



International Dragon Boat Federation

# Guide to Coaching Paradragons



## Introduction

This guide has been developed by IDBF's Para Athletes Commission to assist anyone involved in the coaching of Paradrasons by providing some guidance and suggestions. It is not to be taken as authoritative or directed, but rather as 'food for thought'. It does not set out to cover every type of impairment likely to be encountered, nor address the multitude of ways in which a particular impairment may present.

IDBF considers any paddler living with a psychological, neurological, sensory, developmental or intellectual impairment to be a 'para athlete' and, as far as dragon boating is concerned, a 'Paradrason'.

IDBF sees a clear need to differentiate between 'impairment' and 'disability'. Essentially, for IDBF's purposes, an 'impairment' is a structural or functional anomaly in the body, whereas a 'disability' is a restriction on a person's ability to carry out particular functions because of an impairment. 'Disability' is therefore related to the environment/activity, whereas the underlying impairment may be constant. IDBF prefers to focus on 'impairments'.

Comments and feedback are always welcome! Please direct them to the Chair of the IDBF Para Athlete's Commission by email at: [chair-para@dragonboat.sport](mailto:chair-para@dragonboat.sport)



## General

Coaching Paradrasons brings challenges but also great rewards. These challenges, and the rewards, will not only affect the individual but also you as a coach, others in the team (regardless of whether all or some are themselves impaired), the families and loved ones of those involved, and others looking in (such as other teams, spectators etc).

The guiding principles for you as a coach should be:

- involve the Paradrason in all of your sessions;
- recognise and coach the person, not their impairment;
- have a shared vision with the Paradrason in terms of coaching goals and expectations;
- talk to the Paradrason about their impairments to help you plan effective coaching sessions and adapt practices; and
- coaching is coaching – the only real difference with coaching Paradrasons is that it is you that will need to adapt

## From the start ...

- a warm welcome goes a long way (and this includes before the person even turns up for their first session);
- confidently approach the Paradrason and talk to them about what experience they have had, and what they want to get out of your sessions;
- be careful in your use of words and terminology so as not to cause offence;
- try to use the word 'impairment' to refer to a structural or functional anomaly in a person's body, and only use 'disability' when referring to any restriction on their ability to carry out particular functions
- don't try to learn everything you can from reference books about the impairment(s) you will be dealing with – instead, learn from the individuals;
- don't focus on what the Paradrason can't do – focus on what he or she can do;
- be open-minded and see coaching Paradrasons as an opportunity, not only to improve their performance, but also to extend your experiences on your road to becoming a better coach;
- be ready to adapt sessions as soon as it becomes apparent what you had planned may not be working;
- always keep an eye out for accessibility issues and safety hazards – be pro-active; and
- always seek feedback!



### Vision Impairment

Vision impairment is a sensory impairment in which the loss of sight may be total or partial due to damage to the eye structure, optical nerves or optical pathways, or visual cortex of the brain.

Key characteristics of impairment	Implications for dragon boating	Medication / impairment-related interventions	Safety considerations	Coaching
<p><b>Total loss of sight / blind</b> Those born without sight, or who lose their sight at a very young age, will have no reference 'images' in their mind and descriptions of objects and the environment by coaches will need careful thought.</p> <p><b>Partial vision</b> The degree of their impairment may vary according to ambient light conditions, contrast etc</p>	<p>May struggle even to get to training and/or competition. Might have to use public transport (if available) and/or be accompanied by a human guide.</p> <p>Could be as strong and technically proficient a paddler as someone who is unimpaired.</p> <p>Use of a drummer might be particularly helpful.</p> <p>May take time to internalise the paddling experience</p>	<p>May need to deal with guide dogs or other assistance/service animals.</p>	<p>Accessibility to clubhouse, training facility, dockside etc (ensure clear of obstacles and hazards).</p> <p>Need to walk around the site with them so they can familiarise themselves (especially toilets, changing rooms)</p> <p>Boat loading and unloading will require assistance</p> <p>Capsize likely to be a traumatic experience – ensure strong swimmers are properly briefed and seated close by.</p> <p>A trusted 'guide' as a paddling parent could be very reassuring.</p> <p>Will need well-established alternate signals to alert paddlers to hazards.</p> <p>Maybe paint ramps, rails and step edges in bright colours to assist those with some vision.</p>	<p>Words of command usually used with unimpaired paddlers may need adjustment to ensure understanding.</p> <p>Possible that a fully blind person has never seen anything and will need detailed and considered descriptions of everything.</p> <p>Try to give any one-on-one coaching in a quiet environment so the paddler will have less difficulty in hearing instructions.</p> <p>Learn their names and address them personally.</p> <p>Be careful not to startle them.</p> <p>If permitted by the paddler, physically guiding them through paddling technique can be very helpful.</p> <p>Practise capsize drills in controlled conditions</p>



### Hearing Impairment

Hearing impairment is a sensory impairment in which the loss of hearing may be total or partial. Many fully deaf people are likely to experience greater social isolation than fully blind people.

