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Simon Darcy interview transcript

Peter

Welcome everybody to this episode, it's a great pleasure to introduce to you Dr Simon Darcy who is Associate Professor of Events, Sport and Tourism at the University of Technology in Sydney. Hello Simon.

Simon

Hi, how are you Peter?

Peter

I'm good. I was really interested in an article that you wrote recently. I've known Simon for a number of years – he is one of the leading academics and researchers in Australia with a real grasp on the practical aspects of inclusion for people with disability. After I read this article in The Conversation, which you can see in this episode, I was interested to get some more thoughts from Simon around some of the issues raised in this article. I've got two or three questions that I will pose to Simon around some of those issues that were raised in

that article. The first one Simon is – the Paralympic Games have come and gone, the statistics say that there is no subsequent increase in club participation following something like the Paralympic Games. I would question that – is that right? Aren't more people inspired to take part in sport as a result of the Paralympic Games?

Simon

It's an interesting question. The first thing I'd say is that you need to contextualise the question. The research that exists is predominantly around the Olympics and the research around the Olympics is very clear. That there is very little empirical data support that there's an increase in participation in those sports. John Coates, for example, got a little bit upset with some colleagues of mine – Stephen Frawley, Kristine Toohey and Tony Veal, who clearly showed through the ERAS data – the Exercise, Recreation and Sport data which collected nationally from 1999 to 2010 – that there was no increase. In fact, in many Olympic related sports there was actually a decrease in participation numbers over a couple of years – so that's the first one. The second one with regards to the Paralympics specifically, myself and Doug Lee from Canada, Laura Miesner from Canada and David Gilbert from England in looking at the legacy from the Paralympics – and to be quite frank there's hardly any research in any case so I would probably support your observation and that of Ken Black from the UK that anecdotally, there's a flurry of things going on but we are not really documenting these things in any significant way.

Peter

I guess we can say that we suspect that it inspires people but some of the challenges faced by people with disability will certainly not be affected by something like the Paralympic Games – as good and great as that is.

Simon

Certainly, and there was a fantastic article in the Guardian the day after the Paralympics finished that basically said that the gyms and fitness centres of the UK are in no position to accept an increase in the number of people with disability even if they wanted to pay there money and start being included in gyms and fitness clubs in that very week. They are not set up infrastructure wise and they are not set up attitudinally within the staff in those centres.

Peter

In an era of inclusion do we still need targeted programs to encourage people with disability to participate in sport?

Simon

Without a doubt. Without a doubt for a whole series of reasons. I think it's really interesting – it's a little bit like access in a built environment – people are astounded when I tell them that I can't get into the local shops – and they say that it seems incredible in this day and age. There's so many little things – let's call them obstacles or barriers that individuals with disabilities are dealing with. And I'm talking not the elite level – I'm talking about the average Jack and Jill in the suburbs – that unless there's specific programs that target and assist in a macro policy sense – like transport, cost of participation – and for people with high support needs, attendant support – for someone like my level of support need – even to be involved in very good programs of inclusion like Sailability – I still have to have an attendant that comes with me that are used to doing transfers in a safe way to get me into the boat to have a crack. So we need to do things at a macro level but also sports organisations themselves need to have a series of programs in place for those that have got sporting experience to those that absolutely have no experience and need a series of coaching and skill development to start to feel confident to go into mainstream environments.

Peter

A question without notice. Where do you think this perception of inclusion in that inclusion means we shouldn't have to make adaptations in society in the future, that we should all be included into whatever happens. Will there ever be a day when we don't need to adapt and modify and we don't need these specialist programs?

Simon

I don't think I've 'outed' myself to you Peter, but I actually started my post school life – I was going to go into secondary school teaching, I was going to train to be a PE, science and maths teacher. And, you know, for an environment to be fully inclusive we need our schools

to be taking those students to be mainstreamed – all those students that are in special schools – and giving them the same opportunities as everybody else. I know of incidents in almost every week in Sydney where children of school age, with disabilities, are being discriminated against in school sports programs. One of them not far from me, astounded me, where a headmaster phoned up the parents of a child with very mild cerebral palsy, fully ambulant, and said to the parents ‘you can come and pick your son up next time’, the parents said ‘why’ and the reply was ‘obviously he’s not going to be able to participate in our sports program with the normal kids’. Now, where you don’t have an inclusive school program then you can’t expect the flow-on to the rest of society where people with disability have the same opportunities in the school swimming program, and athletics and football or whatever it happens to be. So I’d say the education department is one of the main ports of call to be far more inclusive.

