

Unmasking the Invisible: Empowering Athletes with Hidden Disabilities

Many athletes encounter difficulties both on and off the field. Some of these challenges are obvious, like injuries or problems with their gear, while others are less visible. One such hidden challenge is our neurodiverse population and individuals with learning disabilities. These conditions can hinder a person's learning, information processing, behavioral differences, sensory processing, or communication skills, which can greatly affect an athlete's performance and overall experience.



by Jessica Lamb

COACHING

INCLUSIVITY



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Phelps, the iconic swimmer who has shared his journey with ADHD. Phelps's capability to concentrate and harness his energy in the pool allowed him to navigate the obstacles he faced in academics. Similarly, consider Simone Biles, the celebrated gymnast who has candidly discussed her battles with perfectionism and the intense pressure to succeed. The experiences of these athletes underscore the significance of recognizing and supporting athletes who may process and learn differently.

Navigating Youth Soccer with a Child with AuDHD

Claire Phillips, a local Kansas City mother, (personal communication, October 5, 2024) highlights the challenges and triumphs of her daughter, Eleanor, who has AuDHD, a combination of Autism and ADHD. Eleanor experiences difficulties with self-regulation, executive functioning, communication, and social interaction, which can manifest differently in various settings. Despite these challenges, Eleanor thrives while playing soccer and enjoys the physical activity and social connections. Unlike neurotypical peers, she faces obstacles in traditional recreational soccer due to a lack of support and understanding from coaches and teammates who are not equipped to support her unique needs. Phillips (personal communication, October 5, 2024) emphasizes the importance of open communication and advocacy to ensure Eleanor receives the necessary supports on the field to promote awareness and skill development. She advocates for coaches to have training in inclusion and disability awareness, to foster a more inclusive environment for all players. Through her experience, the parent highlights the positive impact of inclusive soccer programs on Eleanor's self-esteem and confidence. She also encourages other parents to persevere, seek out supportive environments, and celebrate their child's unique abilities (Phillips, personal communication, October 5, 2024).

Importance of Awareness and Support for Learning Disabilities in the Game of Soccer

According to Bailey (2023), neurodiversity promotes the idea that neurological differences should be viewed as a natural part of human diversity rather than as deficits. Neurodiversity in children highlights the ideology that every brain is unique and that these variations should be embraced instead of viewed as shortcomings. Like the diverse physical traits among individuals, there is also a broad spectrum of how our brains function. For this reason, it is often difficult to identify them, as there are no significant physical differences. The term "neurodiversity" rejects deficit-based approaches and embraces diverse ways of learning while promoting social justice for all. Just like there's a wide range of physical characteristics, there's also a wide range of ways our brains work (Bailey, 2023).

Why is this crucial? Data highlights the necessity for greater awareness and education in disability and neurodiversity awareness. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that around 1 in 5 children in the United States has a disability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). Although not all these disabilities pertain to learning, the figures are noteworthy. Understanding learning disabilities and our neurodiverse population is essential for several reasons. First, it enables coaches to offer personalized support and necessary accommodations. By identifying the signs and symptoms of

learning differences, coaches can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for *all* athletes. Furthermore, addressing these disabilities can help reduce the risk of burnout and enhances the overall well-being of athletes which increases the probability of staying an active participant within the game of soccer.

US Youth Soccer, the foremost youth sports organization in the nation, aims to deliver exceptional support, resources, and leadership to assist every member in achieving their objectives both on and off the field. Each year, US Youth Soccer registers close to 2.5 million players (*About US Youth Soccer*, n.d.). By training coaches and club leaders, we can ensure that athletes with learning disabilities obtain the assistance they need to develop and perform.

What is Research Telling Us?

Athletes with hidden disabilities (HD) frequently display behaviors that may disrupt the soccer learning environment, resulting in coaches viewing them as difficult. This viewpoint can have a detrimental effect on how coaches interact with these athletes, potentially leading to decreased participation and engagement in the sport of soccer. Parents are essential in influencing their child's experience in sports, as their perceptions of coaching practices can affect their child's ongoing involvement. A survey involving 311 parents/guardians found that those whose children exhibited HD behaviors reported more frequent instances of negative coaching practices. According to Vargas et al. (2019) approximately ten percent of children in the U.S. are identified as having some form of disability, which can impact their social interactions and acceptance among peers in sports.

