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# Sport in the Lives of Young People with Intellectual Disabilities: Negotiating Disability, Identity and Belonging

Louisa Smith

*University of Wollongong, [louisas@uow.edu.au](mailto:louisas@uow.edu.au)*

Nikki Wedgwood

*University of Sydney*

Gwynnyth M. Llewellyn

*University of Sydney*

Russell Shuttleworth

*Deakin University*

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## **Abstract**

Whilst there is now a growing body of sociological research on the role of sport in the social, gender and identity rehabilitation of people with physical impairments, research on the role of sport in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities primarily focuses on improving fitness, health and social interactions. Yet sport is not only a form of physical exercise, competition or leisure-it is also a powerful social institution within which social structures and power relations are reproduced and, less frequently, challenged. You don't need an entire sports team or YourEllipticals meant for heavy performing athletes, you just need to be mentally into it. This paper provides insights into the role of sport and physical activity in the lives of four young Australians with intellectual disabilities or cognitive limitations from their own perspectives. Data from life history interviews elicits rich and in-depth insights, revealing that the meanings these young people give to their sporting experiences include-but also go beyond-concerns with fitness, health and social interactions. Though by no means representative of the role of sport for all young people with intellectual disabilities, it is evident that these four young people use sport to negotiate complex emotional worlds around disability, identity, and belonging-much like their physically impaired counterparts.

## **Keywords**

disabilities:, intellectual, people, young, lives, sport, disability, negotiating, identity, belonging

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# Sport in the Lives of Young People with Intellectual Disabilities: Negotiating Disability, Identity and Belonging

Louisa Smith<sup>1</sup>, Nikki Wedgwood<sup>2</sup>, Gwynnyth Llewellyn<sup>2</sup>, Russell Shuttleworth<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Social Sciences, University of New South Wales

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney

<sup>3</sup> School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University

Corresponding author email: [nicole.wedgwood@sydney.edu.au](mailto:nicole.wedgwood@sydney.edu.au)

## Abstract

Whilst there is now a growing body of sociological research on the role of sport in the social, gender and identity rehabilitation of people with physical impairments, research on the role of sport in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities primarily focuses on improving fitness, health and social interactions. Yet sport is not only a form of physical exercise, competition or leisure—it is also a powerful social institution within which social structures and power relations are reproduced and, less frequently, challenged. This paper provides insights into the role of sport and physical activity in the lives of four young Australians with intellectual disabilities or cognitive limitations from their own perspectives. Data from life history interviews elicits rich and in-depth insights, revealing that the meanings these young people give to their sporting experiences include—but also go beyond—concerns with fitness, health and social interactions. Though by no means representative of the role of sport for all young people with intellectual disabilities, it is evident that these four young people use sport to negotiate complex emotional worlds around disability, identity, and belonging—much like their physically impaired counterparts.

## Background

Much of the research on sport and intellectual disability is

informed by concerns about improving the fitness, health and social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities or cognitive limitations.<sup>1-3</sup> Yet sport is not simply a form of exercise, competition or leisure—it is also a powerful social institution within which social structures and power relations are reproduced and sometimes challenged. Arising out of specific social and historical contexts, sports usually develop in accordance with the interests of dominant social groups, thereby reproducing broad social structures like gender, ethnicity, class and ableism.<sup>4-6</sup> Indeed, sport ritually celebrates physical abilities and thus is imbued with ableism.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the sporting arena can also be the site of subversion, challenges or resistance to unequal power relations and can even be the site of both simultaneous reproduction and resistance of social structures.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, though on the one hand sports participation may highlight the *inabilities* of people with physical impairments, it can also simultaneously highlight their *abilities*, thus providing an ‘in ya face’ challenge to disablist stereotypes of people with physical impairments as weak, pitiful, dependent and passive.<sup>9</sup> However, it is unclear whether some people with intellectual disabilities or cognitive limitations also use sport to challenge and undermine disablist pre-conceptions about them.