Peter

Excellent. I’ll ask you one more question around your article in The Conversation. In that article called, *Beyond the Paralympics: where to for disability sport in Australia?* You talk about some of the complex variables that contribute to participation of people with disability. Clearly there’s a link between opportunities to participate and the level of support need. You’ve done research but it is quite obvious there is a link there. What are some of the things that need to change if people with high support needs in particular are to get a chance to participate?

Simon

Without a doubt the first one is that it’s a much bigger issue than just the sport. We are starting to address it in Australia, although we are behind the UK with regards to individualised packages. At the moment the way that people are funded for personal care or for – and I hate the word – ‘respite’, which really should translate into ‘recreation’, or ‘enrichment’ or ‘education’ or whatever the desires of the individual are, or ‘dance’ or the ‘arts and crafts’ – it doesn’t matter really what it is – that the way they are currently funded is done through service providers. Now most of those service providers don’t have a great deal of experience in recreation, or the arts or sport or tourism. And hence the best programs get wedged amongst all sorts of other things such as the structure of group home

environments or the demarcation between school or post-school options or whatever it happens to be. So then when it comes to one of the main things that people with high support needs say either the organisation don't have staff that understand my needs or programs that would allow me to participate or I'm not able to get the attendant support for me to bring along, to be able to participate in those environments because of some OH&S or industrial relations issues, it just becomes too bloody hard – apart from having accessible transport – and then once they get included – one of the things unveiled in my research was that the department of health – who sign off on personalised support or people with disability in New South Wales – we are getting children with disabilities to sign that they wouldn't participate in sporting programs with their electric wheelchairs because of the extra maintenance costs that they've bought! I was flabbergasted, the minister for sport was flabbergasted but that is still the situation today. So with those people with high support needs – basic supporting infrastructure to help get them involved – social infrastructure to have them supported within those environments – whether they are mainstream or segregated – and that should be a choice for the individual – and I'm sure you've seen the terrific work the Power Wheelchair Sports guys do – a fantastic program – but it predominantly located out at Mt Druit – so if you are on the northern beaches for example – just the cost of getting there in wheelchair accessible cabs would blow you out of the water. So if we are talking in an environmental sense then there is an accumulated series of constraints that conspire against somebody regularly being able to participate in sport, recreation or fitness or whatever else people desire to do.

Peter

Yes, I guess if people are watching this from all over the world – which they will be – in that immediate sport environment, individuals can make an impact in that immediate environment. While there are lots of other constraints and challenges to get there in the first place – the actual act of inclusion in the sports field is often the easy bit really. Once they've got to that position then let's get on with it and look at some fairly straightforward adaptations and modifications. So there is a lot that people can do in the environment of sport where it takes place. Sport is so adaptable, if people can get there, after meeting all those challenges that you've outlined, then sport offers such a great opportunity once people are able to get there.

Simon

Yes, given that this is going around the world – from what I've read the Australian situation is not that different to what's going on globally, although there is some different cultural contexts – I was speaking to some of my friends in Hong Kong recently and there are some other challenges around sport but one of those around disability sport is having that critical mass once people are in a position to be able to participate. So for the example I was able to give before – I apologise to our international viewers – Mt Druitt in Sydney is in the western suburbs – Sydney is a very geographically spread city – so we are talking possibly anything from three quarters of an hour in a taxi to two hours in a taxi to get from one end of the city to another – and then not throwing into that peak hour – would there be enough Power Wheelchair sports people for a game – whatever it is, soccer, volleyball or rugby league – that's a pretty important undertaking to get a critical mass together to enjoy sport on a regular basis.

Peter

Yes, exactly. Brilliant Simon. I know you've got to dash very shortly so we really appreciate your time. The article will be there for people to go through, plus this video and the transcript which they can download in this episode. So we really appreciate your time and input and if people want to make comment at the bottom of this episode there will be a spot to be able to do that as in all those episodes around opinion and debate. Thank you very much Simon and much appreciated.

Simon

Not a problem, I'm just going to get a last word in – I'll send Peter two resources – one is the Australian Sports Commission report that was done in conjunction with UTS on participation and non-participation of people with disability in sport and active recreation and another one is a recent article we had published in Disability and Society – it specifically looks at people with high support needs and intellectual disability, and I'll make those open to distribution to anyone that would like copies.

Peter

Brilliant, we can do that if you want to send those through Simon. Thanks again and we will be in touch soon.

Simon

OK, looking forward to catching up.

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