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Creating a high performance para-rowing programme in the USA: From the geography of the land to the generosity of the spirit (and everything in between)

**AUTHOR**

Campbell, Natalie

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## **Chapter 2**

# **Creating a high performance para-rowing programme in the USA: From the geography of the land to the generosity of the spirit (and everything in between)**

**Natalie J. Campbell**

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the past, present and projected considerations of the sport of adaptive rowing in the United States of America. Guided by reflections from Thomas Darling, High Performance Director for US Para-rowing, the sport is considered historically, culturally, politically and socially in regards to the specific accompanying opportunities and challenges identified. With the sport being showcased at the 2008 Paralympic Games, the development of Para-rowing within the US is in its embryonic stages. The chapter highlights the difficulties faced when developing an elite Paralympic sports programme in a country of such vast geographical space with limited existing coach education and sparse avenues for financial investment. Acknowledging that the USA is a nation galvanised by professional sports, and that Paralympic sport is afforded minimal media coverage, the difficulties of strategically constructing a pathway from grass-roots participation through to high performance disability sport are salient. However, Darling considers the future of Para-rowing to be promising. Focusing specifically on progressive avenues for Paralympic talent identification, the investment in coach education and the strengthening of associations with US military organisations, this case study unpacks the methods in which community, resourcefulness and leadership are inspiring and driving the growth of Para-rowing in the USA.

## **Historical context of the sport**

When considering the overall landscape of sport, it is commonly acknowledged that, from the playground to the podium, competitive participation is stratified and categorised. This division of competitors allows for the optimum provision of a level playing field, with such parity providing greater opportunity for athletes to participate in, and achieve at, the peak level of human performance. Rowing consists of two technical styles - sweep (where competitors each use a single oar) and sculling (where competitors use two oars) - with a sub-division of these events including categories for open weight and restricted weight (lightweight) male or female athletes. In addition, the division of adaptive rowing is a further race category in both Head of the River races (winter) and Regatta races (summer) at domestic, national and international level. Further to this, adaptive rowing contains its own sub categories of gender and ability. The term “Adaptive” rowing implies that the equipment is “adapted” to the athlete rather than the sport being “adapted” to the athlete. For many National Governing Bodies of sport, the term ‘adaptive rowing’ is adopted for recreational and domestic participation and competition, whereas ‘Para-Rowing’ is used by the World Rowing Federation FISA (from the French, Fédération Internationale des Sociétés d’Aviron) for elite performance programmes and international competition (such as World Cups, World Championships and the Paralympic Games). Before we discuss the case study coach in detail, let us first explore the origins and the growth of the sport, with particular attention on its development in the United States of America.

At end of World War II, adaptive rowing had been employed as a small, participatory sport for the rehabilitation of injured service men, for people with visual impairments and for those recovering from Polio. During the 1970s and 1980s the sport grew in popularity, and rather than focus on separation and segregation, the emphasis was to integrate adaptive rowing into readily established rowing clubs and programmes. When required, attempts were made to customise equipment to suit an individual rower's specific needs as they related to their disability, with boats holding a combination of both rowers with

and rowers without disabilities. During this time in America, the town of Philadelphia hosted regular Army-versus-Navy adaptive rowing races for servicemen blinded in World War II, and in 1980 the first rowing club for people with disabilities was created - the Philadelphia Rowing Program for the Disabled (PRPD). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the sport of adaptive rowing was gathering momentum, with stand-alone and integrated adaptive rowing programmes being supported by National Governing Bodies across the globe. By the early 1990s the noticeable growth in participation and competition was so encouraging to the World Rowing Federation that the first FISA recognised adaptive rowing World Cup event was held in the Netherlands in 1991, aided primarily by the development of the first adaptive rowing international classification system.

Over the succeeding decade, interest, support and participation in the sport continued to expand; with the classification system becoming increasingly refined and sophisticated in its approach to developing the medical and technical criteria for the elite programmes around the world. The popularity of the sport was as such that in 2002, adaptive rowing was added to the regular competition schedule for the FISA World Championships (with the USA winning three of the six available medals). At present, rowing is one of only a handful of sports that sees Para-athletes participate annually alongside able-bodied athletes, with this happening at both World Rowing Cups and the World Rowing Championships. After being accepted into the Paralympic programme in 2005 by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), the sport of Para-rowing was showcased at the Shunyi Olympic Rowing-Canoeing Park at the Beijing 2008 Paralympic Games. For the following cycle, the London 2012 Paralympic Games saw 23 countries, 48 boats and 96 rowers competing in (the newly named) Para-rowing consisting of four boat classes, with a total of 12 medals being won across nine countries (inclusive of the USA winning a Bronze medal). In 2014, 26 countries competed in Para-rowing events at an international level – an increase from seven countries in 2002.