Sport is also a significant arena of identity construction—especially masculine identity. The particular importance of sport in masculinity construction is that ‘[w]hat it means to

**Keywords:** Sport, Intellectual Disability, Identity, Disability Sport

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, ‘impairment’ refers to a physiological condition and ‘disability’ refers to the way in which society excludes, oppresses and/or makes it difficult for people with impairments to participate in mainstream able-bodied society. This reflects the fact that disablism is not an inevitable feature of every relationship, situation and moment of the lives of people with impairments.

be masculine is, quite literally, to embody force, to embody competence.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, sport is one of the primary practices in which men and boys construct their gender identities and their relationships with other males.<sup>11-13</sup> Herein lies the rub for men and boys with physical impairments because they embody a lived contradiction between, on the one hand, hegemonic forms of masculinity (embodied skill/power/agency) and, on the other hand, impairment (reduced abilities/power/agency).<sup>14,15</sup> It has been argued that participation in disability sports, particularly hyper-masculine sports, is a way for men with physical impairments to construct or recuperate a hegemonic masculinity.<sup>16, 17</sup> For instance, in their study of men's quad rugby, Lindemann and Cherney found that performing with athletic skill and embodying the hyper-masculine violence and aggression commonly seen in able-bodied sport enabled a form of gender and identity rehabilitation which helped players to go from self-loathing and stigma to acceptance and pride. Yet, there is doubt about whether male social power constructed and conferred within disability sports has much currency in broader able-bodied society. A recent study exploring whether playing sport is a form of cultural capital in the construction of a masculine identity and in gaining peer acceptance for young men with physical impairments suggests this may not necessarily be the case; social status among their able-bodied peers was associated more with doing well in able-bodied sports from which they were mostly excluded.<sup>18</sup>

Despite masculinity being a significant focus in research on sport and physical impairment,<sup>19-21</sup> there is scant attention to the development of gendered identities through sport for people with intellectual disabilities. Yet in a society where masculinity and disability are culturally defined as contradictory, it is equally important to know whether and/or how people with intellectual disabilities experience and negotiate such lived and embodied contradictions.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, research on intellectual disabilities more generally has done little to look at broader theories of masculinity.<sup>22</sup>

Some research suggests that participating in sport can do the following for people with physical impairments: enhance relations with peers,<sup>23</sup> expand social interactions, experiences and networks, and initiate other social activities.<sup>24</sup> Yet, these positive experiences are far from universal. Many young people with impairments who attend mainstream schools have negative experiences of physical education, such as not being chosen for teams by peers,

being assigned marginal roles on the sidelines by teachers and/or being made to feel inferior to their able-bodied peers.<sup>25, 26</sup> Moreover, for those who do have positive social interactions in sporting contexts, these occur primarily in disability-specific sports and it is unclear if, or to what extent, these positive interactions spill over into other parts of their lives or other social contexts.

For people with intellectual disabilities, associations are also frequently made in the literature between participation in sport and increased social connection, interactions and acceptance.<sup>27-29</sup> Yet as Harada and colleagues point out, the fact is that “little is known of sport in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities.”<sup>28</sup> The study reported here provides the opportunity to address this gap by seeking the perspectives of young people with intellectual disabilities or cognitive limitations on the place of sport in their everyday lives.

## Methods

This paper is based on the findings from life history interviews with four participants with mild intellectual disabilities or cognitive limitations drawn from a larger study of 53 young people (aged 19–26) with a range of sensory, physical and intellectual disabilities. The main objectives of this broader study—the Transition to Adulthood Study\*—are to identify the ways in which young Australians with impairments, as active, embodied and creative human agents, shape their transitional experiences and the extent to which these experiences are shaped by disablism. Participants were recruited indirectly via disability organisations that agreed to send their members invitations to participate in the study along with details of the study and consent forms. Once recruited, life history interviews were used to explore whether or how these young Australians with impairments meet the developmental and structural challenges of adolescence and emerging adulthood. These challenges include identity development, autonomy from family, community involvement and adult relationships.

