'to go there for the experience and to learn because I hadn't done a show in a wheelchair', Dan ended up placing first. Winning this event re-affirmed his sense of self, and led to him gaining his pro-card as the first wheelchair bodybuilder in the UK. Winning this event confirmed Dan's identity as a hard-core bodybuilder on stage, in the gym, and in public life thereby restoring some of his normative masculine status:

I have got to a point now where I am really happy. No matter what you wear or whatever, I am a bodybuilder... Obviously I'm going to be getting bigger but I'm happy that everything is in proportion. I am in a wheelchair and I've have even got an 8 pack, I'm chuffed to bits with that!

In many ways Dan's SCI has enabled him to become a more successful bodybuilder – e.g. bigger, first-prize winning – than when he was able-bodied. However, Dan acknowledges that the specificity of his disability has been crucial to his attainment of this new bodily perfection. He describes the level of SCI (T12) as 'perfectly located' to assist his transition into a wheelchair bodybuilder. He jokes that it is at 'exactly the right level' to achieve a perfectly built upper body and describes himself as 'just disabled enough' to maintain important able-bodied ideals of masculine body perfection that are judged from the torso upwards.

For Dan, his 'perfect' level of impairment assists in the muscular development of his body. As he explains in relation to his visibly developed 8-pack of abdominal muscles:

I use my abs as balance, because I use them for the lack of glutes I have got, so moving around they are constantly working. So when I dropped the weight they were like "Wow! Where did they come from?" I get e-mails from people in wheelchairs asking, 'How do you get your abs like that?' And I'm like, I don't train my abs and you can hear them, in their mind they are going 'WANKER!'

While enjoying his success as a wheelchair bodybuilder, Dan also frequently draws attention to how the specificity of his disability has facilitated his achievements:

I mean some people in wheelchairs are not going to be able to. We have to work so much harder in the gym. Some people they have got no core stability so they will have to get help onto a bench, with no strap, so they have to be really careful what they are doing. So for them it is much harder than anyone else.

This is significant, since the category of disability that is operationalised in both theory and practice is so broad and diverse as to produce little conceptual or practical leverage (Inckle, 2015). For example, 'disability' can be used to encapsulate experiences as diverse as hearing voices, being HIV positive, SCI or amputation, dyslexia, living with debilitating illnesses such as Multiple Sclerosis as well as congenital impairments. Clearly it would be meaningless for such diverse embodied subjectivities to compete under a single category of 'disabled bodybuilding', and herein lie the limitations of wheelchair bodybuilding, and other disability sports (Howe, 2011), for transgressing normative identity categories. As

Dan comments:

The three guys that were there at the finals absolutely loved it. I mean one of them has got a brain disease that is slowly shutting his body down. The guy that won it was born with one leg and he used to walk on one leg, but now he has a super duper carbon fibre leg. He is in his chair a bit more now because his prosthetic is wearing away his hip joint, so yeah, he's over the moon. He is Mr Britain Wheelchair now, the first ever one. And the other guy, he was a lot older [and had cerebral palsy], alright he couldn't get the condition down like the younger guys but he was there, and he did it and his routine was blinding. He is never going to win the worlds, he is never going to win the British, but that's what I am saying, it doesn't matter. He got up there and he probably put together the best routine out of the three but he wasn't going to win. It wasn't because he didn't try hard enough it was because he was 10 years older than everyone else. But he did real well. They all did real well. I was in the

audience with tears in my eyes thinking 'Christ, now I know how people feel when they watch me'.

Dan's comments illustrate the heterogeneous nature of disability and the challenges for theory and practice in attempting to universalise from one disability experience to another. Nonetheless, disability sports identity and activism is important for Dan. For example, at the time of interview in 2009 there were only three IFBB Wheelchair Pro's in the world. However, there needs to be six competitors with their pro-cards in order for promoters to add a wheelchair competition to a professional bodybuilding bill. Therefore, part of Dan's role, as he sees it, is to promote himself and the sport so more wheelchair bodybuilders can become professional, thereby further raising the profile of the sport. He states, 'If we don't have any pro's then they are not going to put a show on. If we can just keep on doing what we are doing and then get this bodybuilding going as a professional sport then it will give other people something to aspire to'.

### **Subverting the gaze, inviting the stare, and embodying the supercrip**

Dan's sports activism is evident in his desire to create new professionally endorsed spaces for disabled bodybuilders. It is also evident in his hyper-muscular upper-body that offers a direct challenge to the tragedy model of disability, and subverts the normative gaze of the able-bodied away from perceived weakness (his wheelchair) to his indisputable physical capacity.