Key characteristics of impairment	Implications for dragon boating	Medication / impairment-related interventions	Safety considerations	Coaching
<p><b>Total loss of hearing</b> Fully deaf people often consider themselves to be part of an alternate culture, rather than 'impaired'. They may be able to communicate easily with sign language and/or lip reading</p> <p><b>Partial loss of hearing</b> Hearing aids likely to be used</p>	<p>Likely to be as strong and technically proficient a paddler as someone who is unimpaired.</p> <p>Major issue will be their inability or reduced ability to hear spoken words of command.</p> <p>Words of command may be useless! Drummer may need to relay any commands from the helm/steerer/sweep using visual signals.</p>	<p>Hearing aids, if used, can quite easily fall out during strenuous activity and may not be waterproof; they can also be very expensive. Might be better for the person not to paddle with them.</p>	<p>Will need well-established alternate signals to alert paddlers to hazards.</p>	<p>Having someone who can 'sign' will be a massive help (or learn signing yourself!). Learn a set of often used signs specific to paddling.</p> <p>Need for good, visual, explanation of the session before getting on the water</p> <p>Encourage others to 'keep the noise down' (hearing aids, if used, aren't selective).</p> <p>Person may be able to lip-read so stand where you can be seen clearly. And don't exaggerate lip movements etc.</p> <p>On land, use visual aids (eg whiteboards) to assist explanation of training drills etc.</p> <p>Coaching from drummer's seat makes you more visible.</p>



## Intellectual Impairment

Intellectual impairment relates to a wide range of conditions resulting in a restriction in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour that affects conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills required for everyday life

Key characteristics of impairment	Implications for dragon boating	Medication / impairment-related interventions	Safety considerations	Coaching
<p>Chronological age may not match developmental ability.</p> <p>Below average intellectual functioning.</p> <p>Deficiencies in adaptive behaviour.</p> <p>Possible reduced motor skills.</p> <p>Significant needs usually in cognitive function, learning, social behaviour, and emotional control.</p> <p>Change of routine or staff etc may elicit behavioural reactions.</p> <p>New skills can be learned but progress can be slow. Skills may need to be broken down into very small steps, even before getting into boat (for example, how to put on a buoyancy aid)</p>	<p>Significant variations in ability likely.</p> <p>May struggle to execute paddling stroke.</p> <p>May need a carer present, including in the boat.</p> <p>Is their condition suitable for dragon boating? Medical advice may need to be obtained.</p> <p>Be aware of possible impact the individual's behaviour etc may have on others in the team and consider briefing them separately about what to expect and how to deal with particular situations.</p>	<p>People living with intellectual impairments may often require medication to mitigate their medical or behavioural conditions. Clear need to be aware of their medication needs and to understand how this medication may affect their performance and behaviour.</p> <p>Be especially conscientious about making the environment welcoming.</p>	<p>Collaborate with individual and/or their carer, parent or guardian to help provide a suitably supervised environment.</p> <p>May have associated conditions such as epilepsy, so may need a proper life jacket rather than simple buoyancy aid</p>	<p>Do not be afraid to ask about the condition.</p> <p>Liaise with individual (if appropriate) or with their carer about anything you need to be aware of so you can structure your coaching accordingly.</p> <p>Find out about any prior experiences with team sports.</p> <p>Try to interact with the individual, not with their carer.</p> <p>Try to use questions that can be answered simply (eg with a "yes" or a "no").</p> <p>Keep instructions simple.</p> <p>Showing technique rather than talking about it likely to be better received.</p> <p>Be patient. Repetition of drills etc will be necessary.</p> <p>With permission, physical guidance likely to be beneficial.</p>



### Limb deficiencies

Limb deficiency refers to total or partial absence of bones or joints as a consequence of trauma (for example traumatic amputation), illness (for example amputation due to bone cancer) or congenital limb deficiency (for example dysmelia).