As aforementioned, the development of the classification system for Para-rowing has been shaped and professionalised over a number of years, with FISA releasing the latest classification manual in 2014. Upon meeting with a Technical Classifier and a Medical Classifier, athletes will be considered eligible for racing under one of three categories:

1. Legs, Trunks and Arms (LTA): Rowers are able to use a sliding seat and have function in their legs, trunks and arms to row. Athletes may have a visual or physical impairment, however it is not a requirement that a visually impaired athlete have a physical disability. Rowers with physical disabilities are categorised as LTA-PD. Sub categories for visually impaired rowers are indicated as LTA-B1 / B2 / B3, however in the interests of vision impairment equality, during races all visually impaired athletes wear black-out blindfolds.
2. Trunk and Arms (TA): Rowers have functional use of the trunk and arms but are not able to use the sliding seat to propel the boat because of significantly weakened function or mobility of the lower limbs. TA rowers use a fixed seat with a form of pelvic support which must adhere to FISA standards.
3. Arms and Shoulders (AS): Rowers who have minimal or no trunk function (i.e. shoulder function only), using a fixed seat and back support which adheres to FISA criteria.

The first adaptive-rowing World Championships in 2002 saw events for LTA (legs, trunk and arms), TA (trunk, arms), and A (arms-only) boats. Later, in 2009 the A category was replaced by AS (arms and shoulders), and an ID (intellectually disabled) category was added, however this was removed after the 2011 World Championships. With a new event added in 2013, Para-rowing is

currently divided into five boat classes: LTAMix4+ (LTA mixed coxed four), LTAMix2x (LTA mixed double sculls), TAMix2x (TA mixed double sculls), ASW1x (AS women's single sculls), and ASM1x (AS men's single sculls). The LTA and TA are mixed gender boats and competitive regatta races are held over 1000 metres for all five events.

### **Historical context of the case study coach**

Tom Darling was appointed the US Rowing High Performance Director of Para-Rowing shortly after the London 2012 Paralympic Games. As a former Olympic rower himself, with a keen understanding developing mutually beneficial partnerships, managing large budgets, and with experience in coaching adapted sports, his hiring to the position was inevitable. Tom described his role as a process of '*self-actualisation*', and that pretty much everything he has achieved in his life up to the point of our meeting he '*fortuitously fell in to*'. However, from what I have learnt about Tom and his achievements both in and out of sport, I consider this to be an exceptionally modest and humble self-reflection. Whilst he may not have actively sought a career in disability sport, Tom's strength of character, compassion for others and tenacity to seek performance solutions has without question led him to such a notable position.

Tom had a formidable athletic career spanning three Olympic cycles representing the USA at Moscow 1980, Los Angeles 1984 and Seoul 1988, with his most successful Olympic performance being a member of the silver medal winning Men's Eight crew in 1984. During his rowing career, Tom excelled academically and graduated from Syracuse University, New York, in 1981 with a BA in Psychology and Economics – a qualification Tom admits contributes greatly to his position today in assisting him to "*understand my athletes and understand my numbers*". In addition to being a university graduate and Olympic medal winning athlete, Tom's CV also boasts being a two-time winner of the Americas Cup in 1987 and 1988 as a crew member of the 'Stars and Stripes'

San Diego Yacht Club. Of particular note is that whilst Tom was achieving exceptional athletic accolades in both sailing and rowing, he was also enrolled on a seven year M.Ed. degree at Boston University from 1984, graduating in 1991.

Upon athletic retirement, Tom naturally found himself gravitating back towards rowing and in 1991 was appointed Head Coach of the Boston University Rowing team, leading the women's crew to national championship victory in both 1991 and 1992. After such successes in rowing, Tom decided to focus once more on sailing and was appointed the principle trainer for the 'Stars and Stripes' San Diego Yacht Club Americas Cup crew from 1994 to 1996, leading them to victory in 1995. After such athletic successes, Tom decided to move away from sports in 1997 and "*get a real job*" working in the financial services sector in Boston, however he continued to do ad hoc coaching at local community rowing clubs around the city. In 2006 Community Rowing (a non-profit rowing club in Boston) approached Tom and asked for his help in developing an adapted rowing programme to run out of their boathouse on the River Charles. The Community Rowing programme seeks to offer multiple opportunities to learn to row - from children with learning disabilities through to wounded war veterans. From 2006 to 2012 Tom became increasingly involved with the programme both as a coach and as strategic lead for its development. As a result of his dedication to, and vision for, adapted rowing, the National Governing Body US Rowing approached Tom in 2012 to be appointed High Performance Director for Para-rowing. His remit going forward is to develop and grow the elite programme in time for the 2016 Rio Games and beyond.

### **The case study of the coach**

The high performance programme

Tom was appointed High Performance Director and head coach for US Para-rowing in June 2013, inheriting a programme that faced a number of physical,

cultural and financial challenges, yet is tasked with delivering at least 2 out of the 5 medals available at the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games. It is evident that he is very much aware of the impediments this role will consistently encounter.