Do I challenge them [able-bodied perceptions]? Yes. Probably because when I'm out people are like "MY GOD"! You get the odd idiot saying 'Crikey no wonder your shoulders are so big having to push yourself around in a



wheelchair'. No, hold on a minute mate, the reason I have got shoulders like this is because I am in here [the gym] 5 days a week unlike you! But you do get quite a few people go 'WOW!' They are proper impressed. So when I get out there in my wheelchair it's made a lot of people think, it's changed a lot of people's perceptions of what someone in a wheelchair is like and what they are capable of.

In altering the comportment and appearance of the body itself, Dan is able to modify the very material entity that informs the negative stereotypes that people hold about disability in a strikingly visual way. This is particularly so when he does guest spots at shows where he invites both the gaze and the stare of the audience. The, stare is an 'urgent eye jerk of intense interest' (Thomson, 2009: 3) that is normally deemed rude and oppressive in everyday life but is welcomed and unconstrained at bodybuilding competitions as part of the thrill of immersion by spectators.

Dan's body also invites the stare of the judges and other bodybuilders as he seeks and to confirm to the bodybuilding 'cognoscenti' (Monaghan, 2001) that he is an authentic pro-bodybuilder. Thus, Dan's sports activism is subversive, in that he is pushing a sport that is based on body aesthetics to incorporate disabled bodies, which are normatively positioned as unsightly and abject:

I do put myself under pressure when I go to a show. I am already a pro bodybuilder no matter what condition I go out in on stage. People are still like 'he's in a wheelchair and he's a pro bodybuilder.' But there is always pressure for me to look good...The pressure is horrendous because I don't want to disappoint people. I want to go out there and for people to go 'Oh my God, WOW!' Rather than say, 'Look at him, well done he's a disabled pro

bodybuilder'. I want people to think 'WOW, he's better than half of the [able-bodied] guys that are competing today.' That's what I want.

The visibility of Dan's hyper-muscularity acts as a sign to others that against the odds he has overcome his disability. He thereby represents, for some, the embodiment of a muscular hero or supercrip athlete. According to Berger (2009) and Howe (2011), the central feature of the supercrip is their success through the attributes of courage, hard work and dedication in overcoming the 'tragedy' of their bodies and demonstrating an ability beyond that which is commonly expected of disabled people. While inspiring and enabling for some, they both point out that this categorisation is, for many disabled people disempowering in terms of, for example, fostering unrealistic expectations of what they can achieve, or what they *should* achieve, if only they made the required effort. Yet, as we will argue below, Dan does more than simply conform to one of these binary stereotypes of disability, rather, he challenges the binary distinction upon which perceptions of ability and disability are founded.

### **Seeking imperfect perfection and variable disabled bodybuilding projects**

Given the espoused 'advantages' of Dan's level of SCI stated above in developing a perfect upper-body, Dan readily displays this part of his body with a sense of pride and achievement both on stage, in the gym, and in everyday life situations. In contrast, he tries to make his atrophied legs invisible as they act as a visible signifier of disability. When asked why he always wears baggies (bodybuilding tracksuit bottoms), Dan responded as follows:

Sometimes I am a bit self-conscious about it [atrophied legs], which is why I wear the baggies in the gym. That way when I'm stood up you don't know how thin my legs are. I have got no muscle on the front of my shins. I have got no calves. I have muscle in the calves but from spasms. That's like a 'work out' which isn't bad because I get movement and the muscle is there! Sometimes I look at photos of me in a wheelchair and I wish I had legs but I can't alter that. I'm in a wheelchair man, it can't be helped.

In terms of making impairment 'invisible' it is interesting to note the IFBB 'Men's Wheelchair Body Building Rules 2016' regarding the attire that must be worn on-stage:

Competitors will wear one-coloured, loose-fitting, long training pants which are clean and decent. The colour, fabric and style of the trunks will be left to the competitor's discretion. Competitors will wear sport shoes. (p. 4)

This regulation, which functions to conceal the disabled physical features, can be viewed as both a challenge to ableist norms as well as a reinforcement of them. For example, the attire worn in competition is the *only* distinction that is made in competitive rules for able and disabled bodybuilders, thus creating a clear delineation between the two categories where otherwise there is none. Similarly, the emphasis on concealing the atrophied legs, which sit in marked contrast to the built upper body, may be an attempt to keep disabled bodies out of sight in an arena where bodily strength and power are prized. On the other hand, however, wearing garments that conceal the disability may also subvert the ableist gaze – or stare – which fetishizes and foregrounds disability over sporting achievement, which is evident in much commentary on Paralympians.