Key characteristics of impairment	Implications for dragon boating	Medication / impairment-related interventions	Safety considerations	Coaching
<p>No two people with limb deficiency are affected in the same way. Some can function as well as any unimpaired person, while others are severely impaired.</p> <p>Without prosthesis, potential for significant loss of motor skills, strength and balance.</p> <p>Lower limb amputees may use a wheelchair for energy conservation, but can transfer to boat with relatively little help</p>	<p><b>Lower limb loss</b> Those with loss of lower limbs can actually be almost as strong a paddler as unimpaired people. Loss of one limb may not even require use, in the boat, of a prosthesis in order to paddle. Loss of both lower limbs may cause stability problems when seated in the boat, unless the person is using at least one prosthesis.</p> <p><b>Upper limb loss</b> A missing upper limb, without a prosthesis, can be a significant hurdle to high performance.</p> <p><b>Race rules (refer Regulation CR13.1 of IDBF Competition Regulations)</b></p> <p><b>IDBF race rules do not permit the use of 'smart' prostheses or of other devices that generate power.</b></p> <p><b>Paddles can be adapted.</b></p>	<p>Where the individual does not need a prosthesis to paddle, it can be sometimes better to leave the prosthesis on the dockside (to avoid possible damage from water and/or simply to reduce boat weight!).</p> <p>Stumps and stump 'socks' can become swollen and uncomfortable during a session. Or damage may go unnoticed due to loss of sensation. Either way, paddler should check regularly.</p> <p>Too much repetition can cause skin breakdown at join of stump and prosthesis.</p> <p>Not all amputations are due to trauma, so there may be other considerations such as treatment cycle</p> <p>Some amputees may need pain management medication.</p>	<p>Those with missing upper limbs may struggle to swim in the event of a capsize – use of buoyancy aids should be considered.</p> <p>Ascertain their range of movement while seated in a boat.</p> <p>Entry and exit from the boat may require assistance.</p>	<p>Although prosthetics are designed to mimic limbs, technique adaptation is likely.</p> <p>Work with the paddler to determine whether it might be better to paddle only on one side of the boat.</p> <p>Practise capsize drills in controlled conditions</p>



### Limb impairments

Limb impairments refer to a wide range of conditions where full use of a limb is not possible. Although, in some case, the impairment can be a debilitating as a limb deficiency, limb deficiency is considered separately.

Key characteristics of impairment	Implications for dragon boating	Medication / impairment-related interventions	Safety considerations	Coaching
<p>Includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• loss of fingers or toes;</li> <li>• loss of use of fingers, toes, or parts of limbs;</li> <li>• dysmelia;</li> <li>• restricted passive range of movement (for example juvenile chronic arthritis);</li> <li>• restricted active range of movement (for example Erbs Palsy)</li> <li>• difficulty balancing, including when seated; and</li> <li>• loss of strength and/or power (for example Polio)</li> <li>• reduction in stamina/endurance</li> </ul>	<p><b>Upper limb impairments</b></p> <p>Person may find it difficult to even hold a paddle let alone deliver power through the water.</p> <p>Some form of strapping to secure the paddle to the person may be necessary.</p> <p>May affect which side of the boat the person can paddle.</p> <p>Likely to require adapted paddling technique.</p> <p><b>Lower limb impairments (including hips)</b></p> <p>May affect which side of the boat the person can paddle.</p> <p>May affect stability when sitting in the boat / executing a stroke – some form of ‘strapping’ or adaptive seat may be needed.</p>		<p>Some affected by limb impairments will struggle to swim and may be at risk in the event of a capsize – buoyancy aids should be considered.</p> <p>Adaptive seating and/or strapping necessary to support someone with lower limb impairments could be very unsafe in the event of a capsize or other emergency – <u>they must be properly designed and tested to ensure they are safe to use</u> (and quick release mechanisms are <u>essential</u>).</p> <p>May be difficult to fit an ‘over the head’ buoyancy aid for those affected by upper limb impairments.</p> <p>If the person has a loss of sensation in the affected limb(s) there is the possibility of injury without the person being aware.</p>	<p>Paddling technique may need adaptation to suit the impairment.</p> <p>Practise capsize drills in controlled conditions</p>



### Psychological Impairment

Psychological impairment relates to a wide range of conditions that influence emotions, cognitions and/or behaviours. Conditions include: PTSD, depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder.

Key characteristics of impairment	Implications for dragon boating	Medication / impairment-related interventions	Safety considerations	Coaching
Key characteristics will vary significantly according to the condition the person is living with.	Because dragon boating is a team sport, others can be affected, sometimes even troubled, by the behaviours of those living with psychological impairments.	<p>Many conditions require medication to help control behaviours etc.</p> <p>Person may have good adaptive behaviour if on correct type and level of medication.</p> <p>If a difference in behaviour is seen, it may indicate that the person has forgotten to take medication (or, in some cases, deliberately not taken it).</p>	<p>In certain circumstances the impairment may generate an aggressive 'fight or flight' or 'freeze' response to stimuli that could endanger the individual affected, those around him or her, or even the whole crew (when in a boat on the water).</p> <p>Responses to likely scenarios should be thought through and properly planned.</p>	<p>Always try to use calm voice and tone, even when shouting instructions.</p> <p>Try always to be firm but calm – discipline of itself may be counter-productive.</p> <p>Try to visually connect with the person being coached, and then use their name.</p> <p>Consider a private signalling system with the individual so you can discreetly notify them if they are acting inappropriately.</p> <p>Be aware that the person may find it difficult to concentrate on performing even relatively simple tasks.</p>



### Neurological impairments - ambulant

Neurological impairments occur when there is damage to the nervous system, which includes the brain and spinal cord. Damage to either or both of these areas can affect the way the brain processes information and communicates with the rest of the body. Term covers a wide range of disorders and includes ataxia, spasticity, athetosis, stroke and multiple sclerosis. This section relates to those living with neurological impairments but who do not require a wheelchair.

