



## Participation of Physically Disabled Individuals in Sports in Türkiye: Barriers and Supports

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### Abstract

This study aimed to reveal the participation processes of physically disabled athletes who gained success nationally and internationally and assessed what circumstances impeded and facilitated them in this process. The study used a qualitative research technique and interviewed individuals accordingly, which comprised 11 physically disabled athletes (19-32 years old) participating in professional sports competitions. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, and the corresponding data were subsequently evaluated by content analysis. The data analysis revealed that physically disabled individuals experienced issues that potentially fall under preventive and supportive categories during their participation in sports. In this context, the study identified the protective approach, restrictive social environment, physical barriers to engaging in sports, and cost- and success-oriented practices as impeding conditions. Yet, it also revealed that supportive family and sports environment, motivation, and socialization-based favorable aspects encouraged the participation of individuals in sports. Considering the positive outcomes of sports in the lives of disabled individuals, it is crucial to foster supportive attitudes and behaviors and to minimize impeding attitudes and conditions so that they can engage in sports activities and professional competitions.

**Keywords:** Athletes with physical disabilities, Barriers, Supports, Elite sport

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## INTRODUCTION

Physically disabled individuals are unable to participate in sports on the same regular basis as individuals without disabilities. Approximately two-thirds of individuals with physical disabilities appeared to fail to engage in sports, whereas it was less common among individuals without any disability, according to a study conducted in the US (Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). These data are critical for individuals with special needs (ISNs) whose physical, psychological, and social health are adversely affected (Richardson et al., 2017) since sports activities provide psychosocial advantages such as promoting personal autonomy, social integration, and life satisfaction (Aitchison et al., 2022; Majnemer et al., 2008) for individuals with physical disabilities. Furthermore, such activities reportedly are favorable to lowering the risk of secondary health problems, including heart disease, type II diabetes, and obesity (Department of Health and Human Services, 2000).

There are numerous positive experiences that individuals attain during the process of participating in sports. These experiences, which hold great significance both physically and psychologically, can create opportunities not only for improving physical health but also for participating in social environments and becoming more independent individuals in daily life. With the increase in social integration, the sense of independence and self-confidence paves the way for different emotional experiences, helping individuals overcome potential barriers they may face (Chen et al., 2024; Ravesloot et al., 2022; Rimmer & Marques, 2012).

Increasing such positive experiences for those with physical disabilities is undoubtedly possible. Keskin et al. (2014) reportedly identified that sports activities affect socialization processes such as making friends, group membership, caring, and teamwork among individuals with physical disabilities. Correspondingly, Stephens et al. (2012) indicated that those who experienced spinal cord injury gain several advantages from participating in sports, including socialization, eliciting information from others, raising awareness on health and welfare, maintaining weight, functional development, and independence. Similarly, the biological, social, cultural, and economic characteristics of individuals with disabilities can influence their participation in sports and the benefits they experience from such participation. Several studies on this topic (Chen et al., 2024; Lobenius-Palmér et al., 2018; Valis & Gonzalez, 2017) have shown that variables such as gender, age, education level, economic status, type of disability, level of awareness, and social support can be significant factors in the participation of individuals with disabilities in sports and physical activities.

The involvement of ISNs in sports is a very complex phenomenon. Indeed, ISNs, their parents, and specialists studying in this field have reported various barriers to engaging in sports. From a broad perspective, it is reasonable to assert that ISNs, who require additional energy in their daily activities, find it physically extreme to participate in sports (Jaarsma et al., 2015). Jaarsma et al. (2014) reviewed 52 studies to identify barriers and supports in the participation of physically disabled individuals in sports. As a result, they specified that incompetencies and health concerns were the primary personal barriers that ISNs confronted during their participation in sports. They further listed the lack of facilities, transportation problems, and accessibility issues as environmental barriers, contrarily indicating entertainment and health

factors and social connections as personal and environmental facilitators, respectively. Nevertheless, they reported that the barriers and supports in participation in sports varied depending on age and disability type.