For example, the USA is dominated by the multi-million dollar industries of professional sports such as Basketball, Baseball and American Football, it occupies a geographical space almost 40 times that of the United Kingdom and is a country which is yet to securely embed wider sporting provisions and opportunities for people with disabilities into its national policies or societal conscious (Silvers & Wassermann, 2000; Shapiro, et al., 2012; Misener & Darcy, 2014; Cottingham, et al., 2014). These considerations, plus the addition of much wider debates concerning the socio-cultural, biological and political positioning of disability in the USA makes the priority of, enthusiasm for and co-ordination of a high performance Paralympic sports programme a phenomenal feat.

#### *Funding (or lack thereof)*

For the U.S Para-rowing programme, the primary funding stream is via the U.S Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and their partnership with the USOC, and in January 2014 the sport successfully bid for \$250k to run the entire adaptive rowing and Para-rowing programme. At present U.S Para-rowing sits within the remit of U.S Rowing (similar to how GB Para-rowing falls within the overall structure of GB Rowing), however Tom's budget of \$250k means he can only afford to pay a salary to himself and one other member of staff - Programme Development Specialist Debbie Arnberg – the entire programme is operated through two full time members of staff. In addition to the elite system, Tom must ensure that a proportion of the \$250k is spent supporting the development of community adaptive-rowing programmes nationwide, all of which is done through the "*personal interests and good will of volunteers already in the rowing community*". I asked how this seemingly impossible task was being managed and I admit I was taken aback by the answer:

*“We have a lady who is basically traveling around the country with her dog in a van, visiting nearly every community rowing programme and just asking ‘hey, how would you like to start an adaptive programme’? She gets around \$500 a month which doesn’t even cover her gas.”*

The idea that Tom must oversee the development of an elite para-rowing talent pathway to Rio 2016 whilst simultaneously facilitating the national development of the sport at grass roots level seems utterly removed from the UK system. Responsible for the current elite athletes, the potential talented athletes, the community initiatives and the social responsibility attached to the funding grant, Tom is responsible for both performance and participation – and as we talked, the professional and moral tension experienced between the two priorities was evident. As he begins to reel off names of coaches within the community who volunteer their time to support new adaptive-rowing opportunities (*“mainly women and masters rowers”*) the disparity of the programme is mirrored in his fragmented reflections:

*“I really need to follow up on ... I just remembered that I need to call / email ... That’s a good point, I need to chase that ... That reminds that I haven’t done [a task] yet ... I’m just making notes to myself whilst we talk...”*

What is clear from the outset is that Tom is in a position in which the success of his role depends upon the extent to which he can rely on others outside of the performance environment. Indeed, the overall staffing structure of the Para-rowing programme runs in relative isolation to its able bodied counterpart, with little practical collaboration or cross-over between practitioners in the two sports. Considering this reality as part of a much richer conversation within disability sport, Hums et al., (2003) ask the question of identity for Paralympic sports programmes; is it better for athletes with disabilities to host their own NGB with specific recognition (ie as GB Wheelchair Basketball is separate from GB Basketball), or to be subsumed into a larger NGB? They ask *“Does equality mean loss of identity as athletes with disabilities – and is that positive or negative?”* (p.270). The deliberation of the binary of inclusion / exclusion within

Paralympic discourse is pertinent, particularly within the area of governance, and is one that athletes and scholars, differently abled and not, have provided voice to. It is a rhizomatic problem with no obvious solution; yet for Tom, he is aware that in order to create a high performance disability sports programme, he must draw upon the knowledge and support of his colleagues working in able-bodied rowing.

*“There is nobody to help me run this camp [in March] so I went to the national team manager in US Rowing and I was like ‘what do you know about running adaptive camps?’ and he gave me a list of things and I had to just say ‘send me that information because guess what – you’re the guy to help me run it!”*

From camps to competitions, the nutritionist, the psychologist, the physiologist, even the physiotherapist, right through to the administrators and logistics coordinators are roles currently occupied by paid and voluntary staff outside of the U.S. Para-rowing environment.

### *Talent Identification*

Whilst organising a training camp in Sarasota (Florida), Tom talked me through some of his concerns for a much-anticipated week of talent identification. He commented that his budget could not pay for the labour of classifiers, physical therapists, psychologists, coaches or technical support needed, let alone for their flights from across the country or for accommodation for them to stay in the area, and so the camp would only be possible if enough volunteers came forward to offer their time and expertise. All the members of staff attending were (as Tom put it) “*scrounging around*” for finances to support a camp that could potentially unearth a new U.S Para-rowing medal winner. Talent identification is a huge priority for Tom, and from running the camp in March he hopes to be able to have at least one athlete physically robust and technically efficient enough to send to the World Rowing Championships at the end of August. Although the concept of talent identification is not new to academic research or able-bodied sport, it is largely an underdeveloped area in Paralympic sport which is gaining

more attention in the field from both hard science and soft science research approaches.