The research indicated that while some coaches exhibited positive behaviors—such as involving athletes in decision-making and offering choices—parents of children with learning disabilities noted a deficiency in effective teaching and supportive communication. Coaches often did not cater to the specific learning needs of these athletes, resulting in repeated setbacks and frustration. Additionally, parents of children considered inattentive or hyperactive reported a higher occurrence of aggressive coaching tactics, including yelling and intimidation. Such negative experiences negatively impact player participation and underscores the necessity of educating coaches on the traits associated with HD. Coaches need more education and resources to learn effective methods and to better support diverse learning needs in youth soccer players (Vargas et al., 2019).

Soccer Club Leaders' Role in Inclusivity

Guiding a young soccer player is crucial, and the coach (YOU!) plays a vital part in this process. In fact, various studies and experts indicate that there is no specific profile or coaching program tailored for grassroots soccer coaches that accommodates both soccer practice and disability (Burgos-García, 2023).

By implementing these strategies, club technical leaders can foster a welcoming environment for all athletes, enhancing their experience and promoting the sport's overall growth by:

- **Educating Coaches:** Conduct regular training sessions with experts, invite guest speakers with hidden disabilities, and provide online resources on inclusive practices.
- **Run In-House Clinics/Seminars:** Organize practical workshops, discuss case studies, and promote peer-led learning among coaches.
- **Provide Adaptable Coaching Programs:** Create inclusive activities and games that focus on skill-development, utilize modified equipment, and offer individualized support for athletes needing extra assistance, create a specialized program within the club for players with higher support needs.
- **Address Potential Biases:** Encourage open dialogue about biases, incorporate sensitivity training, and use role-playing exercises for practice in respectful responses.

Unleashing Potential: A Series on Soccer Athletes with Hidden Disabilities

This series of research-based articles aims to inform, educate, and advocate for soccer athletes with hidden disabilities, empowering coaches and club leaders to foster inclusive environments for all players. Key themes include understanding hidden disabilities, inclusive coaching practices, breaking down misconceptions, and showcasing success stories. The series will also provide an accompanying e-learning module for comprehensive training, practical exercises, and case studies, culminating in education for all coaches. By engaging with this series and the e-learning resource, coaches can empower athletes, promote diversity and inclusion, enhance coaching skills, and inspire positive change in the soccer community. By focusing on these strategies, we are creating a future where every player can excel and be celebrated.



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sports setting. Eleanor describes struggling with self-regulation, executive functioning, communication/social skills, and fine motor activities, but also finding joy and a sense of belonging in the physical aspects of soccer. While Eleanor may face difficulties following multi-step directions or advocating for herself, she expresses feeling "happy when I get to play soccer with my friends and cousins." However, she also acknowledges the challenges, such as feeling "sad when I get sweaty" or "when I don't win the soccer game." Despite these obstacles, Eleanor has found support from coaches who have used her interests to motivate her, and she is grateful for the encouragement she receives, such as "the coaches give me a hug" (Phillips, personal communication, October 5, 2024).

By highlighting the experiences of players like Eleanor and providing comprehensive training and resources for coaches, this research-based series aims to foster more inclusive and supportive environments in youth soccer, where all athletes can thrive and be celebrated for their unique strengths and abilities.

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Meet the author **Jessica Lamb**

Jessica Lamb is a Registered Occupational Therapist with 11 years of experience, currently working in a school-based setting supporting special education students aged 5-18+. Jessica also serves as the Director of the Union KC Success Through Adapted Recreational Soccer (S.T.A.R.S) Program, which offers an inclusive soccer experience for children with diverse abilities in Kansas City. Inspired by their Autistic son, Ollie, Jessica and her husband Adam Lamb, founded this program to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities and foster a supportive community for players and parents. Jessica is dedicated to advocating against ableism, promoting inclusivity for families with special needs, and raising awareness about diversity while highlighting the potential contributions of autistic individuals within the soccer community. Jessica is finalizing her post-professional occupational therapy doctorate program (PPOTD) practicum at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Her project focuses on partnering with US Soccer to create an educational program aimed at coaching children with disabilities and fostering inclusivity in soccer. She strives to equip coaches with vital resources and enhance opportunities for families with special needs, incorporating knowledge acquired from the PPOTD program.



INCLUSIVITY

Practical Tools and Strategies for Inclusive Soccer Coaching

Coaches must recognize the unique learning needs of athletes with HD and adjust their coaching methods/styles accordingly to foster an inclusive



INCLUSIVITY

Promoting Continuous Improvement and Celebrating Success in Inclusive Soccer Coaching

In the pursuit of creating inclusive and adaptive soccer environments for athletes with hidden disabilities (HD).



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