Stephens et al. (2012) identified that organizational (e.g., availability of facilities), medical (e.g., urinary tract infections), emotional (e.g., lack of confidence), lack of relevant information (e.g., medical advice), and the opinions of others (e.g., patronizing the views of others) were the main barriers averting individuals with spinal cord injury from engaging in sports. Tenenbaum and Eklund (2007) also asserted that the most significant hindrances preventing ISNs from engaging in sports were time constraints and lack of motivation.

In the axis of the given literature above, it is essential to identify what attributes encouraged or discouraged ISNs to engage in sports. Informing disabled individuals about barriers and supports in participating in sports might also provide opportunities to promote their engagement in sports (Jaarsma et al., 2014). Because nowadays, the sport has evolved into a professional level where ISNs potentially compete and perform at an advanced level, serving beyond its original purposes as before, such as rehabilitation, socialization, and enjoyable activity for individuals with physical disabilities (Yılmaz-Anatca & Yılmaz, 2019). In this sense, the current study aimed to reveal the participation processes of physically disabled athletes who achieved success nationally and internationally and assessed what circumstances impeded and facilitated them in this process.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Model**

The field of sports institutions is a significant area for investigating the challenges individuals with special needs (ISNs) face in social life and the support they can receive in response to these challenges, as well as for gathering data on this topic. In this regard, it is beneficial to examine lived experiences in depth. Consequently, the use of qualitative research designs is a highly preferred method to comprehensively understand this subject. In this study, the grounded theory design, one of the contemporary types of embedded theory studies, was employed as a qualitative research method. Charmaz (2006) emphasizes that the complexity, multidimensionality, and interconnectedness of situations, events, and phenomena can only be effectively studied if the researcher actively engages in the data collection and analysis processes, generating codes and categories from the data and continuously comparing them. In this process, researchers focus on theory construction rather than aiming for population representation in the sample.

### **Research Groups**

In the study, interviews were conducted with 11 individuals with physical disabilities residing in different provinces of Turkey, who have adopted sports, allocated time to sports activities, participated in tournaments, and achieved success in national or international sports organizations. Seven of the interviewees were undergraduate students, two were undergraduate

graduates, and two were high school graduates. Considering the age groups of the participants, their ages ranged from 19 to 32. Every participant is actively engaged in regular sports training and attends competitions. To reach the participants, initial meetings were conducted with clubs within the researchers' close network. While trying to form the participant group in this way, the snowball sampling method was employed to identify new participants. Table 1 provides detailed information on the participants.

**Table 1.** Detailed information about the participants

Code Name	Age (G)	Educational Status	Disability Type	Sports Branch	Interview duration
Bülent	21 (M)	Undergraduate Student	Brachial plexus palsy	Athletics	65
Yusuf	21 (M)	Undergraduate Student	Cerebral Palsy	Wheelchair tennis	47
Dilek	21 (F)	Undergraduate	Two-leg amputations	Wheelchair archery	45
Suat	23 (M)	Undergraduate Student	Leg amputation	Athletics (sprinter)	50
Serdar	22 (M)	Undergraduate Student	Cerebral Palsy	High jump	70
Gamze	24 (F)	Undergraduate	Two-leg amputations	Wheelchair Basketball	55
Fatih	30 (M)	High-School Graduate	Hand amputation	Sitting Volleyball	48
Erkan	32 (M)	High-School Graduate	Hand amputation	Sitting Volleyball	57
Aydın	19 (M)	Undergraduate Student	Two-leg amputations	Wheelchair tennis	50
Osman	30 (M)	Undergraduate Student	Two-leg amputations	Wheelchair archery	48
Aysel	28 (F)	Undergraduate Student	Two-leg amputations	Shooting sports	68

### Data Collection Tools

The study performed an in-depth interview design by employing a semi-structured interview form. The interview primarily focused on acquiring participants' relevant viewpoints and comprehending their perceptions on the subject of interest. The best way to ensure this goal was to foster a safe and secure setting where the participants freely and comfortably express themselves. The researchers, therefore, conducted semi-structured interviews to strike a balance among these aspects. The preference for the semi-structured interview technique has been influenced significantly by the subjective experiences of persons and the quality of their sporting experiences.

The initial section of the semi-structured interview form comprised queries regarding the personal information and experiences of the participants. The first set of questions also included queries about participants' sports lives. These queries specifically centered on challenges and barriers participants experienced while engaging in sports and the coping strategies they used against it. The questions further explored the dynamics that individuals receive support from and the roles of these dynamics in enabling participation in sports.

