



## Jessica Tidswell: “Great strides have been made to improve the classification process of para surfing”

- The professor and expert in Paralympic classification spoke at the First European Adapted Surfing Seminar.
- Tidswell affirmed the International Surf Association is “working hard” to get para surfing included as a Paralympic sport, and encouraged everyone involved in this discipline to “work together to go to Paris” 2024 Paralympic Games.

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### Fuerteventura, 17<sup>th</sup> of November

The classification process of the athletes is one of the core aspects –if not the most important one- for the International Paralympic Committee to determine whether a sport should become a Paralympic discipline. That is one of the reasons why a substantial part of the First European Adapted Surfing Seminar, that took place the past October in the Spanish island of Fuerteventura, was focused on this process and its thorough methodology. The physiotherapist and athletic trainer Jessica Tidswell -who is also a professor at the University of Utah- was the expert in charge of untangling the ins and outs of the medical classification of para surfers. Tidswell emphasized that “great strides” have been made to “improve” this aspect of the sport. The International Surf Association is “working hard” to get adaptive surfing included as a Paralympic discipline by the Paris 2024 games, Tidswell said.

Tidswell started her presentation by explaining that classification of Paralympic athletes responds to three basic questions: “Does the athlete have an eligible impairment for this sport? Does the athlete’s eligible impairment meet the minimum disability criteria for this sport? Which sport describes the athlete’s activity limitation most accurately?” The team of classifiers that must give answers to these questions is formed by medical professionals (physiotherapists, physicians and those with training and experience working with neurological impairments), sports and technical officials and also volunteers with different backgrounds.

However, the methodology of classification has greatly evolved since it first started in 1948. Back then, the system used was exclusively based on medical criteria, and only athletes with spinal cord injuries were eligible, Tidswell narrated. It was not until 1976 that amputees and visually impaired athletes were also included, whereas sportsmen and women with cerebral palsy had to wait until 1980 to be able to take part in Paralympic games. ‘Les autres’ became part of the eligible athletes only in 1984, and since 1996 all II athletes have been incorporated.

As the popularity and professionalization of Paralympic sports increased –from only 2 countries and 130 athletes in the 1952 games the numbers raised up to 150 countries and over 4000 athletes in 2008-, so did those of classification criteria.



From the Medical Classification System, Paralympic sport moved on to a Functional Classification System for the 1992 Barcelona Paralympic Games. This methodology was based not only on the medical diagnosis of the athlete, but primarily on the effects and the similar remaining functionality that different impairments could have on the athlete. For instance, Tidswell explained, paraplegic athletes with good trunk and arm function and athletes with double above knee amputations were up until 1992 in different categories, but then became one single Class A for Wheel Chair Racing.

### **Evidence-based and sport specific classification**

Although the change from the medical to the functional classification was an upgrade, the International Paralympic Committee believed there was still room for improvement. Thus, the Evidence-based and Sport Specific Classification System was established in their Classification Code in 2007. This, Tidswell explained, has also been the system applied by the ISA to para-surfing.

The purpose of this system is to “minimize the impact of eligible impairment on the outcome of competition”, Tidswell said. This would translate into a “success in competitions based on training, coaching, talent, fitness...” as well as in more “legitimacy”, she stressed. In order to do so, the classification is based on “empirical evidence”, the doctor in physiotherapy explained. The first step is to define the eligible impairments; which are afterwards tested, as is the sport activity. Once that has been accomplished, the minimum eligibility criteria are defined so as to group athletes in sports classes. For their part, athletes must go through 3 steps of evaluation. First, their eligible impairment is verified by collecting medical diagnostic information and through their assessment on site, then classifiers check if the eligible impairment is severe enough to meet the minimum disability criteria for the sport and finally athletes are allocated a sports class “based on the activity limitation that their impairment causes in a certain sport”.

### **Para Surfing classification**

When it comes to Para Surfing, the classification system (that was created by Jon Richards in 2011 and has continued to constantly develop since) establishes that “athletes must have a permanent physical or visual impairment”, for intellectual impairment is “not accepted for Para Surfing at the present time”, Tidswell explained. Pain with activity does not either “meet minimal disability criteria”, nor do hearing impairments, joint instability, muscle endurance, motor reflex functions and cardiovascular dysfunctions. Impaired muscle power, impaired passive range of movement, limb deficiency, leg length difference, short stature, hypertonia, ataxia, athetosis and visual impairment are the current eligible impairments for para surfing. Regarding progressive diseases, the physiotherapist said that their “status typically needs to be reviewed to allow for assessment of change in condition”.

The presence of any of these impairments “must be proven by means of medical diagnostic information, that must be presented no later than at the time of the athlete evaluation”, Tidswell said. The presentation of that information is only one part of a thoroughly staged athlete assessment process.



Once the national federation has sent the medical diagnosis, the ISA Medical Review Panel evaluates it and allocates the athlete a sport class. The athlete will then be interviewed and tested in different ways, depending on “the impairment he or she presents with”. Based on their impairment and mode of surfing -standing, kneeling, sitting, prone position or assisted- para surfers can compete in 9 different categories and subcategories.

Tidswell also pointed out that although “great progress” has been made since the classification was applied in 2011, “great strides” are being taken in order to keep improving it. To achieve that goal, “research will begin at the 2017 Stance ISA World Adaptive Surfing Championships at the end of November” and ISA is currently “searching for interested and qualified classifiers”, whether they are “medical professionals with experience and/or training dealing with neurological impairments” or “technical experts with expertise in surfing”. “Classification is a serious process that needs attention and code compliance is essential. There is still work to do. Together, let’s go to Paris”, she concluded.