In many ways Dan's top heaviness resonates with other able bodied bodybuilders who opt for upper body muscular hypertrophy with a disproportionate growth in legs. Although Dan ironically frames his involuntary leg spasms as a 'workout' (the repetitive muscle contractions results in some lower body hypertrophy) he makes attempts to reduce the visibility of this impairment. In addition to the concealing baggies he wears, Dan also takes measures to restrict involuntary movements in his 'bouncing legs' by strapping them down tightly in order to minimise the contrast between his muscled and controllable upper body with his atrophied and uncontrollable 'rogue' lower body:

When you saw me on stage and my legs started bouncing around. I can control them all the time, right until I get onto stage. My spasms are adrenaline based. As soon as I get on stage I cannot stop them. I will take Methocarbamol half an hour before I go on stage, which is my muscle relaxant, which won't help with having to pump up and show my muscles because everything is relaxed! They are calm when I go on, and then they go off and then they get used to it, and then they get calm near the end [of the routine]. It's just as soon as I get really excited and in the moment, and you go out there and everyone starts clapping and screaming, that's when my legs start and you can't control them. And that drives me mad. I just wish they didn't have any movement in them because then they just wouldn't do it but it does. They are obviously getting some signal and as soon as that happens I can't stop them. If I didn't have spasms I wouldn't have anything to worry about.

Jerking legs on stage remain a visible reminder of Dan's disability as well as the less than perfect nature of his SCI. They undermine the illusion of precision and control

that must be created during a posing routine that aims to draw attention to the 'good' parts of the bodybuilder and deflect attention away from the 'weak' parts. Dan's concern, therefore, is similar to that of able-bodied bodybuilders and locates him within the normative masculine framework of bodily mastery. The difference, for him, is the trade off he must make between using a muscle relaxant to control his leg spasms at the expense of his ability to powerfully flex his upper body muscles that are the focal point for his display of the imperfectly perfect body on stage.

Another point of similarity between Dan and able-bodied bodybuilders is his recognition that the perfect body is always elusive and beyond the grasp of any one individual. Given that notions of perfection can be defined differently over time by governing organisations and participants, then all bodybuilders are faced with the dilemma of pursuing an imperfectly perfect body that is never a static entity and can always be improved in some way. As Dan states:

You're never happy [with your body]. I mean, define perfection? You can't say, 'You *must* look like this'. Every bloke is different and bodybuilders are *never* happy. They are *never ever* happy. They will always look in the mirror and think 'My God, I need to be bigger', 'I need to be this, I need to be that'.

That is bodybuilding.

The focus on creating the 'perfect' body, which is the object of the male gaze, in many ways transgresses normative masculinity. Competitors, judges and audiences for male bodybuilding are predominantly male, however, in gender regimes it is usually the female body that is the focus of intense scrutiny and maintenance in order to create the feminine ideal. Yet in order to create a perfect object-body, male body builders share many practices with female beauty regimes: waxing, tanning,

oiling and paying close attention to one another's bodies, and are often derided as 'gay' by other gym users for doing so (Bridges, 2009). This slippage in normative masculine practice coupled with the state of imperfect perfection as the norm in bodybuilding, opens the way for the creation of unique self-reflexive body projects that can accommodate various and contingent conceptualisations of perfection, including disability.

Monaghan (2001) terms the individual choices bodybuilders themselves make on their embodiment as 'variable body projects'. In doing so, he emphasises, the importance of recognising multiple forms of perfectionism as part of the long-term engagement with, and fulfilment in this activity. Understanding bodybuilding in this way provides opportunities to narratively imagine and actualise a multiplicity of perfectible disabled bodies in, of, and for themselves rather than always in comparison to ideologically informed able-bodied notions of physical perfection. Wheelchair bodybuilding may, therefore, offer one form of embodied practice through which (some) disabled people may envision and experience their corporeality in positive and powerful ways and construct new identities accordingly.

## **Reflections**

At a personal level, Dan has benefited in a number of ways from becoming a successful disabled bodybuilder in terms of his health, self-confidence, physical self-perceptions, self-esteem and quality of life. Dan has been able to establish narrative continuity between his former athletic identity as an able-bodied bodybuilder and his transition to that of a disabled bodybuilder. This has assisted him in developing a valued body-self relationship, and allowed him to enjoy the feelings of intense embodiment that come with the immersive practices of training in the gym to build

muscle. All this has also enabled Dan to enhance his physical and social capital that has led to increases in his economic capital by providing him with a source of paid employment.