### Ethics Approval

Approval for the study was received from Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University Ethics Committee (Date/Protocol number: 07.06.2023/ 2023-248.) In addition, informed consent forms were obtained from the athletes' parents and coaches before participation.

### Analysis of Data

During the interviews, audio recordings were made with the consent of participants to record the data properly. Subsequently, the audio-recorded data was converted into written texts. The acquired data were analyzed using content analysis. For the credibility and reliability of the study, two different authors first worked separately on the interview notes for the themes, and the coding and the resulting themes were mutually evaluated. The agreement between the co-researchers was determined using Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula, and the percentage of agreement was calculated. According to this formula, the percentage of agreement between the researchers was found to be 88%. During this process, an expert in both qualitative research and the field of the article was consulted, and their feedback was utilized. Additionally, one of the important factors affecting credibility and reliability in qualitative research is participant confirmation (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). To ensure that the interview data accurately reflected their thoughts, the data was read by the participants and confirmed.

The study's two primary topics —the challenges faced and the support received— while engaging in sports were transformed into themes by the suitable conceptual framework by leveraging the most acceptable data among the information gathered from the participants. While analyzing the data, however, the data analysis procedure considered that the issues developed under the influence of various social dynamics; as a result, it attempted to evaluate their diverse dimensions, even though the current study centered on the challenges ISNs faced and the support they received. Furthermore, sub-themes from the coded data were identified and merged under the main themes based on their interrelationships to ensure that the data were expressed meaningfully during the analysis.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data acquired within the scope of the study revealed that physically disabled individuals experienced conditions that potentially fall under the categories of barriers and supporters (facilitators) during their involvement in sports. It appears that ISNs encounter some barriers while participating in sports, such as a protective approach, restrictive social environment, physical impediments to engaging in sports, and cost- and success-oriented practices. On the other hand, the study identified positive aspects such as a supportive family and sports environment, motivation, and socialization that facilitated the participation process in sports.

**Table 2.** Themes emerged from the analysis

<b>Barriers</b>	<b>Supports</b>
Protective Approach	Supportive Family and Social Environment
Restrictive Social Environment	Motivation
Physical Barriers	Socialization process
Transportation and Cost, Success Orientation	

Rimmer et al. (2004) reported a similar theme categorization. In their study performed among ISNs, fitness and recreation specialists, architects, city planners/green space managers, they explicitly discovered that numerous variables, such as physical condition/transportation, cost, economic conditions, equipment, accessibility to information, emotional and psychological factors, that influence the engagement of physically disabled individuals in sports might also become potential barriers and supporters in themselves for such individuals. Correspondingly, Stephens et al. (2012) emphasized the existence of some perceived barriers, such as lack of organization, medical barriers, and emotional barriers, as well as perceived benefits, such as socialization, self-dignification, physically challenging, and emotionally benefiting, in the participation of ISNs in sports.

## **Barriers**

The literature review related to disabled individuals indicated that these entities frequently encountered social exclusion, stigmatization, marginalization, and many adverse behaviors, attitudes, and widespread opinions, signifying that such reflective aspects make them feel unequal to other members of society (Aslan & Şeker, 2011; Babaoğlu, 2018; Baffoe, 2013; Barnes, 1995; Çaha, 2016; Ersöz, 2020; Nazlı, 2012; Neufeldt & Mathieson, 1994; Saugeres, 2011). Furthermore, considering the perspective of the sports institution, a similar setting appears to exist in the sports environment, and ISNs face substantial barriers to reaching and performing sports activities. Such unfavorable behaviors might occasionally ensue intentionally, whereas they might also emerge as false behaviors, improper acts, and attitudes in the form of attempts to protect ISNs, pity them, and regard them as needy entities. As this way of thinking retained a historical background evolving since ancient times, it is also possible to recognize such perspectives in expressions that have been reassembled with new forms nowadays (Doğan, 2008; Yılmaz-Anatca & Yılmaz, 2019). This scenario is highlighted further by the fact that ISNs engage in physical exercise and sports at a lower rate than those without special needs (Healthy People, 2000; Rimmer, 1999; WHO, 2011).