Key characteristics of impairment	Implications for dragon boating	Medication / impairment-related interventions	Safety considerations	Coaching
<p>A wide range of characteristics that depend on the underlying condition. However, common ones include difficulties with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• speech,</li> <li>• motor skills,</li> <li>• vision,</li> <li>• memory,</li> <li>• muscle actions and control (including balance), and</li> <li>• learning abilities</li> </ul> <p>Of the above, probably muscle actions and control and motor skills will present the greatest challenges in dragon boating.</p> <p>Some individuals will also exhibit fierce independence (which can be detrimental to energy conservation).</p> <p>Possible reduction in stamina / endurance.</p>	<p>May find it difficult to execute paddling stroke.</p> <p>Involuntary muscle/limb movements can be concerning to others in close proximity.</p> <p>Can be both physically and mentally tiring for the individual, due to effort needed to try to maintain control</p>	<p>Pain management medication may be used. In some cases, these can be very strong (for example, morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl and buprenorphine) and need careful management.</p>	<p>May need assistance entering and exiting a boat.</p> <p>Some affected by limb impairments will struggle to swim and may be at risk in the event of a capsize – buoyancy aids should be considered.</p> <p>Individual may overexert.</p> <p>May exhibit poor balance when in the boat, or while on land (especially if there are steps, steep slopes or uneven surfaces).</p> <p>Adaptive seating and/or strapping necessary to support someone with lower limb impairments could be very unsafe in the event of a capsize or other emergency – <u>they must be properly designed and tested to ensure they are safe to use</u> (and quick release mechanisms are <u>essential</u>).</p>	<p>Individuals can be very driven and independent and may need additional management of both their expectations and their workload.</p> <p>Likely that paddling stroke will need to be adapted.</p> <p>Practise capsize drills in controlled conditions.</p>



### Neurological impairments – wheelchair user

Neurological impairments occur when there is damage to the nervous system, which includes the brain and spinal cord. Damage to either or both of these areas can affect the way the brain processes information and communicates with the rest of the body. Term covers a wide range of disorders and includes ataxia, spasticity, athetosis, stroke and multiple sclerosis. This section relates to those living with neurological impairments who require use of a wheelchair (although they may not be ‘wheelchair-bound’).

Key characteristics of impairment	Implications for dragon boating	Medication / impairment-related interventions	Safety considerations	Coaching
<p>A wide range of characteristics that depend on the underlying condition. However, common ones include difficulties with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• speech,</li> <li>• motor skills,</li> <li>• vision,</li> <li>• memory,</li> <li>• muscle actions and control (including balance), and</li> <li>• learning abilities</li> </ul> <p>Of the above, probably muscle actions and control and motor skills will present the greatest challenges in dragon boating.</p> <p>Some individuals will also exhibit fierce independence (which can be detrimental to energy conservation).</p> <p>Remember, a wheelchair user, may be able to stand up and move limited distances.</p> <p>Possible bowel / bladder control issues</p>	<p>May find it difficult to execute paddling stroke.</p> <p>Involuntary muscle/limb movements can be concerning to others in close proximity.</p>	<p>Pain management medication may be used. In some cases, these can be very strong (for example, morphine, oxycodone, fentanyl and buprenorphine) and need careful management.</p> <p>Ask permission before touching or moving wheelchair</p> <p>Temperature regulation may be impaired.</p>	<p>Accessibility and safety issues likely to dominate.</p> <p>Someone should be responsible for the person’s movement</p> <p>Will probably require assistance entering and exiting a boat.</p> <p>Some affected by neurological impairments will struggle to swim and may be at risk in the event of a capsize – buoyancy aids should be considered.</p> <p>May exhibit poor balance when out of wheelchair.</p> <p>Adaptive seating and/or strapping necessary to support someone with lower limb impairments could be very unsafe in the event of a capsize or other emergency – <u>they must be properly designed and tested to ensure they are safe to use</u> (and quick release mechanisms are <u>essential</u>).</p>	<p>Try to talk to them at their height level – if they are in a wheelchair, sit down or crouch</p> <p>Individuals can be very driven and independent and may need additional management of both their expectations and their workload.</p> <p>Likely that paddling stroke will need to be adapted.</p>



[Further sections can be added in due course – please send recommendations to [chair-para@dragonboat.sport](mailto:chair-para@dragonboat.sport)]