

# Beijing To Birmingham: Thinking Outside the Para Sport Classification Box

November 17, 2021

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Despite the unprecedented challenge of hosting these Games during a global pandemic, the Tokyo Paralympic Games were hailed as a success. However, many Paralympic athletes experienced uncertainty about their participation at the Games. If these Games hadn't been controversial enough, some Paralympic athletes weren't classified yet as they boarded their flights to Tokyo.

Classification Opens in a new window is mandatory for an athlete to compete in Para sport competition. Classification informs athlete preparation and development and

has a material impact on competitive success. It determines which athletes are eligible to compete in a sport and how athletes are grouped together for competition.

This blog describes the classification process and explains how the COVID 19 pandemic disrupted classification for Para sport competition. It also discusses how the pandemic exposed and worsened existing constraints in the classification process, limiting equitable access to Para sport classification and competition. Finally, it highlights opportunities to do classification differently, during and in a post-pandemic world, with the promise of improving access to classification and enhancing Para sport participation globally.

## Classification: Confusing, Expensive and Essential

Classification is a system of athlete evaluation used to minimize the effects of diverse impairments on sporting performance and the outcomes of competition (Tweedy & Vanlandewijck, 2011). It's intended to "level the playing field" for Para athletes and ensure that success on the field of play results from an athlete's skill, fitness, tactical ability and mental preparedness Opens in a new window.

To clarify, athletes are classified not by physical impairment, but by that impairment's effect on sporting performance. An athlete's classification is sport-specific, determines where they 'fit' in their sport, and who the competition will be. Though implemented by each International Sport Federation (IF), all sport classification processes must comply with the International Paralympic Committee's (IPC) Classification Code and be conducted under the auspices of the IPC.

The process isn't always straightforward. While protocols for classification vary between sports, presently an athlete must physically appear



before a classification panel. The panel consists of highly trained, sport-specific Classifiers, who conduct standardized physical and technical tests to determine an athlete's classification. If the panel deems an athlete eligible, the panel assigns that athlete a sport-specific, alpha-numeric classification category. For example, in Para athletics, a T54 classification represents a track athlete who uses a wheelchair, has full function of their trunk and arms, with moderately-highly impaired leg function or has absent legs. Athletes may need to be re-classified at multiple points throughout their career.

Since 2014, the IPC hasn't allowed athlete classification to take place at the Paralympic Games or other major Games including the Commonwealth Games. The IPC's zero in-Games classification policy ensures that all athletes are appropriately classified pre-competition, ensuring the credibility of the competition and number of participants for each event. Pre-competition classification avoids spending resources necessary to bring an unclassified athlete to competition, and the possible disappointment for the athlete and their entourage.

However, in the lead-up to Tokyo, the COVID 19 pandemic forced the cancellation of countless sporting events and shut down international travel, both requirements for many athletes to access classification. In response, the IPC suspended its longstanding in-Games zero-classification policy and allowed athletes (in 10 of the 22 sports on the competition schedule for Tokyo) to be classified at the Games.



## Classification During the COVID 19 Pandemic

Current circumstances and the foreseeable future suggest a grim forecast for global travel. In fact, in the lead-up to Tokyo 2020, a number of small island nations opened a new window and withdrew from attending the Games due to pandemic-related concerns. Such concerns include the gamble of spending already limited resources to send yet-to-be-classified Para athletes to the Games without guarantees that these athletes would receive the desired classification necessary to participate.

Sport administrators around the globe face questions around how to host local, regional and national events. These events have historically been locations to train sport classifiers and for athletes to be classified. In Para sport circles, there's much discussion and valid concern that access to classification will be very limited for the immediate future. This reality will have the most impact on athletes who didn't qualify for Tokyo, who compete in sports other than those on Tokyo's agenda (such as lawn bowls and 3 on 3 wheelchair basketball), and athletes from developing nations.

If athletes weren't classified in Tokyo, then where and how? Two large-scale sporting events for Para athletes will happen in 2022: the Beijing Winter Paralympic Games and the XXII Commonwealth Games.

The global pandemic has forced the sporting world to think critically, cleverly and creatively. In response to the historic challenge of athlete classification and the current state of inequitable access to classification, now is the time to consider how to do classification differently.