## **Protective Approach**

For various reasons, protecting or patronizing ISNs is a typical practice, and many ISNs conveyed this scenario in their statements (Stephens et al., 2012). Taub and Greer (2000) underlined that a protective strategy reduced potential opportunities, yielding fewer supportive outcomes for ISNs to participate in physical activities. In this sense, protective parenting approaches result in social isolation for children with special needs, making it difficult for them to participate in sports activities.

One of the indicators of the reproduction of disability is the discourses that exclude, protect, and denigrate it as inadequate. Some of the participants stated that they were under pressure from their families and other close circles at the juncture of the beginning or continuing their sports activities under the theme of the protective approach:

At first, my family and social surroundings were upset with me and warned me; 'Do not! do not tire yourself, do not do this, do not do that, do not go anywhere alone,' which



inevitably undermined my self-confidence. Naturally, I thought myself that it would really happen if I did this, and it lowered my motivation. Indeed, they believed that they cared about and supported me, but at the same time, they were causing me to close myself off unavoidably. (Suat)

Another participant, Serdar, observed that ISNs who had similar experiences went through the followings:

Well, there are already many families. They do not allow their children to go out. So, they struggle with a lack of self-confidence in making friends and constantly try to lead themselves with difficulties and disappointments. Here, the responsibility of the families is to ask the children what they want... Hence, I could suggest that these families encourage their kids towards the things they like, the things that will make them happy, and the things they have a talent for. Of course, I would not overstep my limit and say things like this, but I still recommend that you may provide your children with a happy life so that they become successful. Sports promote communication, social interaction, self-assurance, moral inspiration, knowledge, study, and actually many other things. (Serdar)

Sports, by their very nature, have a structure that makes players more prone to injury and wounding, and consequently, players frequently require assistance and support due to such incidents. In the face of potential difficulties, this organizational structure remains ISNs more indecisive or hesitant in seeking social assistance, such as parental support or personal responsibility. As a result, this structure limits their ability to express their needs and seek assistance (Rimmer et al., 2004). The cumulative effect of all these negativities may lead to a sense of inadequacy and the obliteration of self-confidence among ISNs (Wickman, 2015).

### **Restrictive Social Environment**

Another theme addressed under the title of Barriers is social environment-oriented barriers. One of the environmental barriers that ISNs confront in this process is pragmatic expectations (money, status, and fame), particularly in physical activity and sporting activities. The financial prospects and the anticipation of power, rank, and fame to be developed through cultural capital will explicitly motivate the players (Yılmaz-Anatca, & Yılmaz, 2019). However, setting an ultimate goal above physical activity and sports and a narrow success limit creates social pressure on the individual. Bülent, one of our participants, described the discourses of his close circle and their skepticism of this issue as follows:

Well, I frequently heard from my close circles saying, 'This kid cannot succeed in anything... what will happen to him? What could he do? Or will you always take care of him?' Such comments just made me sad. I remember being offended at that young age. I was irritated... People around me were polite to me. No one was telling me anything. Well, they could not. Generally speaking, I would get angry, say inappropriate things, and poke them with my words. Their family would tell my parents like; 'What is he capable of doing in sports? What can he succeed in? What will he

achieve? What will he accomplish? he merely attends and has a good time; nothing else happens. (Bülent)

Kumcağız and Avcı-Çayır (2018) specified in their study that the social environment puts pressure on individuals and that they adopt an obstructionist attitude with speech and expressions while participating in sports. The same study also reported that 83.33% of participants underlined the presence of social environment pressure.

Undoubtedly, the habitus concept by Bourdieu (2015) is one of the best definitions describing the difficulties experienced by ISNs in their social environment relations. As a result, habitus is effective in the perception, interpretation, and tendencies of ISNs. Habitus also refers to the social environment, particularly the family, to reproduce disability and limits the individual within certain codes (Yılmaz-Anatca & Yılmaz, 2019). The interviewed participants in the study shared the following statements about how they witnessed the social environment limited them:

First of all, there is a perception among people: 'My son or my daughter is disabled, but I do not want him to sit in a wheelchair.' Well, there is no such thing. It is the reality of life that I have seen many times. I met two girls, and I wanted them to be athletes. I introduced them to the coaches, but their parents said, 'I will not put my daughter in a wheelchair.' It is a typical perception. I do not know why they think this way, but they should overcome such a perception. The disability of people becomes visible when they are put barriers! (Yusuf)

Another problem related to the restrictive social environment is the gender-related problems experienced by female participants. In this regard, Dilek, despite having a supportive family, expresses the barrier created by her family due to the fact that she is a woman in achieving her goals as follows:

My family was with me in the hospital when I first met archery. My father gave me tremendous support when I tried the first shot. They supported me in this regard... We just can't agree on the transfer. There are transfer offers from other provinces but my family won't allow it. How can a disabled woman live in another province? They don't look at it positively. That's why I continue in the province where I am... When I work more forward-oriented, the problems related to womanhood come in front of me. As I said, I received very good offers. Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, Bursa, Turkish Armed Forces Club, etc. These are all top lists in archery. When I told them to my family, they told me how could I live in Bursa and Istanbul. That's why I couldn't transfer. (Dilek)

This situation emerges as the manifestation of the “gender regime”, which Connell (2013) refers to in relation to gender and which is seen in micro-relationships, in daily life. This conviction that women are weak and in need of help leads to the perpetuation of gender in this way and the realization of the role attributed to it in all areas of life (Burke, 1980). Additionally, in the study by Ascondo et al. (2023), it was found that, in terms of participants' gender, women



with disabilities perceived more barriers in sports practices compared to men. Another social barrier is the language imposed by the media. Media reporting language can be disturbing rather than making the disabled individuals who are involved in sports more visible:

I was offended by something in the first place. It was a news published by Bolu Municipality. Something like a headline referring to 'they won by sitting down,' as if we were sitting and doing nothing. The game name has been sitting volleyball already, but the news implied that as if we just won while sitting down. We broke a sweat there, so I was slightly offended by the news giving a headline. (Erkan)

In this sense, the media, while covering sports news for ISNs, constructs a language that usually focuses on the virtue of physical integrity over the opposing idea, develops a vocabulary on the goodness of being disabled, and prefers to use a terminology legitimizing the 'ideal body' (Yılmaz-Anatca & Yılmaz, 2019).

### **Physical Barriers, Transportation and Cost**

One of the primary reasons why ISNs retain an isolated life, are unable to engage in social activities, and fail to make themselves visible physically, emotionally, and socially is the lack of an efficient infrastructure and transportation network that places them at the center (Ives et al., 2021). This is also true in sporting events:

It takes about 40-45 minutes to walk from my house to the training session. Well, there was no transportation at all at that time. So, I used to go on foot. If the schedule for training were at 5 o'clock, I would have to leave the house at 4 o'clock. I would go for a long walk, dreaming about playing with the racket in my hand. By the way, my first branch was badminton. That is why I had a racket. Aside from that, I was coming home at night. My training would end around 9-10 p.m. I have witnessed many things multiple times. Neighborhoods I passed, streets I crossed, and so forth. Sometimes it can get pretty dirty. I experienced several difficult moments. (Bülent)

Kirchner et al. (2008) revealed that only 19% of ISNs live in "accessible states/provinces" in their survey. Moreover, this rate was low in some states/provinces that expanded special needs services. The sidewalk, road, transportation network, and facility features were restrictive for disabled individuals, according to a study conducted with various groups such as athletes, city planners, and sports specialists (Rimmer et al., 2004).

In addition to factors such as roads and transportation, the cost is another significant variable among the barriers indicated by athletes with special needs (Berardi et al., 2021; Kumcağız & Avcı-Çayır, 2018; Stephens et al., 2012). Athletes with physical disabilities explicitly face serious economic problems, especially when sports-specific instrument/equipment costs are combined with costly expenses such as prostheses.