For most of the thirteen participants with intellectual disabilities or cognitive limitations, their main sources of social connection and sense of identity were through their family and/or a disability service organisation or program that facilitated participation in various activities, such as drama, art or music. Where physical activities were part of

<sup>2</sup> The Australian Research Council 2011-2015 funded the study, with the interviews being undertaken between 2012-2014; the University of Sydney Human Ethics Committee granted the ethics approval, no 13386.

such programs (for instance, half an hour of group karate), this was a more passive approach to sport or physical activity, compared to the four in this paper who were self-motivated to regularly pursue a sport or physical activity outside of these programs and over a long period of time. Although most of the thirteen young people in the study with intellectual disabilities or cognitive limitations were engaged in sport or physical activity at some level (i.e. occasionally went to the gym or participated in Special Olympic programs), for the four participants featured in this paper, sport occupied a central place in their life story, particularly in their identity formation. The life histories of these four young participants reveals that they use sport to negotiate complex emotional worlds around disability, identity and belonging—much like their physically impaired counterparts.<sup>16, 30-32</sup> Though these four participants are not representative of the 13 participants with intellectual disabilities in this study, nor of young people with intellectual disabilities more broadly, this finding nevertheless adds further insight to the literature on the various roles of sport in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities.

Life history interviews are particularly useful when exploring the range, scope and contradictions around people's embodiment and identity formation.<sup>33, 34</sup> While the life history interviews often began with a broad opening question about their family and when they were born, interviewers also had an interview schedule which offered prompts for topics expected to be addressed about different phases of the life course, such as peer group membership, transitioning to work, and autonomy from family. There was some flexibility in how this schedule was used. For example, for two of the participants Maria and Zane—both of whom described themselves as talkers—the interview was largely based around a single opening question and occasional prompts from the interview schedule. Both of these participants enjoyed reading, so each participant was also sent a written copy of their case study. For Josh, the interview mainly followed the schedule, with his interview being audio recorded and returned to him for checking. For Jade, the structure of the schedule was not very useful whereas photos, other documents from her life and a tour of her house provided additional information and acted as prompts for her storytelling and explanation. This was particularly important as Jade has a moderate speech impairment. Her interview was written up in plain English and returned to her for checking.

Interviews lasted roughly two hours and each interview was transcribed verbatim. The life history case studies developed

from the interviews were structured around two sets of topics: The first set of topics were imposed by the interview schedule and were focused on chronological stages (e.g. family life, school, work, dating); the second set of topics were generated from the individual's life history interviews as themes which emerged as central and/or repeated concerns of participants (e.g. social exclusion, religion, teacher's aides). For the four participants in this paper, Maria, Zane, Josh and Jade, sport was central in their lives and emerged spontaneously from their stories. Once the interview had been analysed by the interviewer, another member of the team listened to the interview before reading the analysis. Both researchers then discussed and resolved any difference in opinion before integrating their analyses.

## Results

This paper focuses on sport in the lives of these four young people and how this intersects with their transition to adulthood, identity and disability.

### *Maria*

Of all the participants in our study, sport is the most redemptive and ameliorating for Maria. Maria lives with her parents and younger sister in an inner city suburb of a large city where she grew up. She comes from a white, middle-class Anglican family whom she describes as 'busy, loving and supportive.'

Maria found out that she had an intellectual disability towards the end of primary school when after some testing, her parents told her that she would need to attend another school with a support unit. Until then she had been 'almost normal, normal like wearing braces, reading magazines,' and had two or three close friends, hanging out 'as much as we could' and doing things like 'going to the movies, shopping... discos at the school, parties, sleepovers.' Thus, learning that she had a disability was very difficult: 'I thought I was normal. I thought I was the same as everyone else... I didn't know what a disability was or what kind of person had a disability.' She experienced a great deal of confusion and a tumultuous range of emotions as she tried to come to terms with learning she had a disability, 'At first I was sad, then I was pretty angry, then I was frustrated, then I was pretty much going all over again.'

Maria felt that finding out she had a disability when she was 12 or 13 was particularly difficult because of her formative age, saying 'so I was sort of a pre-teen by then... It was like a mirror shattering.' She felt like her identity was

disintegrating with the diagnosis, 'I tried to find out who I was, what my identity is.' Initially, she felt that having a disability meant: 'Being different, being a freak.' Maria withdrew from friendships, partly because she was going to leave her school in order to attend one with a disability support unit but also because she did not know how to relate to people with this new and unfamiliar sense of herself as a person with a disability: 'I had all of these thoughts of sticking with my friends in high school... But then I started to sort of drift away from all of those [non-disabled] friends I had in primary school and just went from bad to worse.'