Whilst most talent confirmation stages are conducted with athletes over a three to six-month period, Tom hoped to take some individuals at his camp from talent identification to World Championship level in only five months. The speed at which an individual is to be transformed to an athlete may appear to be inauthentic or disingenuous at first; perhaps providing a derided nod to the standards of Para-rowers in the U.S.; but Tom does not see it this way, commenting that:

*“If we have an athlete who wins the national trial, and if they can fund themselves, then they can go over [to the world championships] and represent the USA, even if they’re coming in 1.5 minutes behind the gold medal time – it’s about participation and opportunity”.*

Tom’s consideration of competing internationally may be unorthodox, there is method to his madness – his ‘talent ID calendar’ is saturated. Each week Tom finds himself travelling throughout the country to events that enable him to make use of staff and resources not readily available to him to find the new talent. From Gateway to Gold<sup>i</sup> events to the Valour Games<sup>ii</sup>, from high school regattas to community rowing coaching sessions, Tom understands the importance of consistently seeking out new talent if he is to grow the talent pool for U.S. Para-rowing in the run up to 2016. He wants boat selection to be competitive. Yet this need for constant talent identification dovetails with a financial agenda. A caveat for the programme continuing to receive financial support from the VA is that Tom needs to report that every 3 months he has introduced 250 injured service men and women to the sport of rowing – be that on the water or on a rowing machine.

It would not be unfounded to comment that the USA is a patriotic country, with the historical and present day considerations of the military firmly embedded within the national cultural. Indeed, for the London 2012 Paralympic Games 20 out of the 227 Team USA athletes were former service men and women injured in combat<sup>iii</sup>. The almost excessive desire for NGBs to fast track former members of the armed forces to become a Paralympian has been explored by numerous academics from multiple disciplines, with research pertaining to issues such as the disabled soldier/athlete body as a site for inscription of national fantasy (Batts & Andrews, 2011), the impact of sport and physical activity on well-being and rehabilitation (Hawkins, et al., 2011; Brittain & Green, 2012; Caddick & Smith, 2014), the cyborging of the soldier / athlete body (Wolff, 2011) to the social and medical transitioning of the 'warrior' (Cooper et al., 2013; Messinger, 2013). Parallels between military personnel and elite athletes are often drawn – diligent, dogmatic, self-disciplined and committed individuals, who professionally absorb orders and facilitate task cohesion; the allure of the injured service man or woman as a future Paralympic potential is alluring. However, none of the squad members who made the U.S Para-rowing team for the 2014 World Championships are former soldiers.

### *Geographical and relational distance*

With such an emphasis on talent identification currently galvanising his finite resources, I asked Tom about the current athletes he has on his programme and how the high performance programme currently operates under the constraints identified. The current ASM1x athlete is at law school in Ohio. He has his own coach and follows his own programme and whilst Tom has input into his training, their contact time is limited. Similarly, the ASW1x athlete trains independently in Massachusetts, whilst the 2 athletes that comprise the LTAMix2x train separately in Connecticut and Massachusetts. The LTAMix4+ boat consists of two college (university) student and two high school (sixth form) students, all of who are involved in their own rowing programmes where they live in 4 different states - Seattle, Ohio, Michigan and Connecticut. Hundreds of miles separate the athletes from each other and from Tom meaning time in boats together, or simply

in each other's company is minimal. It is not uncommon for NGBs to require athletes to relocate to a centralised environment once invited onto a high performance team, especially so in rowing. A fundamental concern that any rowing coach will contend is that it is critical for a crew to spend as much time in a boat together as possible. The issue of centralising is a concerted subject for Tom to negotiate:

*“You can't put someone in a camp like situation for years. They get bored; they have other lives to live so we just have to work with what we've got”.*

Reflecting on his own rowing career Tom recounted how during this time he was responsible for the physical programming of his crewmembers from in 1985 – 1987.

*“I know what they were eating, I knew when they sleeping, I knew what they were feeling, I saw them every single day you know? I knew about injuries, and it was a great resource of course, but I don't have that luxury now – and you know what? It doesn't work anyway.”*

However, as is noted, Tom cannot do this. His main objective is to streamline communications between him and their coaches in regards to how he is updated on their physiological and technical progression. Unquestionably his objective is for the rowers to peak for the world championships in late August, he is aware that their high domestic coaches (especially those athletes in high school and college) will be working to different performance agendas; and whilst he posts programme regularly to the US Para-rowing facebook page, Tom must relinquish some level of control in regards to regulating individual athlete progression:

*“I ask them to follow the programmes on the concept 2 system<sup>iv</sup> so that I can see they're doing the work, don't make excuses. If you*

*do as I ask you to then in 6 to 8 weeks we'll see improvement. If you don't do what I ask you to do then we're probably not going to be on the same team".*

In October 2015, however, Tom was given a specific directive by the USOC – to qualify a TAMix2x boat in April 2016 that would race competitively at the Rio 2016 Games. Knowing the present system, it seems like such an overwhelmingly difficult task in such a short space of time with so much ground to cover. Tom needs to find a male and a female athlete who would both classify (medically and technically) for the TA boat, but who could also train together – and most importantly – row well together. To achieve this, Tom explains how he will need to be 'creative' with a recent \$290K secondary grant from the VA.