Since the prosthesis is an imported instrument abroad, it really bothered me. Actually, I had planned to begin sports sooner, but I had to postpone this sport for a year and a half due to the lack of a sports prosthesis. I was supposed to have a sports prosthesis

for my disability, but I had difficulties since I had financial problems and wasted time. Thus, I inevitably faced such barriers. I also could not find any source to provide me with financial aid. For example, I applied to some institutions, but they responded to me: 'Sports prosthesis is expensive, and we can not afford it.' Despite several written petitions, I could not find my actual addressee. (Suat)

Another participant, Aysel, expressed his dissatisfaction with the budgets and limited funds allocated by the federations for the organizations as follows:

Even though the sport we engage in is portrayed as highly valuable in the media, in reality, the value given is not as significant. The resources provided by the federations are very inadequate. A significant portion of the costs, including transportation, equipment, and the overall expenses of our sport, falls on us. Alternatively, part of it is covered by supportive family members, coaches, or other mentors. (Aysel)

It is possible to articulate the primary barriers that prevent athletes with special needs from accessing sports organizations through political power relations. The cities, buildings, and facilities built with the hegemony of the 'strong' and 'powerful' ones, particularly over those with special needs, are a way of making ISNs feel weak constantly all the time in the face of the 'strong' ones.

### **Success Orientation**

One of the issues limiting individuals and hindering the engagement of disadvantaged groups in sports institutions is the dominance of an achievement/peak/medal-oriented mentality. If institutions fail to manage such an attitude, it potentially leads to problems such as competition, aggressiveness, and violence in the sports environment, or it may lead to many individuals opting out of sports activities. The current study indicated that physically disabled individuals exclusively overcame the barriers they encountered in sports or physical activities by achieving remarkable success. Undoubtedly, the future sports life of a successful ISN becomes relatively comfortable. The fundamental issue here, however, is how many ISNs are discouraged from engaging in sports as a result of adverse attitudes they experienced while working toward peak/success and an achievement-centered approach:

Just think about it! You practice every day while certain people at home say: 'Do not go, do not do, you cannot succeed, you cannot accomplish.' You may begin thinking about it after a while, wondering and asking yourself: 'What if I cannot really do it? What if I cannot succeed? What if I fail? Will I let it down? Will I falter in this? Will I remain unsuccessful in this too? Here, I can assure you that the family's reaction, their thoughts towards this occasion, and their supports are essential building blocks in a sportsman's career. Because, as I said, it is difficult without their support and motivation. Although this sport branch retains a physical dimension, it also has a psychological dimension. Even though people around you constantly say that you cannot do it, hearing such doubts from your family could worsen your psychology. (Aydın)

Allan et al. (2018) revealed that athletes, who launched objectives such as practicing quality sports, establishing equitable relationships with their counterparts, socializing, and adapting, turned into motivation for which competition is vitally critical when they reached a professional level. According to our findings, one difficulty related to this topic is that involvement in sports activities by athletes with special needs is a critical prerequisite for their potential to succeed. Indeed, Osman explicitly emphasized that the condition for continuing to engage in sports was not only for his social environment but also for his coach:

Let me put it this way, everyone in my close circle initially told me this way: 'You are doing it for hobby purposes, excellent, lovely.' Nobody believed that my hobby could become as big as the national team. Yet, the fingers of athletes in archery sport should be strong. Athletes in archery sport do not necessarily use their feet or maybe do this sport branch in a wheelchair, but their fingers are always strong. When I first participated in the Turkish Championship in 2013, my biggest challenge was that; I was at the lowest rank in Türkiye. My coach said: 'You cannot do this sport, and you quit this branch. It would be encouraging if you were at least at the 4th or 5th, 6th intermediate level.' Yet, he said that I would be welcome if I continued to do so. He also said: 'Here is the equipment, and here I am. I give you all my support, and I am ready to share all my knowledge and skill mightily. Then I replied: 'If I am working one-fold now, I will work three-fold from now on. Because I got experienced, and I know my opponents.' At first, my coach did not believe in me. But I finished at second rank in the Turkish Championship in 2014. (Osman)

## **Supports**

The existence of strong social support for individuals favorably improves their lives (Chao, 2011; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Rueger et al., 2016). The same situation may also become more advantageous for those who are physically disabled under the risk of isolation (Aykara, 2011). From the perspective of athletes with special needs, having a social support system, and thus a strong family bond and social environment, is of utmost significance for their engagement in physical activity (McKinnon et al., 2022), motivation (Ball & Mind, 2021), social identity (James et al., 2021), achieving success (Alizadeh & Cobuliev, 2021) and self-efficacy (Martin & Mushett, 1996). Hence, this section will focus on the supports that facilitate ISNs to engage in sports. In this context, the participants frequently emphasized the aspects that support and motivate individuals when they begin to practice sports and continue to do so.