Maria attended another private Anglican girls school for her senior schooling, which her parents selected because it had a disability support unit. Though she found the school very warm and supportive, change had always been difficult for Maria. Combined with the low point in her confidence and a period of unhappiness she found that 'it was pretty tough getting used to it... it took two or three years/a year and half or so to get used to it.' Maria says she was invited into the 'cool group' of 'mainstreamers' but chose not to because she preferred quieter activities than going to parties. Eventually Maria found a place in a social group she liked, which was made up of other students in the disability program who mostly remained socially separate from 'mainstreamers.'

When Maria was fifteen her mother encouraged her to join a disability sports program that provides 'those who haven't got much confidence in themselves with different kinds of support to become more social and active in the community.' Maria found this program to be 'the best thing.' Up until then, she had been feeling socially isolated in a 'mainstream netball' team, which made her 'even more depressed and antisocial and not really confident' because she 'just didn't feel like I was a part of anything.' In contrast, learning to play basketball in an organisation for people with disabilities, she felt 'the coaches and other people understood who we were as people with disabilities.' Maria says she 'never looked back on my old self' and describes her new self as:

*More confident in my personality, my skills - yeah, I'm more social and outgoing. I try to get out in the community with them, so things like functions and discos and raffles and quizzes, things like that.*

Playing sport with this program also gave Maria the opportunity to meet other people with disabilities. At first she found that 'it was quite a shock, really. I just saw all these people around me being talkative and playing a game together and just having fun.' Seeing the confidence of other

people with disabilities has enabled Maria to 'come out' with a new identity – as a person with a disability who has friends with disabilities:

*Not just the sport and the idea of playing, but the fact that it has people like me who have a disability and some who have gone through that stage or some who are starting to get through their personality and just mainly coming out.*

Meeting and befriending other people with disabilities, not only through her own team but through national and international competitions, has also inspired Maria to find out more about how to become an advocate for disability issues. She has travelled internationally to a disability and youth forum where she 'got to see the sights ...to explore different places and meet new people.' Her independent travel was facilitated by close relationships she had with other members of the Australian team and allowed her to be away from her parents for two weeks. Her involvement with her peers with disabilities from around the world expanded her views of the world, disability and herself:

*I almost cried at the time when one of the guys ... saying that in his country he can't go out to do shopping or hang out with friends or anything like that, because if someone sees them they throw rocks at them. He just wanted to die; he couldn't take it anymore. I was like 'I thought I had it bad!'... I feel so sorry for him but he's managed to pull through so much... I couldn't believe it.*

Participation in this international sporting event as an advocate became a critical moment for Maria:

*I just felt different somehow when I came back. I was like different somehow, more mature. Yeah, something inside of me just started to come out. It's one of those feelings where you can't describe it... I just wanted to do more for others and so I went into [a program supporting young people with leadership skills] and I told my story to schools, so I got to do that for a while... I told them how I felt when I found out I had my disability and what [Disability Program] has done for me ... as well, how they helped me with my confidence and my leadership skills, and how I've managed to become the person that I am. I just feel that I'm growing more and more each day... I just think I'm going to learn more about myself each day and every year that goes by... I think everyone feels that way... I guess that feeling of seeing others and how they've managed to cope through their lives of having a disability, makes me want to do more for others as well as myself.*



Taking up disability sport coincided with Maria turning 16 and receiving the disability support pension. This became symbolic for Maria of needing to take ‘the ball in [her] hands... make the most of it.’ This sporting metaphor shows how sport helped Maria’s transformation into a more proactive approach to life:

*[I felt I] should try and be a bit more mature in my studies as well as my life. So I started doing a lot more that I wouldn't do then, so I was becoming a bit more outspoken and just doing things that I didn't think I could do... I went on camps and went on things like the flying fox. I did things like [enter a national music competition]. I did the choir, like in school, so I was in the school choir. I talked to different people, I just did all sorts of different things.*

At the time of her interview Maria was 19 years old and still played basketball and tennis with ‘a lot of friends’ from the disability sports program. She was active in her church and working in a full-time permanent position in a childcare centre. In her immediate future she wants to travel and move out of her home. She has long-term goals such as having her own family and home and also continuing her advocacy work. For Maria, sport has been empowering because it has provided her with an avenue to meet others with a disability, which in turn has enabled her to come to terms with and accept her own disability and also provide her with the opportunities to flourish in and beyond the disability sport community.

