

# PARALYMPICS MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS



UNITED STATES  
OLYMPIC & PARALYMPIC  
COMMITTEE



## **THE PARALYMPIC GAMES AND THE SPECIAL OLYMPICS ARE THE SAME.**

The Paralympic Games and Special Olympics are two separate organizations that are recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The Paralympic Games are a highly competitive event for athletes with elite skill levels and the Special Olympics are designed to be a more inclusive event for athletes with cognitive disabilities.

They are similar in that they both focus on sport for athletes with a disability and are run by international non-profit organizations.



## **THE OLYMPICS AND THE PARALYMPICS ARE THE SAME, PARALYMPIANS AND OLYMPIANS ARE THE SAME THING.**

The Paralympic Movement is independent of the Olympic Movement and the two should not be referenced as the same entities. Paralympians and Olympians are both elite athletes who train and compete at the same elite level in sport. The key difference is that Paralympians have a disability while Olympians do not. The Paralympic Games are overseen by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), while the Olympic Games are overseen by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The two organizations have a partnership but operate as separate and independent entities, establishing Paralympians as elite athletes in their own right. When referencing Games, it should never be referred to as the "regular Olympics" vs. the Paralympics.



## **THERE IS MORE THAN ONE WAY TO SPELL PARALYMPICS.**

"Paralympics" is the only correct spelling. Common misspellings such as Para Olympics are incorrect.



## **THE PARALYMPICS ARE NAMED AFTER PEOPLE WITH PARAPLEGIA.**

The word "Paralympic" is derived from the Greek preposition "para," which means beside or alongside, as well as the word "Olympic." The Paralympic Games are conducted in parallel to the Olympic Games, which illustrates how the two movements exist side-by-side.



## **TO BE A PARALYMPIAN, YOU MUST HAVE A VISIBLE DISABILITY**

Paralympians are not required to have a clearly identifiable disability to compete. Many athletes have disabilities that are not visible or immediately apparent and the classification process ensures all athletes compete in a fair playing field in each sport, regardless of their disability and its visual prominence.



## **ALL OF THE CLASSIFICATIONS ARE CONFUSING, AND IT'S TOO COMPLICATED TO UNDERSTAND WHAT'S GOING ON IN PARALYMPIC SPORT.**

Classification [[LINK to Classification 101](#)] is the cornerstone of the Paralympic Movement. It determines which athletes are eligible to compete in a sport and how they are grouped together for competition. In Para sports, athletes are grouped by the degree of activity limitation resulting from their impairment. This, to a certain extent, is similar to grouping athletes by age, gender or weight.

The goal of classification is to mitigate the impact of impairment on athletes' performance. Ensuring athletes are classified prior to competing is crucial to safeguarding the integrity and credibility of the competition, and it is an important education gap to close in the American public.

Visit [paralympic.org/classification](http://paralympic.org/classification) to learn more about classification.



## **PARALYMPIANS AREN'T AS ATHLETIC OR DON'T HAVE TO TRAIN AS HARD AS OLYMPIANS.**

The Paralympic Games were created to showcase elite athletes performing at the highest possible level. When it comes to their sports, Paralympians train equally as hard as able-bodied Olympians to reach peak levels of athleticism and compete against the best of the best, while classification ensures fair competition across the board.



## **THE GOAL OF EVERY PARALYMPIAN IS TO INSPIRE THE WORLD.**

The relationship between the Paralympic Movement and the disabled community is complicated.

While the Paralympic Movement and the Paralympic Games inspire the world, this does not mean that all individual Paralympians share the same lofty goal. Many athletes strive simply to be the best they can be, which is inspirational and can be separate but related to representing their country in sport at the highest possible level. The misconception that all Paralympians set out with the explicit goal to inspire the world can be rooted in bias and perpetuate negative or false stereotypes and expectations.

Furthermore, Para athletes should not be referenced as inspirational for simply participating in sport rather seen for incredible athletic feats in the same way an Olympian would be portrayed.



## **EVERY PARALYMPIAN IS A MILITARY VETERAN.**

While some Paralympic athletes are military veterans, the majority of Paralympic athletes did not acquire their disability through military service.



## **THE PARALYMPICS ARE ABOUT DISABILITIES.**

The Paralympics, as with the Olympics, are about the abilities of the elite athletes competing to represent their country at the highest level. With the classification system to balance the effects of disabilities to create a more equal field of play in sport performance, the Paralympics showcases the outstanding abilities of athletes through sport.



## **ALL PARA ATHLETES ARE PARALYMPIANS.**

Athletes are only Paralympians once they have qualified and taken part in a Paralympic Games. "Para athlete" is a general term for pro and amateur athletes with a disability who participate in an adaptive sport.



## **USING INCORRECT TERMINOLOGY WHEN REFERRING TO PARALYMPIANS OR PARALYMPICS IS HARMLESS.**

Using incorrect terminology when writing about or referring to Paralympic Games or Paralympians contributes to stereotypes and misconceptions in public knowledge that are often harmful. Ask questions and reach out to [Annemarie.Blanco@usopc.org](mailto:Annemarie.Blanco@usopc.org) for assistance.