*"You see the VA gave the USOC that money to build a cross-country sustainable model of connecting local VA offices and reachouts to their local rowing programme, and so the money can't really be used for training camps or the likes, unless those camps specifically develop veterans into elite athletes."*

Tom budgets a cost of approximately around \$12k - \$15k per week for an elite training camp to cover flights and accommodation for prospective athletes, volunteer support staff, and the cost of boat and facilitates hire. Knowing that each camp could host approximately 25 athletes, I wondered what strategic monitoring had been implemented to ensure that from the invited athletes there would be 2 who could fill the seats in the boat. As we spoke it became clear that the selections were reliant on self-report data. The new objective would inevitably require a shift in the way Tom currently worked, acknowledging that he will need to undergo less 'head coaching' and more 'performance directing' if he is to achieve this extraordinary task of qualifying a TAMix2x.

And so, with budgetary constraints, limited athlete contact, a gigantic geographical space and one member of staff, how does Tom think he will be able to deliver on the challenging medal and participation targets set by the USOC

and the VA respectively? By growing a culture of support and awareness and building effective partnerships and strong relationships with people already in the rowing community.

### *Building partnerships*

One of Tom's first actions in post was to investigate if any of his "old crew" contacts were still involved in rowing - and to ask for their help. The tendency for disability in the USA to be the adopted responsibility of community physical activity programmes for wounded soldiers often leaves elite programmes for Paralympic sports significantly lacking in visibility. As Tom put it there was "no-one knocking down the door" to work with Pars-rowing wanting to develop as a practitioner (in whatever discipline). The development of the programme therefore is determined by the consistent need to rely on others. Fortunately for Tom, a former team mate had transitioned into a career as an engineer and agreed to (voluntarily) explore a more ergonomically enhanced design fixed seat for the TA and AS rowers to capitalise on marginal gains. In fact, Tom credits this new design of the ASM1x seat as a contributing factor to a 4<sup>th</sup> place finish at the 2014 World Rowing Championships. In addition, a collaborative relationship with the head coaches of Canadian and the Australian Para-rowing has led to a better understanding of the international classification system and curriculums for coach education – the first of which is an online manual explaining the classification system for the sport. I considered this knowledge transfer partnership between nations to be something quite unorthodox, and so I asked Tom if he thought there was a distinct contrast between the adaptive community and the able bodied community in elite sport:

*"I think there is something bigger in adaptive coaching, it's like we understand the process and the requirements are bigger than ourselves, and whilst some coaches don't want to talk to me, it's my job to find the ones that do so I can learn".*

Tom is honest about how much he has to learn in his new role. Often he finds himself needing to be the coach, the physiologist, the nutritionist, the psychologist and the handler at camps and most competitions if USOC staff are not available to help. The 2014 World Cup in Amsterdam was a steep learning curve for the programme, identifying a number of issues that had been overlooked such as the need for more 'buddy' staff<sup>v</sup> accreditations and that clothing for some of the athletes was insufficient. An exceptionally important consideration for coaches of spinal cord injured athletes or athletes with more than one amputee extremity is that individual may have difficulties in detecting thermoregulatory changes during physical activity – for example, an inability for the body to detect dipsia (thirst), be unable to activate appropriate diaphoresis (sweating) or recognise sensations of hypothermia (cooling).

#### *The coach-para-athlete relationship*

In addition to this, Tom acknowledged that the physical distance between himself and the rowers over the course of the year had, at times, resulted in strained coach-athlete relationships at international competitions. He recounted an incident with the ASW1x athlete who presented with an injury during the World Cup 2014 in Amsterdam, and although the medical doctor had signed her off as being able to complete, Tom was apprehensive. Prior to the competition Tom had invested a lot of time learning about her condition, and despite expressing his concern for her physical well-being, the athlete chose to race. What emerged later was that Tom had not invested enough time in learning about *her* – her background, her family, her psychology.

The athlete was able to push herself so hard that she slipped a cervical disk during her final race.

Tom was happy to report that part of this VA funding had allowed for a performance psychologist to be at the forthcoming LTA camps. This was a

huge benefit for the programme in terms of progression. As he took me through how he hoped the psychologist would deliver at the camps, there was a particular area of impact that Tom was most concerned with:

*“Because I don’t see my athletes 1-on-1 as much as I would hope, I feel I need to do more to develop the trust between us all. If we can develop those ‘inner-voice’ dialogues of trusting each other to be working towards the same goals, then we’re getting closer as a team you know, despite the many different states we all live in”*

As such, Tom was reflective in his worries that the continued and consistent physical distance between him and his athletes could manifest mentally, disrupting not only their training, but also their relationship with him. Tom understood the need to remain psychologically close to his athletes, even when they were training thousands of miles away. The LTA training camp was the first step to overcoming this.

