



International Bowls for the Disabled Inc.

Explanatory guide to Classification in Para- Sports.

1) What is classification

Classification provides a structure for competition. Athletes competing in Para-sports have an impairment that leads to a competitive disadvantage. Consequently, a system has to be put into place to minimize the impact of impairments on sport performance and to ensure the success of an athlete is determined by skill, fitness, power, endurance, tactical ability and mental focus. This system is called classification.

Classification determines who is eligible to compete in a para-sport and it groups the eligible athletes in sport classes according to their activity limitation in a certain sport.

2) Eligible impairments

The Paralympic Movement offers sport opportunities for athletes with physical, visual and/or intellectual impairments that have at least one of the following eligible impairments.

Impaired muscle power

Reduced force generated by muscles or muscle groups, may occur in one limb or the lower half of the body, as caused, for example, by spinal cord injuries, Spina Bifida or poliomyelitis.

Impaired range of movement

Range of movement in one or more joints is reduced permanently.

Joint that can move beyond the average range of motion, joint instability and acute conditions, such as arthritis, are not considered eligible impairments.

Limb deficiency

Total or partial absence of bones or joints, from birth or as a consequence of trauma (e.g. car accident, amputation) or illness (e.g. bone cancer).

Leg length difference

Bone shortening in one leg from birth or trauma.

Short Stature

Reduced standing height due to abnormal dimensions of bones of upper and lower limbs or trunk, e.g. due to achondroplasia or growth hormone dysfunction.

Hypertonia

Abnormal increase in muscle tension and reduced ability of a muscle to stretch, which can result from injury, illness or a health condition such as cerebral palsy.

Ataxia

Lack of co-ordination of muscle movements due to neurological condition, such as cerebral palsy, brain injury or multiple sclerosis.

Athetosis

Generally characterised by unbalanced, uncontrolled movements and a difficulty in maintaining a symmetrical posture, due to cerebral palsy, brain injury, multiple sclerosis or other conditions.

Visual impairment

Vision is impacted by either an impairment of the eye structure, optical nerve/pathways or the part of the brain controlling vision (visual cortex). **(Classification is done by an ophthalmologist)**

Intellectual disability

A limitation in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour as expressed in conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills, which originates before the age of 18. **(Classification is done by a psychologist)**

The presence of an eligible impairment must be proven by means of medical diagnostic information that must be presented no later than at the time of athlete evaluation.

3) Classification systems

Classification systems differ by sport, and are developed by the International Federations (IF) governing the sport. (In this case, International Bowls for the Disabled - IBD). The IF is also responsible to review the system from time to time.

IFs decide which eligible impairment types their sport will cater to. Some sports are only open to eligible impairment, e.g. goalball, which is only open to athletes with a visual impairment. Athletics and swimming are open to athletes from all 10 eligible groups.

At present, Lawn Bowls is not open to Intellectual Impairment, via IBD. All other eligible impairments are represented.

IFs also decide how severe an impairment must be in order for an athlete to be eligible to compete in their sport. For an athlete to be eligible the impairment must be severe enough that it impacts his or her sport performance. This is called the "Minimum Impairment Criterion". If an athlete fails to meet the Minimum Impairment Criterion, it does not question the presence of a genuine impairment. It is only a ruling on the eligibility of the athlete to compete in a particular sport under the IF Sport Rules.

Since different sports require different abilities, each sport logically requires its own classification system. For example, an impairment of the arms affects performance in a running event in athletics to a lesser extent than it affects performance in swimming. It is therefore possible that an athlete may be eligible for 1 sport, but not for another.

The only exception to the sport-specific character of Paralympic classification is the classification for athletes with visual disability. This system is still a medical system and the sport class allocated therefore applies across all sports (but the naming of the class may differ).

4) **Sport Classes**

A sport class is a category which groups athletes, depending on how their impairment impacts performance in their sport. Therefore, a sport class is not necessarily comprised of one impairment type alone, but can be comprised of athletes with different impairments. However, these different impairments affect sport performance to a similar extent. For example, a bowler with an above knee amputation may be in the same class as a high-level paraplegic. Although one is ambulant, and the other in a wheelchair, they both have impairments relating to balance.

In individual sports, athletes compete against athletes in their own class to ensure the impact of impairment is minimised. In national events and smaller international competitions, athletes in different sport classes may compete together for one medal, because there are not enough athletes for each sport class to create a competitive event. E.g., B5 and B6 classes may compete together and B7 and B8 classes together.

5) **How is a sport class allocated?**

A sport class is allocated through athlete evaluation by a group of classifiers. Each IF trains and certifies classifiers to conduct athlete evaluation in its sport.

Classifiers assessing athletes with the various physical impairments listed above have a medical background (doctor or physiotherapist usually). They perform the "bench test" which establishes whether the sufficient number of points have been lost, or not, to establish eligibility. A technical classifier (an expert in the sport) then assesses the athletes functional ability/ limitation. Together they agree on the class. However, the process is not completed until the athlete has been observed during their first appearance in competition. Then the class is confirmed and all parties, including the athlete, sign off on it.

Athletes with a visual impairment are assessed by an ophthalmologist or optometrist.

Athletes with an Intellectual Disability are assessed by a Psychologist.

Athlete evaluation takes place before competitions. Therefore those who need to be classified need to arrive a day or so early. Depending on the type and severity of the impairment an athlete might undergo evaluation several times throughout his/ her career. Some impairments may be progressive e.g. Multiple Sclerosis. Also, junior athletes may not yet have reached skeletal maturity by the time of classification. In these cases, classifiers can decide that the athlete has to be seen again at the next competition or set timeframes (e.g. Bi- annual review)

Athletes have the right to challenge a decision taken by classification panels. The IPC CLASSIFICATION CODE defines protest and appeal opportunities which need to be adhered to by each sport.