## **Supportive Family and Social Environment**

The previously indicated main theme focused on the barriers ISNs typically encountered when participating in social life and, as a result, in pursuits such as sporting activities. The widespread view is that, in addition to the barriers hindering them from social activities, sports-specific issues (cost, equipment, perspective, etc.) are also the primary impediments for physically disabled individuals. Despite all these adverse aspects, an individual may pursue their interest in sports and develop a sustainable sports adventure through the supportive attitudes of the environment that gives them strength, such as their family (Mckenzie et al., 2021).

My family has already been my greatest supporter in every aspect of my success during my life. They never questioned me like, 'You cannot achieve it. Why are you doing this? or anything similar.' Quite the contrary, they consistently supported me with their words such as: 'Son, if you are doing this, you are doing the right thing, and you are doing the best.' They always supported and encouraged me in this way, in the decisions I made in my life, in the work I did, and in my sports activities. My family has become my biggest spirituality, my biggest supporter. (Osman)

Apart from the family, there are other critically supportive actors in the sports environment, such as coaches and administrators. Bülent emphasized the significance of the coach and manager's stance on this issue as follows:

I decided which branch I would engage in the sports hall. I met with my elderly colleague in the hall. My father told my couch: 'If it is okay, let him engage in this branch for three months. Then we evaluate his improvement and proceed accordingly.' My first couch enthusiastically replied: 'Please do not say it that way. This child will be my precious already. Do not worry at all.' Then, he did as he said. He protected me all the time. He helped me on many occasions. Apart from that, there was a club chairman. He had been in an accident in 1994, returning from a funeral and rolling into the ditch. He got disabled from his back. Since he was also involved in sports in his past life, he now dedicates himself to athletes and disabled individuals. So, he retires and then opens a club. He also involves in pedlar's trade to keep the club alive. He invests all the money he earns from his occupation into the club. That is, he uses it for us like individuals. This man supported me a lot. He treated me like a son. Then, this attitude became very decisive in many of my failures and successes. (Bülent)

Participants explicitly emphasized the value of the people who make up the sporting environment. Kumcağız and Avcı-Çayır (2018) revealed the same findings. They accordingly contend that a person's support network, particularly their family, is critical in fostering self-confidence among physically disabled individuals.

## **Motivation**

The favorable impact of sports and the quality it creates in individuals' lives extremely motivated disabled athletes during their physical activities. An exemplary attitude toward athletics and a high level of motivation are evident when considering physically disabled individuals (Güler et al., 2019; Tekkurşun-Demir & İlhan, 2020). The study participants elucidated how they coped with the barriers in their ways using their internal motivations:

There have been many barriers on my way to success. I have had several difficulties. If you really want something to happen, never give up on what you want. Always fight! Fight whomever and whatever comes your way! Do not quit and keep doing it if you really want it. You should not overstate the barrier in your mind, face the challenge and keep on with your life accordingly. (Yusuf)

Such issues frequently develop as a confrontation among ISNs (Wickman, 2015). It has occasionally come to resemble an escape from distressing situations and a way of removing barriers from the center of life. Stephens et al. (2012) reported this state as one of the typically emphasized issues, thematizing it as an 'emotional exit.' In addition to the pleasant atmosphere it fosters for an individual's future, the feeling of approval and appreciation gained from the social surroundings is another benefit of participating in sports. Tekkurşun-Demir and İlhan (2020) indicated that successful athletes who have extended to the national level respond well to external motivation such as appreciation, approval, and rewards. Many physically disabled athletes used the appreciative statements proliferating in their lives as a significant inspiration source in advancing their sports life:

People say: 'Are you an athlete? I had no idea you could play that well.' So it is really nice to hear things like that. Well, you may inspire yourself to play well just by hearing such encouraging words, to achieve success for your friends, and even to win medals. So, you can even play to hear lovely remarks. (Erkan)

In general terms, it is rational to indicate that factors such as the individuals' feeling of being equal with others and assuming that sports are the activities they desire and find beneficial are substantially critical inspirations in their internal motivation processes, in addition to the feelings such as struggle, sense of achievement, and eventually the appreciation it creates (Allan et al., 2018).