This paradoxical nature of the coach-Paralympic athlete relationship is one that Tom is aware of and whilst contemplating his position is conscious of the stratified concepts of authority and power akin to the role of head coach:

*“I don’t want them to think they did or didn’t make [the team] because I do or don’t like them ... and on the other hand I don’t want to get too into their personal lives because it’s about performance”*

Tom is right; Paralympic sport is about performance. It is not about participation, nor is it about pity. Despite the multiple duties, his primary objective is to find 4 men and 4 women who can contend for a medal position at the Rio 2016 Paralympics.

*Finding the (controversial) future talents*

At present, Tom relies on existing rowing programmes to identify (and flag to US Para-rowing) athletes within their system who may be eligible for Paralympic classification. Yet this pipeline for talent acquisition needs to be expanded at the source; once more Tom considers sharing knowledge and building relationships to be paramount:

*“I want coaches to know that we are searching for athletes with minimal disabilities so when I see them at different college [rowing] events I can ask ... I know some of them do, it's just that they don't have the information of what we're looking for.”*

Tom does not gloss over the importance of wanting to find “athletes with minimal disabilities”. He is aware of the physiological and psychological advantage of transforming an already athletic individual into a technically competent rower, as was the head coach before him. In March 2011, an online talent identification process saw 2 former elite athletes and a former Navy Seal – all of whom had acquired their disabilities - be introduced to the sport of Para-rowing.<sup>vi</sup> Five months later at the 2011 World Championships, each was at the start line of their respective events racing to qualify their boat category for the London 2012 Paralympic Games.

The notion of purposefully seeking out individuals with ‘minimal disabilities’ to supplement the talent group is a contentious issue. It causes practical questioning around selection and classification for both athletes and coaches – indeed, the entire classification system presents as conceptual conundrum. As our conversation drew to a close, I asked Tom to reflect on his own journey in rowing and to expand on how he considers that his coaching philosophy will ensure that once he finds these athletes they will stay committed to the programme.

The Coach

One of the first things Tom did upon coming into post was to sit on an indoor rowing ergometer and attempt to row 1000m using only his arms and shoulders. He felt it was important to get a physical blueprint (even if temporary and somewhat falsified) of what his AS1x athletes are required to do. Despite his physical conditioning and technical efficiency on the rower, he stopped after 250m. This was an important learning experience for Tom as the coach, immediately needing to reframe his ontological notions of ‘knowing’ what it felt like to row. This concept of the able bodied coach being able to ‘understand’ the needs of the athlete with a disability for performance development is well researched (Tawse, et al., 2012; Fitzgerald, 2013; Martin & Whalen, 2014). Alarming, within the UK only 6% of registered qualified coaches across all sports (professional / Olympic / Paralympic) self-identify as having a disability<sup>vii</sup>. In turn, this indicates that the vast majority of those who participate in disability sport are coached by an able bodied individual. Without question, the more coaches can understand about the pragmatic considerations of disability sports coaching the better – and this is an area Tom is keen to invest in.

### *Coach Education*

Recently Tom and Debbie Arnberg have completed a piece of work that has been in development for the past 6 months. Together they have created an on-line adaptive coaching manual of over 100 pages, which community coaches can access and download for free (THIS IS THE GUIDE TO ADAPTIVE ROWING ON THE SU ROWING WEBSITE <http://www.usrowing.org/docs/default-source/adaptive-documents/2015-guide-to-adaptive-rowing.pdf?sfvrsn=0>). The manual aims to introduce coaches to the technical aspects of the sport, the way that equipment needs to be adapted as well as providing information on how to best introduce an individual with a disability to the sport:

*“It’s basic advice like getting an individual with a visual impairment to feel the oar and the boat before getting onto the water, or if you have a person with a spinal cord injury they should sit in a boat with*

*able bodied rowers to get a sense of movement and imbalance on the water.”*

He explained how the development of the manual was in part due to Joy (the lady with the dog traveling the country) visiting as many clubs in the country as possible and asking the coaches what they would need in order to feel confident and competent in delivering to an adaptive athlete; she then reported this information back to Tom and Debbie. Taking advantage of his relationships with head coaches of other nations, Tom has been able to adopt and adapt information from multiple NGB coaching manuals and add an American stamp to it. The manual is important to Tom and he reflected that when he began as a volunteer adaptive coach he had no formal training, no documents to refer to and no one to ask – he had to learn about the sport - and about disability - session by session, just as the participants did. I asked Tom how the manual had been received so far:

*“To be honest I don’t really know. I mean I’m sure, no I should ask the IT guys to pull up stats [sic] on how many times it’s been looked at but for now at least if anyone calls US Rowing to ask about adaptive we can point them to our web pages”.*

I was curious to understand what it was that prevented Tom from making contact with the clubs in his network, taking the manual to them as opposed to waiting for a phone call. After all, he and Debbie have a vested interest in ensuring more and more clubs are able to offer adaptive rowing both in terms of veteran / community level growth and also to develop a healthy talent pathway. Tom considered my suggestion for a moment and responded with earnest:

*“If I could show you the list of things I have to do against the list of what I want to do... At the moment I can only respond to the need, not create the need. I have to find athletes for Rio”.*

However, Tom is the High Performance Director of US Para-rowing, not a university graduate entering into their first position; should community coach education really be part of his job role? And how much could it detract (as he pointed out) from finding his 2016 hopefuls?

