

Session: Physical disability, sport and public engagement

Title: Wheelchair bodybuilding: Challenging ableism or reproducing normalcy?

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Abstract

Bodybuilding competitions that celebrate the construction of the 'perfect' muscular physique are now widespread in contemporary culture and have been subject to in depth academic analyses (e.g. Klein, 1993; Monaghan, 2001). To date however, there is little investigation into wheelchair bodybuilding or attempt to reveal the lived experiences of disabled bodybuilders. This could in part be explained by how in contrast to the 'perfected' muscular body that has long been synonymous with strength, control, success, and sexual allure (Dutton, 1995), the disabled body has been positioned under medico-tragedy stereotypes as weak, uncontrollable, ugly, monstrous, and asexual and deemed 'imperfect'. For some therefore, disabled people engaging in muscle-building practices relative to normative standards of bodily perfectionism appear anathema. Against this backdrop, I draw on the corporeal experiences of Duke (pseudonym), a male wheelchair bodybuilder in his thirties in order to explore how disabled people aspire to normative notions of physical perfectionism. In doing so, I examine if disabled bodybuilding challenges ableism or continues to promote normalcy. In illuminating these tensions, I allude to the dilemmas that wheelchair bodybuilding faces in becoming more publicly engaged and how disabled people may be able to challenge contemporary tyrannies of body perfectionism *and* normalcy.