### **Socialization Process**

Sharing, supporting, solidarity, and spending quality time are just a few of the many advantages of sports that positively impact social life. It is also possible to mention how sports facilitate socialization among ISNs and serve as a support mechanism for that process.

Serdar explicated the benefits of sports to the socialization process as follows:

I was a kid, and then I went through adolescence. At first, the mindset and looks of people bothered me, but over time, after meeting friends and engaging in endlessly chatting, I realized that I had become a person content with who I was. On the contrary, the circumstance greatly inspired me. In other words, there was no difficulty in the process. I engage in physical activities, make friends in that branch and socialize with them, travel, discover new places, and then meet up with new people. In this way, I was able to learn more about myself as well as my friends and their immediate social networks. I eventually developed the ability to regulate my behavior in the future. (Serdar)

Physically disabled athletes have frequently referred to aspects such as socializing, having a shared objective, fostering an environment through sports activities, and developing a support system. Even in difficult situations where they encounter barriers to participating in sports, the significance of sports to their social relationships and socialization process remains constant and unaffected (Wickman, 2015).

I actually feel considerably comfortable. I feel freer in this process. Because, as I said, life is silly at first. At the beginning of your disability, there is a period of questioning yourself, and you may totally ignore your disability with sporting activities. You begin to feel more relaxed. When you realize that you can achieve something, these thoughts are completely gone from your mind. So, you feel comfortable and become more social. I can claim that it significantly improved my mood, and I can say that training days are good days for me. Although I was not such a social person before I started sports activities, these activities enabled me to meet different people regularly. You are constantly in tournaments in different cities, meeting diverse people, players, and coaches... I can say that the world I live in has changed. My circle has expanded. I made different friends. (Aydın)

The above-mentioned phrases explicitly emphasized the changes in Aydın's life, such as being freer, feeling comfortable, and visiting new places and settlements during sports activities.

Considering the supportive aspects in general, sports activities specifically contributed to the socialization processes of physically disabled athletes by fostering their sense of belonging, teamwork, success and its conveniences, exploration, invention, and new social life. Furthermore, this situation positively affected their relationship with sports and supported their engagement with sporting activities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Some barriers averting physically disabled individuals from engaging in sports activities are directly tied to the socio-cultural structure, whereas others are related to the behavior patterns of sports institutions. Yet again, it is possible to argue that the design of the institutional standards, which constitute significant barriers to involvement in sports, is based on disregarding or ignorant terms, thereby excluding ISNs. The current study revealed that the protective approach developed around the factors of the restrictive social environment themes related to cultural aspects. However, physical barriers are shaped by the lack of institutional and organizational efforts for ISNs, although the restrictions, such as cost, transportation, and success-oriented practices, were listed under the themes of physical barriers related to sports culture.

The current study also found that the supportive attitude of family and the close social sphere of ISNs is crucial while they struggle with the experienced problems. It also emphasized personal efforts exemplified by motivation and socialization processes in overcoming barriers to participation in sports. These efforts appear to improve the visibility of ISNs in the sports environment and enable them to succeed.

## **Practical Implications**

It is critical to perform additional subject-related and Türkiye-specific scientific research, considering the experiences of ISNs, the significance of social networks they create via sports,



and the potential of such networks to become solutions to many problems. Institutions and organizations appear to be obligated to raise sociocultural awareness. In this context, sports institutions and managers should be more responsible for establishing the required conditions and infrastructures, given that sports activities are the fundamental rights of every individual.

### **Limitations**

The research was solely limited to physically disabled athletes who perform sports activities at a professional level.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors hereby affirm that no conflict of interest, either financial or personal, has influenced the research and findings presented in this study. This declaration encompasses all potential conflicts that might impinge upon the integrity and objectivity of the research.

**Authors' Contribution:** Study Design- A.S. & E.Ç.; Data Collection- A.S.; Analysis- A.S. & E.Ç.; Manuscript Preparation- A.S. & E.Ç.

### **Ethical Approval**

**Ethics Committee:** Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University Ethics Committee

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