#### Jade

Similar to Maria, Jade found sport to be an important way of connecting with others in her home town of 2,000 people. For Jade, however, sport facilitated a connection with her family, rural community and able-bodied peers rather than enabling a connection with her disability, as it had for Maria. Jade has cerebral palsy, which affects her speech and movement (she has a slight limp). She also has cognitive limitations.

Jade, who was 19 years old at the time of the interview, is the eldest of three with a younger brother and sister, who are 16 and 8 years of age, respectively. She describes her family as very close, supportive and sporty. Her grandparents and parents all lived and grew up in the small country town where they still live. Her family’s position in the small town is very important to Jade because ‘everybody [in town] knows my family is good’ and it means that ‘if I need somebody [community members] ring up for me [and my family] come.’

For most of Jade’s schooling she went to a government school close to her house, which serviced the whole town in which she lived with classes from Kindergarten through to Year 12. It seemed that the most important part of school for Jade was facilitating feelings of independence like walking to school and ‘Not having to ask the teacher. Yeah, cos... when I start going in high school they help me... sometimes I do that by myself.’ Despite enjoying school and having two good friends and a younger cousin who were ‘kind... Let [me] sit with them,’ Jade did not seem to have a social group or stable place in either primary or high school. Jade had always received learning support at school and seemed to experience more and more difficulty in learning and understanding as schoolwork became increasingly complex in upper high school.

Jade’s family enjoy sport and also ride bikes together, recently having gotten Jade a ‘four wheeler bike for Christmas.’ Jade’s mother and her siblings are all swimmers. Jade swims with a swim squad two nights a week and has ‘got a fair few medals’ from her swimming. When she turned 18 Jade’s mother took her to watch a football game. After meeting and having her photo taken with one of the players, he is now her ‘favourite player’ and she roots for his team.

There are elements in Jade’s story which were possible because she lives in a small town where her family facilitated her acceptance and integration into the community. For instance, Jade’s mother held a position in the town that supported Jade in entering mainstream sport enabling Jade to then forge her own place in a team, playing touch football with a group of young people her own age:

*Every Monday we play touch football together. Lately I play with them but... the first year I played with Mum to see how I go and I play on their team because she plays too and a couple of years ago I play on a different team.*

Playing football and ‘all the friendship I’ve got’ from it has become very important to Jade’s sense of community membership: ‘All of [the team] live in [Jade’s town]... and they come in every day to work so I see them. Say ‘Hi,’ chat.’ Jade is aware, however, that these rich and interconnected relationships are a bubble of security and if she were to live anywhere else people may not be as understanding as they are in her hometown.

#### Zane

Sport is very important to Zane but not in a way that joins

and connects him to others. For Zane, sport is about a privately defined routine that he maintains in lieu of other structures in his life, such as work and social commitments. Zane has Down's Syndrome and his experiences with sport helped ameliorate the stigma he often experienced due to his recognisable impairment which is typically associated with intellectual impairment.

Zane's family comes from a migrant working class background, but their success has led his parents to live very comfortably. Zane describes his family as being very supportive. He is particularly close to his maternal grandparents but they live in a capital city 10 hours drive away.

Zane, who always attended a mainstream school, did not like school because he 'got bullied a lot' and he felt the bullying was very poorly handled by the school:

*All the nasty things people say about me and when I tell them to stop, they won't stop, they keep on doing it, I'll just hit them because they wouldn't stop doing it and then the teachers will go off at me.*

While Zane was bullied, he had a strong group of friends made up of 'all different types' of people. None of his friends had disabilities, because Zane was very clear that 'I don't relate to those kind of people.' Zane's best friend—who is now in gaol for doing 'something stupid...same ole' same, had a gun, he was on drugs'—would defend him from bullies by giving them 'a whack in the face.' Thus, the use of violence to 'solve' the problem of high school bullying may be part of the reason why martial arts resonated with Zane so strongly as a young adult, along with its masculinising aspects.