Dan has also developed a sporting activist identity in terms of using his hyper-muscularity to challenge normative notions of the disabled body, and using his status as a professional wheelchair bodybuilder to encourage more disabled men to take up bodybuilding so that eventually there will be enough disabled bodybuilders to ensure actual competitions between them rather than just doing guest appearances. Additionally, Dan is driving an aesthetically based sport to incorporate bodies that are normatively framed as abject, flawed and undesirable. To this end, he has been part of a successful movement for the inclusion of wheelchair bodybuilders at major competitions. For example, Men's Wheelchair Bodybuilding was officially recognised as a sport discipline by the International Federation of Bodybuilders (IFFB) International Congress in 2008, with the First IFBB Professional Wheelchair Championships taking place in 2011 at the Houston Pro Show in the USA.

Dan's emergence as a professional disabled bodybuilder, along with others like him, clearly has the potential to be individually empowering, to subvert and transgress normative boundaries of gendered bodily perfection, and thereby challenge ableism. This said, questions have been raised as to whether or not male professional wheelchair bodybuilders, as with women bodybuilders, and other supercrips competing at an elite level in sport, simultaneously collude and reinforce the normative gendered order of bodily perfection. For example, drawing on the reflections of Thomas (2007: 66) regarding the disabled/normal binary divide, we might ask whether or not Dan's presence on stage as a disabled bodybuilder

symbolically affirms the masculine heroic status of the able bodied bodybuilders 'through a subtle celebration of the latter's normality'. Here, the visibility of Dan's wheelchair, and its rarity in bodybuilding (and the gym), inadvertently confirms the normalcy of able-bodiedness (to non-disabled people).

In thinking through some of the possibilities and contradictions that Dan's body presents, we found Locks (2012b) notion of the body builder as body-garde, and Richardson's (2012) thoughts on strategies of enfreakment in representations of contemporary bodybuilding to be useful. This is particularly so in relation to the ways that such bodies are characterised by excess, disproportion, exaggeration and grotesqueness. Here, as Locks (2012a) and Richardson point out, bodybuilders can acquire fame and money by having monster, gross, grotesque, and most importantly freaky muscle groups that overshadow and overpower the rest of their physique. This can include, extreme quadriceps development (e.g., Tom Platz), or enormous lats – back (e.g., Dorian Yates). In this context the post-SCI hyper-muscular upper body and invisible legs merely adds another body-type to the already transgressive range of physical capacities on display.

For Locks (2012b: 169), bodybuilding, like the body modification subcultures with which it shares many features but is often excluded, 'blatantly rebels against definitions of the "normal" and conventional'. He also points out that the competitive contemporary bodybuilder transgresses ideals of physical perfection, and conversely, ugliness and extremity. Therefore, in a similar vein to non-mainstream body-modification subcultures, it also provides a non-binary, non-pathologising space for those whose bodies already transgress binary norms in terms of, for example, gender, sexuality and/or disability. Locks suggests that bodybuilding also



shares a selection of traits with the avant-gard art movement which similarly aimed to disturb and disrupt by transcending aesthetic conventions, establish a discernable distance between itself and other mass practices, took time to find its maximum audience, and always pointed towards the future and the further transgression of aesthetic standards. This open-ended transgressive potential is what Locks terms the 'body-garde.' This notion, for us, speaks to queer understandings of agency, and highlights the importance of engaging with Dan's role, despite the limitations of the category of 'disabled bodybuilder' discussed above. Here, by 'working the weakness in the norm' (Butler, 1993: 237) and creating the imperfect perfection of a built post-SCI body, Dan's embodiment prizes open a gap for other non-normative subjectivities to emerge, be present, find their space and be performed.

Richardson's (2012) reflections on the process of stylising and marketing the non-normative body that he calls 'enfreakment' are also significant. According to him, contemporary bodybuilding is no longer about the audience gaining pleasure from *gazing* upon the perfectible body. Rather, it is more about the thrill of *staring* at a grotesque body. He sees this as part of the archaic entertainment spectacle of the freak show that he believes has been creeping back into contemporary culture. Richardson argues that the concept of the freak is a fluid one which continually evolves in relation to cultural norms against which the meaning of freak (and disability) are produced.

There is no fixed meaning to the body of the freak because there actually is no essential body which exists prior to the discourse which 'creates' it. The freak's body is the product of the institution or discourse known as the freak show ... As such, the signification of the 'freaks' and ways in which they have

been exhibited have evolved over the years. (p. 183).

