

STATE OF PLAY

Written by Craig Stirton



Photo: Julia Evans

For able-bodied people, there are numerous opportunities to participate in any and every sport that tickles their fancy. From tennis and golf to cycling and running, quality structures at grassroots level mean that getting involved is very easy. But what of para-sport? Is South Africa doing enough to provide an outlet for disabled people to participate and compete in their sport of choice? The exploits of Natalie Du Toit and Oscar Pistorious during the prime of their careers trained the spotlight on para-swimming and para-athletics respectively. We take a look at three para-sports which do not necessarily steal the headlines.

Golf

The South African Disabled Golf Association has been positively impacting the lives of its members since its inception more than two decades ago. Inclusivity and acceptance of all physically disabled people is at the heart of the association's philosophy. As such, the association has categories that cater for arm and leg amputees as well as for people with Cerebral Palsy and the like which comprise the "Les Autres" category, meaning "All others".

Per the association's 2019 statistics on membership demographics, there are even two wheelchair-bound members. Yet the inclusive nature of the association extends beyond the physical, those with visual or auditory impairments are also able to join the association.

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The SADGA is constantly striving to grow the game among the disabled people of South Africa. The First Swing Program which was established in 2008 aims to introduce disabled children from underprivileged backgrounds to golf. The Program has grown exponentially and today more than 1000 children are part of the five-tiered structure. SADGA's committed team of 20 coaches guide the children through the first three tiers and accommodate all severities of disability. Those who advance to level 4 receive an official golf handicap. Finally the doors to coaching open for those graduates who attain a single-figure Handicap Index..

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Competitively, there are a number of tournaments which golfers can participate in and test their skills against their fellow members. Monthly provincial days are held in the Western Cape, Northern Gauteng and Kwazulu-Natal which offer a social but competitive atmosphere. The pinnacle for every member is the annual staging of the Canon SA Disabled Open which attracts a field of 80 high-quality golfers from all around the world.

**Handicap Index: Per GolfRSA, a Handicap Index is a measurement of a player's potential ability on a course of standard playing difficulty. E.g. If one's Handicap Index is 9.0, on average they'd complete a course whose par is 72 shots in 81 shots.*

Tennis

Para-tennis in South Africa and abroad is largely wheelchair-centric. Only those disabled people with a permanent loss of function to one or both of their legs may participate. Wheelchair Tennis has grown steadily over a number of years. Since first appearing at the 1988 Paralympics, Wheelchair Tennis has become a fixture on the paralympic stage. Today, there are no fewer than 160 Wheelchair events staged by the International Tennis Federation in more than 40 countries.

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Wheelchair Tennis in South Africa is on the rise, too. Wheelchair Tennis programmes have been established in all of the nation's nine provinces since Wheelchair Tennis South Africa was founded in 2005. The programmes set up offer an opportunity for participants to thrive in their chosen discipline in spite of their circumstances and physical limitations.

The stock of South African Wheelchair is rising. That South Africa hosts six tournaments on the NEC World Tennis Tour is a testament to the steady growth of the sport in the country. South African Wheelchair Tennis players are also beginning to make their mark on the world stage. Kgothatso Montjane was a semi-finalist at this year's Wimbledon. Montjane is one of the best players in the women's game, ranked seventh in singles and eighth in doubles at the time of writing.

Cycling

The final sport which we'll touch on is cycling. Much like golf, participants are classified according to their disability. Individuals with arm or leg amputations, visual impairments, cerebral palsy and locomotor disabilities comprise four broad functional categories.

There are fourteen further sub-categories which cover the wide range of limitations associated with each. Depending on the severity of the disability as well as the cyclist's ability, a bicycle, tandem, tricycle or handcycle may be used.

The official para-cycling administrator in South Africa is Union Cycliste Internationale. UCI stages events that allow cyclists to compete either on a road or track and as individuals or in pairs. On a national level, the pinnacle of para-cycling is the Outeniqua Wheelchair Challenge which offers the nation's paracyclists an opportunity to showcase their skill and talent. Participants have the option of completing 10, 21 or 42km in their respective classification categories. The UCI Road World Championships represents the pinnacle for para-cyclists with aspirations of representing South Africa internationally.

**H1 Category: H1 is reserved for tetraplegics with severe upper limb impairment to the C6 vertebra.*

In a world that so often panders to the needs and achievements of the able-bodied individual, disabled people can sometimes be left out in the cold. That said, disabilities shouldn't deter people from getting involved and pursuing the sport that interests them. After all, there is no shortage of opportunity.

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