After Zane graduated from high school his parents relocated from the capital city in which he grew up to a beautiful holiday/retirement town where they bought a luxurious house with a pool. Now living in an isolated location, Zane must rely on his parents to drive him anywhere he wants to go. This, along with not working nor being a client of a disability service, leaves large amounts of unstructured time, which Zane fills by making his own routine. He trains in a home gym that his parents have set up under their home, timing it around his favourite daytime television shows. Consequently, Zane's opportunities for personal development and community participation beyond his parents' home are limited.

Zane's mother introduced him to Mixed Martial Arts

[MMA] when they first moved to this new location, presumably to aid Zane's transition and help him make friends. Zane became passionate about MMA: 'I love doing martial arts. I used to do it for fitness. I was a black belt but now I'm advanced Black belt... MMA. A bit like you see on TV.' Keeping fit, active and healthy has become central to Zane's identity and to his routine:

*When I'm at home I do all the weights... It just keeps me active... it makes me feel great. You've got to love the right things, eat the right things. That's me... I don't do anything else in the day. That's just me.*

But Zane had strong reasons for his commitment to his private sport-based routine; the disablism he has experienced and internalised throughout his life, including at the fast food store where he had his first and only experience of work. He found his work colleagues '...so rude. I'm going fast and they'd say 'Keep moving!'" This led Zane to quit after six months and declare, 'I don't do any work. I'm not much of a worker,' thus avoiding situations in which he felt victimised by able-bodied people. Hitting a punching bag has replaced hitting bullies and is an outlet for the anger he feels when people say 'nasty things' about him: 'when I come home I take it all out on that... sometimes I get upset too easy.' Some of Zane's private workouts help him to recover from disabling relations that have occurred in public.

When Zane's father took him to an event for people with Down's Syndrome when he was a child, this experience confirmed for Zane that he did not want to be associated with other people with Down's Syndrome—a common sign of internalised disablism known as 'dispersal'.<sup>37</sup> Since then, Zane has avoided situations involving other people with Down's Syndrome, thus distancing himself from his disability. He acknowledges, however, 'I was born with Down's Syndrome, something like that,' he also says, 'I haven't got it. I was born with it. Nothing much I can do about that. Just be me. Keep working out. Stay fit. That's just me.' In contrast to Maria, whose involvement in disability sports helped her 'come out' as someone with a disability, Zane's participation in sport seems to give him the opportunity to develop an alternative identity.

Through training and MMA, Zane is enacting a particular type of able-bodied masculinity with which he identifies. A number of times during the interview, Zane likened himself to other strong men who also train and are fit, like his brother-in-law who was a professional footballer: 'He's a pretty fit dude, exactly the same as me.' He also likened



himself through sport to his best friend at school who was in gaol at the time of the interview 'He's coming out now, he's doing what I'm doing, just training [physically].' Zane was keen to point out that 'I'm a good puncher. I'm a hard puncher... I always listen to a bit of rap. It builds me up a bit... makes me go faster.' Despite the role of sport in symbolically connecting Zane with able-bodied men rather than those with disabilities, these connections did not follow through in practical ways. Despite training at the local MMA club for a number of years, Zane says he does not have any real friends at MMA.

### Josh

Like Zane, Josh who is 21 years old, also has Down's Syndrome. He and his family live in a small town but he commutes to a small regional centre where he works one day a week in manufacturing and two days a week doing manual labour. He spends another day a week with a support worker from a disability service organization learning about budgeting with the goal of moving out of home.

Josh attended his local primary school where he was picked on and got into fights. This pattern of being bullied and fighting at school continued when Josh moved to the larger K-12 school in the coastal town:

*It was great. I loved it. I got in fights... someone's picking on me... first punch I did. No-one started it. I did. I bashed someone up. I was a big bully, I was fricken evil. Squash him to death. I went that far.*

Throughout the interview, Josh oscillated between identifying as 'fricken evil' and being an 'undercover [cop]' who was keeping people safe, though he was much more personally committed to keeping everyone safe ('when I was a baby I had an accident and became a superhero').