Given the fluid meaning of the freak, and given advances in science, surgery, medicine, technology along with exercise and nutrition, Richardson (2012) suggests we are witnessing a growth in the category of the self-made freak of which elite contemporary bodybuilders and, for our purposes, wheelchair bodybuilders might be deemed a prime example. This is particularly so given that the physical appearance quested for is excessive and unattractive in contemporary culture. Richardson contrasts the *Adonis Complex* described by Pope et al., (2002) that aspires to a body type that is deemed beautiful by the standards of contemporary culture, with that of *Bigorexia*. The latter reveres and fetishises extreme muscular mass, 'often to the point of excess, which moves the body *beyond* the spectrum of traditional attractiveness' (p. 191).

The bigorexic is saying he will not conform to this tyranny of making his body conform to dictates of masculine attractiveness – will actively reject the tyranny of the Adonis Complex – but will make his stand of resistance through the very mechanism which the Adonis Complex say men should do; namely, gym training and bodybuilding. (Richardson, 2012: 193).

There are many reasons why there has been a move towards the Bigorexic 'freak' in contemporary bodybuilding along with the public representation and marketing of such bodies as a postmodern freak show (see Liokaftos, 2017). Nonetheless, Richardson (2012) highlights that one of the key features of this enfreakment process is that it openly challenges regimes of normative attractiveness. For him, this feature has its historical roots in the freak show where human deviance was in some ways deemed valuable, and in that sense valued. This value he suggests is

the way in which the 'freak' can challenge received dictates of normativity, subvert the 'normal' and muddy the waters of normality.

Richardson's (2012) concepts of the bigorexic and the self-made freak are, however, problematic in regards to questions of agency and power. Historically, most of those whose bodies populated freak shows had little agency or choice, since the norms of the time excluded them from participating in mainstream society. Likewise, tattooed ladies and strong men aside, the early freaks had no choice about their bodily appearance and capacities and they were significantly exploited, disempowered and demeaned because of them. Even today the idea that someone – such as those who identify as transabled – would choose disability is an anathema to cultural norms. Therefore, while 'enfreakment' has some utility, Richardson risks overplaying issues of agency and choice and underplaying the importance of social structures and practices which limit the potential of non-normative bodies.

The concepts of enfreakment and bigorexia also risk re-inscribing the binary of the normal/abnormal body that may be transgressed by contemporary bodybuilding, which provides something of a unique environment in which disabled athletes can compete on equal terms with the able-bodied. Indeed, in our analysis it is the subversive/non-binary potential of contemporary bodybuilding that is significant for Dan's story as well as challenging wider binary distinctions between the disabled (abnormal) and able (normal) body. For example, contemporary bodybuilding incorporates body practices and body displays which are requisite of normative masculinity – such as strength, muscle mass and control – *at the same time* as practices which invoke normative femininity such as waxing, tanning and semi-naked, self-objectifying displays before a judging, and most often, male gaze. This

objectification also intentionally invokes the stare and thereby subverts the power relation between the subject (the looker) and the object (the looked at).

Similarly, the focus on asymmetry, abnormality and outstandingness in contemporary bodybuilding creates a physique that simultaneously embodies both powerful *and* derogated status – masculine strength *and* abject enfreakment.

Moreover, this exceptional body and the value structure it emerges from means that contemporary bodybuilding is almost unique among sports in judging both able-bodied and disabled competitors on exactly the same criteria. This is all the more notable in a sport that is based on aesthetic criteria and in which disabled bodies are deemed to have equal – or potentially more in Dan's case – aesthetic potential as able bodies.

The transgressive potential in contemporary bodybuilding means that it has provided an arena in which Dan, as a post-SCI wheelchair-user, can transform both his body and his identity within a context that would normally be perceived as exclusively able-bodied. It is even more significant that Dan's transformation of his self and body began only once he relinquished the desire to be normal and walk again and, paradoxically, this enabled him to develop a hyper-muscular and therefore normatively masculine upper-body. Indeed, Dan's post-SCI upper-body is much more successfully built than his former 'able' body.

Of course, this transgressive interpretation of Dan's body is not to deny the possible readings of him as exceptional. This is particularly pertinent in regards to the contrast between his upper body and his legs and/or wheelchair which may re-inscribe ableist perspectives. Likewise, the wide variety of bodily configurations and capacities within the category of disability may be underplayed. However, we suggest that Dan's body

in particular, and contemporary bodybuilding more broadly, provides an example and an opportunity to transgress the limitations of simplistic binaries of disability and ability, normative and non-normative. As such Dan's body does much more than either reinforce normalcy or challenge ableism. He highlights the inadequacy of such conceptualisations alongside the power and potential for new perspectives that emerge precisely from those bodies that are positioned as disabled and yet exceed able-bodiedness.

**Acknowledgements:** We would like to thank Dan for giving so freely of his time and for sharing important moments from his life with us.

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*Figure 1: Dan posing on stage*

