



Media guide

Reporting about athletes with disabilities

In cooperation with:


Leidmedien.de
Über Menschen mit Behinderungen berichten

Aktion
MENSCH



More information: www.aktion-mensch.de



Top: Para Ice Hokey Goalkeeper Simon Kunst keeping his goal during a qualifying match for the Paralympics 2026.

© Florian Schwarzbach, DBS

Bottom: Noemi Ristau, blind Para alpine skier with her guide Paula Brenzel at the World Para Snow Sports Championships 2022 in Lillehammer (Norway)

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A new perspective

The media greatly influence public perception of people with disabilities. They can inform and show similarities instead of creating stereotypes. Athletes with disabilities are however often portrayed as “victims” or “heroes”, with phrases such as “bravely coping with their fate”. Many athletes – both at the Paralympic and the recreational level – would like to see a different kind of media coverage, one that focuses on the person rather than on their disability.

Aktion Mensch, in cooperation with Leidmedien.de, a project of the nonprofit organisation Sozialhelden (“Social Heroes”) and the German Disabled Sports Association would like to contribute to reporting without discriminatory language. On the following pages you will find tips and recommendations on how to change these perspectives.

“He sets himself ambitious goals despite his physical impairment.”

From a newspaper article. Response by Simon Kunst, Para Ice Hockey



“My disability is part of who I am and has made me the person I am today. Sport not only allows me to constantly push my limits, but it has also helped me develop a confident approach to my disability and grow as a person.”

“She battles against her opponents – and her disability.”

From a news magazine. Response by Andrea Rothfuss, Para alpine skiing



“I ski because I enjoy it and be-cause I enjoy competing with and against other people. I never ‘battle’ against my disability; it’s not relevant when I compete.”

“She overcomes her lot in life.”

Response by Noemi Ristau, Para alpine skiing



“I definitely don’t see my visual impairment as fate. I think the word fate sounds negative. I’ve accepted my situation and it has opened new positive opportunities for me. Skiing is one of these new opportunities and it’s my greatest passion. I’m not suffering, rather I’m leading a happy and varied life.”

Tips and topics



Para biathlon skier Johanna Recktenwald and her Guide Valentin Haag give an interview at World Para Snow Sports Championships 2022 in Lillehammer (Norway)
© Ralf Kuckuck, DBS

Recommendations for choosing a topic

- Consider whether your article only shows an interest in the way of life of a person with a disability or whether it tells a nuanced story of a multifaceted individual who has a disability.
- Also look at the environmental barriers (e.g. lack of accessibility, prejudice, unemployment) that prevent people with disabilities from equal participation in society.
- Look for topics that point out similarities and that concern both people with and without disabilities (e.g. that accessibility is also important for parents with prams or people with walkers).

Recommendations for interviews

In general: Before the interview, clarify with the interview partner what conditions are needed for a smooth interview (location, communication). Avoid giving unsolicited help (such as touching or pushing) unless clearly requested. Talk to them as equals, ideally at eye level. Do not just talk to an accompanying assistant or interpreter.

Specific examples: Blind people need clear directions and information on how to position themselves properly for a photo. An autistic person may prefer clear structures, such as a fixed timeframe, written communication and a quiet location. This may also apply to people with a hearing impairment. Deaf people usually need a sign language interpreter. People with a learning disability or an intellectual disability may require simplified language. People who stutter need time to be able to finish what they are saying.

Topics: Ask your interview partner which topics are okay to address, (e.g. private life). Be careful not to make assumptions. For instance, not all athletes with a disability “overcome” their disability through sports – they may simply be passionate and ambitious about their sport. Make sure that the tone of your article does not overdramatise the story – portraying people with a disability as “heroes” or “victims” tends to set them apart instead of building bridges. Use varied visual content in photographs and graphics to show multifaceted individuals instead of merely persons with or without disabilities.

Terminology suggestions

Language is constantly evolving. It is everybodies responsibility to use language sensitively and not to discriminate through words. Many people are unsure of which terminology to use when writing and speaking about disabilities. That is why we have compiled a list of suggestions for appropriate language, in consultation with people with disabilities.

When reporting on athletes with disabilities, it is very important not to use patronising language. Because different people and organisations consider different terms to be disrespectful, and as opinions change over time, it is always best to ask them directly or to consult their terminology guide.



Please avoid

Confined to a wheelchair, wheelchair-bound	Person X uses a wheelchair, is a wheelchair user,
Person X suffers from, is afflicted with, is coping with a disability	Person X has a disability (or illness), XYZ, lives with a chronic health condition
The disabled	people with disabilities
Handicap, handicapped	Disability or impairment, disabled
Invalid, severely disabled	Disabled, requiring substantial or significant personal assistance
Healthy or normal vs. ill, sick, abnormal	Non-disabled vs. disabled



Try this instead

“Overcoming” a disability	living with a disability
Despite a disability	With a disability
(the) Blind	Person who is blind, with a visual impairment, partial vision
Deaf and dumb, deaf mute	Deaf, deaf person
Mentally handicapped, mentally disabled, mentally retarded	Person with learning disability, person with cognitive disability, person with intellectual disability
Mongolism, mongol(oid), downy	Person with Down syndrome
Care	Assistance
Dwarf, midget	little person, person of short stature
Person with autism	Autistic person
Mentally ill, insane, crazy, psychotic	Person with a mental health condition, mental illness, person with... (insert the name of the condition, if the person consents)
Automatically calling them by their first name	take the person seriously (both children and adults), speak to them on an equal footing
Paraplegic, quadriplegic	Person with paraplegia, quadriplegia
Suffers from, is afflicted by, Has... victim of...	
Spastic	Person with cerebral palsy

Paralympics

Disciplines

Winter sports:

Para ice hockey
Wheelchair curling
Para alpine skiing
Para cross-country skiing
Para biathlon
Para snowboarding



Blind Para biathlon skier Johanna Recktenwald focusing her next shot at the World Para Snow Sports Championships 2022 in Lillehammer (Norway)

© Ralf Kuckuck, DBS

Aktion Mensch is Germany's largest private funding organisation in the social welfare sector.

It promotes the natural coexistence of people with and without disabilities to live side by side. Through its social lottery, its project funding and its campaigns, Aktion Mensch is committed to people with disabilities, children and adolescents. Aktion Mensch's public education campaigns strive to advance inclusion – both with and without disabilities. The aim is for people with a disability to be able to choose for themselves which school to attend, what job to do, where to live and how to spend their free time. For inclusion to succeed however, reporting by the media must be free of prejudices too, because the way in which people with a disability are portrayed in the media plays an important role in shaping public opinion.

www.aktion-mensch.de

The Sozialhelden Leidmedien.de project provides information for journalists who want to report on people with disabilities without falling back on stereotypes. It provides tips from media professionals – both with and without a disability – on how to give media coverage a new perspective in its use of language and imagery, in order to reduce fear of contact and prejudice within society. The goal is to steer media reporting on people with disabilities away from stories of individual blows of fate towards addressing the barriers that hinder them in their daily lives, their careers or their athletic passion. The focus is on disability mainstreaming, meaning that people with disabilities should be considered, included and should be present – everywhere.

www.leidmedien.de



More information
available at
www.aktion-mensch.de



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