At his mainstream school one of Josh's teacher's aides offered him friendship that he otherwise did not have at school: '[he] was my best teacher there. I like him the most... He's my best mate. I play football with him.' He also helped link Josh into social networks, getting him into a touch football team, which he really enjoyed: 'Best coach... we trained every day. I loved it... we got trophies and I got a medal... I got plenty of them.' Josh's touch football coach was his sister's father-in-law, so the sports arena became a way of extending family support out into the community.

Like many young adults, Josh stopped doing organised sport

when he got older: 'I don't play any more. I get puffed out... I work out... I've got a home gym now.' Part of Josh's motivation to workout is to be healthy: 'When I get on weights I get fit and healthy. I eat fruit and vegies... and meat and protein... That's what I want to do.' That is not the main reason though. He says of his workouts: 'it's all about power and energy... It's all about power... do sit-ups. That's how you get six-packs... I do but I'm a little bit fat... I don't have a girlfriend yet.'

Josh makes other very deliberate choices about how he represents himself to women and the world in general. These choices are usually about making him feel more powerful: 'I like wearing a suit. Makes me feel good... get myself known... I like wearing army pants... I've got lots at home... I've got army boots too... I want to be an army man. Help people.' Indeed, at the interview Josh was wearing cargo pants, army boots and a shirt that showed off both his muscles and his tattoo. He had massive earphones on and a harmonica holder around his neck. A very cool dude, in many ways he looked like a typical 21 year old.

### Discussion

It is evident in these four stories that for some young people with mild intellectual or cognitive disabilities, participating in sport is as much about negotiating disablism, identity and belonging in a disabilist world as it is for some people with physical disabilities.<sup>16, 30-32</sup>

For Maria, after learning during adolescence that she had a disability, which significantly challenged her identity, playing in a disability-specific sports team helped her to reinvent herself with a disabled identity and as a disability advocate. Having been socialised as non-disabled for the first 12 years of her life, she had already established herself as 'normal' and not 'a freak.' Once her disability was diagnosed and then publicly signified by her enrolment in a special unit, Maria experienced an identity crisis during a very formative phase of life. She struggled with internalised disablism and the invisibility of her disability to others. Maria described this as a largely internal crisis and did not describe being discriminated against. Rather, she found herself withdrawing because of how she understood disability to be perceived by others. Doing sport with other people with disabilities, who seemed confident and like they were having fun, helped Maria to shift internalised stereotypes about disability<sup>35</sup> and therefore about herself. Reeve<sup>36</sup> argues that 'coming out,' which are the exact words that Maria uses, can be a liberating and painful way of challenging the psycho-emotional dimensions of disability, which it clearly was for Maria.

Jade, unlike Maria, did not have access to disability sports organisations, and so sport became about connecting with her able-bodied peers and the rural community in which she lived through playing in an able-bodied sports team. While Jade had grown up enjoying relatively high levels of social inclusion because of her family's position in town, it was not until she joined a sports team made up of young people her own age that she really enjoyed friendships with her peers. Before this her social satisfaction had been derived from relationships centred around adults, family, family friends and teachers. This was particularly so during her transition from school, when Jade experienced a troubling void of activities and employment. Sport provided a regular and routine way of meeting up with her peers and gave Jade a new level of independence from her family (for example, her teammates would pick her up and take her to training sessions).