### *Managing Expectations*

Tom admits that whilst reaching out for partnerships at the beginning of his role, he was surprised by the resistance expressed from others within the sport whom he “assumed would be open minded”. This hinting at a shared empathy or enthusiasm towards people with disabilities is not uncommon amongst academics within the elite disability sport domain – the notion that increased awareness will inevitably lead to acceptance and therefore interest in disability seems yet to be challenged. Furthermore, it has been argued that whilst Paralympians are considered to gain empowerment from the Paralympic Games, their specific lifestyle choices and failure to identify as ‘disabled’ can actually be a limiting fact to the empowerment of others in the community who are not identify as an ‘athlete’ (Purdue & Howe, 2012) and that the Paralympics has limited impact on the everyday lives of disabled people (in the UK at least) (Braye, et al., 2013). In order for the programme to progress at a pace which pleases both the USOC and the VA, Tom is practical, almost business-like, in his approach. His staff, his funding and his time are finite and with the 2016 Paralympic Games within a little over 12 months, he feels he cannot afford to be too political about the position he occupies.

*“If someone is not willing to support something I’m involved in then I’ll go to the next person. I mean I’m not trying to change people’s opinions about disabled or working with the disabled.”*

It seems that despite being the High Performance director for U.S. Para-rowing, Tom does not see it as his role as being politically motivated towards championing disability sport.

### *Coaching Philosophy*

I found Tom’s role as Head Coach and High Performance Director of U.S. Para-rowing to be so far removed from my own understandings of how this job would operate within the Team GB system<sup>viii</sup>. I was in awe of how he managed to do so

much with so little (whilst still trying to be a present and good husband and father). He mentioned that he never intended to come back to high performance rowing. He had transitioned well out of his elite athlete career and whilst was happy to volunteer at his local club, his current position was not an anticipated future career move. I asked Tom why he chose to take the position, knowing the limitations that would be placed on the programme:

*“I enjoy getting people to that elite level because I did it. It’s no different. The athlete has to put the time in, put the effort in, got to want to do it, but you have to have someone there saying ‘I believe you can do it too’.”*

Reflecting on his own career, Tom postulated that former athletes develop a habitual style of coaching that mirrors how they best responded when they themselves were training. Tom defined himself as a ‘compassionate’ coach – a coach that listens and a coach that cares about the athlete beyond the medals table. Yet throughout our discussion, he was able to acknowledge that such sentimental behaviour may not always best serve the situation:

*“I don’t think I push as hard as I could. I have to figure that one out you know? When is it time to put the hammer down and when to be the pat on the back kind of person.”*

I found his attitude to be both holistic and progressive. The concept that individuals who reflect on their own practices make for better leaders has been embedded in business management for a number of years. This idea of questioning our own performance before questioning the performance of others is slowly becoming an integral part of the development of elite sports coaches (Kidman & Hanrahan, 2010; Frontiera, 2010; Cruickshank & Collins, 2012).

Despite numerous successful case studies of interventions including supporting athletes to earn degrees, cope with family disruptions, transition healthily out of competitive sport and issues pertaining to mental health, the elite sports system in

the UK has been slow to embrace the need for such support. However, recent studies within the domain of elite sport have grounded this need to support elite athletes beyond performance targets with the theoretical frameworks used in positive psychology. Considered a scientific exploration of the theoretical application of optimal functioning to human flourishing, the area examines the strengths and virtues which enables individuals and communities to thrive. The application of positive psychology to the elite sports domain is in an embryonic stage, however a handful of studies have explored the use of positive psychology in sports organisations (Wagstaff, et al., 2012), the influence of using positive emotions in sports performance (McCarthy, 2011) and the relationship between hope and burnout in competitive sport (Gustafsson, et al., 2010). As yet though, the extent to which high performance coaches understand and implement positive psychology to enhance the well-being of their athletes is yet to be determined. Tom leads me to believe that he would be an advocate of such approaches:

*“I’ve been involved in rowing for so long and have rowed all over the worlds at internationals. I would never want any athlete to feel that I had my thumb on them the whole time to win a gold medal.”*

*“The bottom line is if the athlete doesn’t want to row, you’re not going to convince them to row. An elite will always put more pressure on themselves than you ever will – so if they’re not doing what they need to, it’s my job as the coach to question how much they want it, how much can they give?”*

Again, Tom positions himself as a coach who drives performance through facilitating and reflecting; he is not a dictator. Overall, Tom’s coaching philosophy is one that nurtures – he constantly and consistency tends to the foundational bed of adaptive rowing in the USA with conviction that over time talent will indisputably flourish and advance. Despite participation and integration being a financially rewarding objective for Tom, he contends that through the programme he is developing the USA will become one of the most competitive and decorated Para-rowing nations. He will create a culture where becoming a champion is inevitable.