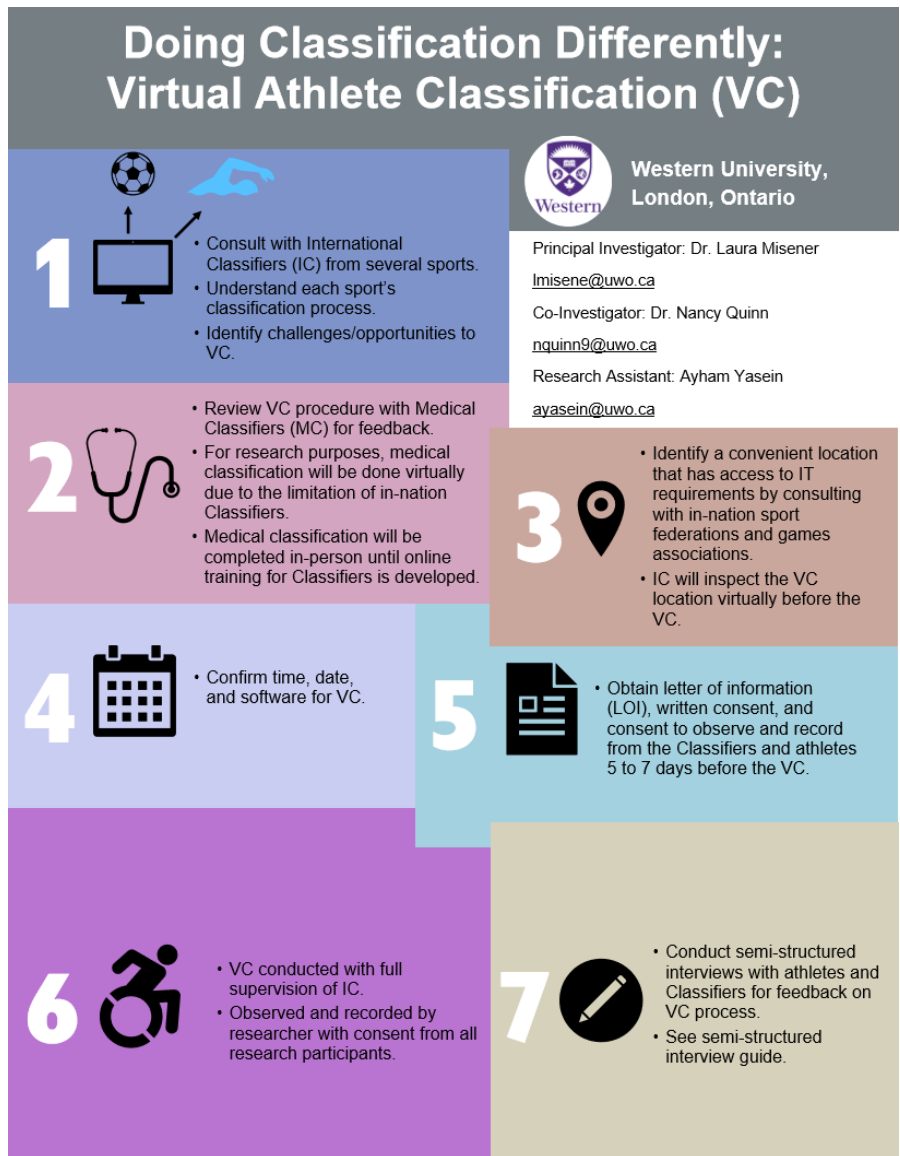
## Doing Classification Differently?

In 2020, Western University partnered with Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) on an ongoing research project in the Commonwealth region of the Caribbean and the Americas. Its goal is to identify factors that drive inclusion in Para sport and to develop a high-performance pathway for Para athletes in the region. Preliminary findings show that access to athlete classification currently limits both Para sport participation and a sustainable high-performance pathway.

Given the uncertainty of international travel and future sporting events, access to athlete classification hinders Para sport participation more than ever before. To this end, Western University has launched a pilot project to examine ways to do classification differently: rigorously, effectively and accessibly.

Still in its early stages, the project involves collaborations with International Technical and Medical Classifiers to develop and evaluate hybridized frameworks to deliver classification, including elements of virtual classification. The aim is to consider approaches requiring fewer resources and creating greater levels of inclusion and accessibility to Para sport participation.

The pilot project presently focuses on alternative processes to provisionally classify athletes in the 8 Para sports on the schedule for the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games. Trials of virtual athlete classification in Para table tennis, Para lawn bowls and Para cycling are underway. If the athlete is eligible, sport-specific International Classifiers will give the athlete a provisional classification. At the first opportunity, in-person confirmation of the provisional classification will be completed.



## Classification and Resource Dependency

Provisional classification as an alternative process isn't new. Research suggests that a number of sports have used ad hoc provisional classification, without formalized processes and rigorous empirical evaluation. Due to the pandemic, many Para athletes require classification or confirmation of an existing classification. This project presents an important opportunity to consider and evaluate how the process by which an athlete obtains classification might be done differently.

If Para sport is to realize the IPC's vision to "Make for an inclusive world through Para sport," stakeholders must embrace more equitable, inclusive processes around classification, for the global Para sport community. Accessing classification creatively and differently holds promise to drive Para sport participation and support high performance development in countries large and small, developing and developed, and to enhance equity in the Para sport movement.

## About the Author(s)

**Nancy Quinn, Ph.D.**, is a Registered International Sports Physical Therapist with many years of experience in high-performance sport and a veteran of six Paralympic Games. Nancy has a PhD from Western University and works as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow. Her research focuses on the intersection of disability and sport where authentic inclusion and social change may be possible. Nancy is also a member of the Advisory Committee of the Calgary Adapted Hub.

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