Yet, living in a small or isolated community does not in and of itself necessarily result in higher levels of social interactions in sporting or other contexts, as in Zane's case. In his life, sport performs a number of roles: Enhancing his sense of masculinity; providing a routine; allowing a release of anger about any disablism he experiences; counteracting his disabled identity; and providing a sense of himself doing the right thing for his health. It has not, however, connected him with others. In part this is because of the sporting context, as Zane does not play a team sport. Yet he does train in an MMA centre and such places are often sites of strong camaraderie. However, despite being in a social setting that potentially could facilitate social connections, Zane says he does not feel connected to anyone there. In contrast to other participants with intellectual disabilities who train at local gyms and develop strong relationships with their trainers, Zane's use of his home gym only increases his physical and social isolation. Arguably, Zane's isolation is also amplified by his attitudes towards his impairment because he does not identify as disabled. Past experiences of disabilist discrimination, which can illicit emotional responses like shame, anger, frustration or embarrassment<sup>35</sup> and impact where people go and what they do,<sup>38</sup> have left Zane disengaged from disability or employment services, which for other participants, facilitated regular activities, transport, social connection and broader participation.

For Josh, who wanted to be in the army but could not, having the strong body and appearance of a soldier made him feel like 'normal like the other people around this town.' To Josh, working out seems to be not only about being powerful but also about being masculine and

attractive to women and about fitting into social spaces that are not marked out as disability spaces, such as truck yards, buses, the town centre and music festivals. This sense of power in his physical embodiment and strength also helps to counteract the lack of power he experiences in other arenas of his life (for instance, how his workplace is determined by an agency rather than his own preferences). This is important given that people with disabilities have a lower sense of empowerment and autonomy in comparison to the rest of the population.<sup>39</sup>

These stories clearly illustrate that for some people with intellectual or cognitive disabilities, participation in sport can ameliorate disablism by offering a way of both accepting one's disability and/or dealing with the discrimination faced because of it. It is widely acknowledged in the disability studies literature that dealing with the attitudes and perceptions of others is among one of the hardest aspects of having a disability. Indeed, the lives of the four young people presented here show how they use sport in various ways to negotiate, ameliorate and challenge these attitudes and their subsequent psycho-emotional effects—what Reeve calls psycho-emotional disablism.<sup>35</sup> For Maria, this is by providing supportive relationships and an arena in which to 'come out' as disabled; for Zane, by providing an outlet in which to physically release his anger and thereby helping him deal with the harmful and confidence-sapping effects of prejudice towards him based on his disability; for Josh and Zane, by helping to overwrite their recognizable disability (Down's Syndrome) with a 'normal' and accepted masculine embodiment; for Jade, by connecting her with her peers and community in ways that were not available to her at school or the workplace.

By looking at sport from the perspectives of these four young people with intellectual disabilities, we can also see that while sport can provide a routine and regular way of connecting with others through a shared fun activity, it sometimes becomes a substitute for other forms of social interaction and belonging. For the two young men in the study, sport is about doing weights and fighting, not about connecting with others as it is for the two young women in the study. For Zane and Josh, it is more about constructing a conventional masculine identity via normative masculine practices unavailable to them in other traditional sites of masculinity construction (e.g. sexual relationships, workplaces or male peer groups). Though participating in sport connects them with a group of men with whom they symbolically identify and also with whom they wish to be identified by others, it has not, however, facilitated actual social interactions or relationships. Nor has sport increased

their access to a conventional masculine identity outside of the sporting arena.

As the literature suggests, sport has a great deal of potential to positively influence the lives of young people with intellectual disabilities. Maria's experiences are a good illustration of this. However, participating in a sports activity does not automatically improve community participation, belonging or self-esteem for all young people with intellectual disabilities. Rather, as this study demonstrates, a complexity of factors influence and moderate sporting experiences including geographical location, gender, class, impairment type/severity, social supports and life-phase. Life-phase is a particularly critical consideration for young people with intellectual disabilities or cognitive limitations because they are faced with the developmental tasks of carving out an adult identity in a world in which they are frequently infantilised and of negotiating a sense of belonging in a world, which is largely unwelcoming and unaccommodating. Participation in sports offers not only health benefits and the opportunity for social networks to develop. As this study demonstrates, sport also provides some young people with intellectual disabilities the opportunities to negotiate identity, resist disablism and forge a stronger sense of self, which are all facets of development sometimes overlooked in promoting social inclusion of young people with disabilities. Thus, an ongoing challenge for sports providers and disability services is to devise supportive sporting environments that facilitate a variety of possible benefits and individual meanings for young people with a wide range and level of intellectual disabilities – rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

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