*“If you asked any gold medallist how they did it, not one will say it was because of the money or the perks. No. They’ll talk about community, about the support structure, their friends, the club, the coaches you know? They will say it was a culture that made them champions. I plan to build this culture here.”*

## **Recommendations for coaching, education and practice**

This chapter has highlighted that in the not too distant future, a reality those involved in high performance disability sport may need to consider is ‘*how can we do more with less?*’ Certainly exploring Tom’s role and the landscape of elite sport in the USA helps to shape an understanding of this. Whilst it is unlikely that elite sport in the UK will see a complete reduction in financial support for elite sport, the gap between the funding allocations to participation and high performance will undoubtedly begin to narrow – preparation is paramount.

What lessons can be learnt, what information can be gleaned and what examples can be used on how to drive forward the anticipated success of a Paralympic sport with the smallest of budgets and minimal full time support staff. It would appear that UK Sport have already confirmed to NGBs a drop in funding post 2021, and are subtly filtering the message through to teams. As part of annual reviews conducted by the organisation, NGBs are expected to demonstrate how the provision of their elite sport services can be funded via self-sustaining business-case initiatives for the 2021 Olympic and Paralympic cycles onwards. I would argue that those hoping to enter employment into high performance sport (be that Paralympic or Olympic) during this time should anticipate two changes:

- 1) The route into a full-time, salaried role will be a lengthier process, with fewer opportunities being made available for entry-level practitioners. A reduction in funding is likely to create an emphasis on practitioners

volunteering at more senior levels of sport, with an overall impact being that salaries will remain below the national rate of inflation.<sup>ix</sup>

- 2) Sports will be seeing to appoint individuals who can fulfil a dual-purpose role, and this may fall within two particular areas – increasing participation (and therefore paid membership to supplement the elite structure) or increasing funding (to pay for support staff). Without question, a coach who will span both elite and participation will be preferable, as will team managers that are able to increase sponsorship deals with corporate agencies. Going forward, practitioners may need to be conscious of sharing roles and responsibilities across the entire organisation, as opposed to working exclusively with the elite athletes.

Future practitioners may gain a competitive advantage by observing a number of practices adopted by other nations and explore how such alternatives could be adapted to suit National systems - such as the 'Adopt an Athlete' initiative driven by the Hellenic Olympic Committee to support the elite system, or by investing only in a small number of popular sports with high levels of medal expectation. Essentially, future practitioners should be exploring private sector strategies and formulating business plans of how Team GB can remain as successful supported and committed should elite sport fail to make the qualifiers for government spending priorities post Rio 2016.

I asked Tom to tell me about the future of his role and the direction of US Pararowing – how did he envision it transforming from a sports programme driven primarily by motivated and passionate individuals into an elite training system supported by paid staff and long term planning? His response was unequivocally that of a High Performance Director of sport:

*“I have a plan but honestly, I couldn't say. Ask me again after the 2016 medal count comes in”*

## Additional resources

<http://www.usrowing.org/domesticrowing/adaptiverowing>

<http://www.worldrowing.com/para-rowing/>

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<sup>i</sup> Gateway to Gold is a USOC organised, multi-sport event held in different states across the USA which serve the dual purpose of encouraging veterans with disabilities to take up a Paralympic sport, are also used as potential fast-track Paralympic talent identification events.

<sup>ii</sup> The Valour Games aims to bring together disabled veterans and wounded, ill or injured service members and engages them in three days of Paralympic sport competition and is held annually in various locations in the USA.

<sup>iii</sup> Since the commencement of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2001, over 35,000 American military personnel have returned home with serious physical and psychological wounds, including amputations, traumatic brain injuries and paralysis. (Batts & Andrews, 2011).

<sup>iv</sup> Concept 2 is a rowing ergometer manufacturing company that has online systems for recording numerical data from erg sessions.

<sup>v</sup> Many adaptive and Paralympics international sport events will allow each athlete to have an accredited 'buddy' who may not have an official role within the team but will provide additional assistance to the athlete.

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<sup>vi</sup> One athlete was a former elite road cyclist who was knocked off her bike whilst on a training ride, resulting in complete paralysis from T4. The second athlete was a former nationally competitive marathon runner who contracted bacterial meningitis, resulting in the medical condition Stiff Persons Syndrome. The third athlete was a US Navy Seal who was involved in a traffic accident whilst on leave, resulting in partial paralysis from T7.

<sup>vii</sup> Email correspondence with Sports Coach UK, April 2015.

<sup>viii</sup> Team GB Para-rowing received £3.8m towards elite development of the sport for the 2013-2017 Rio cycle. Funding amounts received by each Olympic and Paralympic sport can be viewed at [www.uk sport.gov.uk](http://www.uk sport.gov.uk)

<sup>ix</sup> National Governing Bodies of Sport (and associated organisations) are defined as being within the public sector and are therefore subject to similar restrictions in pay increases and bonuses.