



**QUALITY OF LIFE AT SPORTS AS A JOB OF BRAZILIAN PARALYMPIC  
ATHLETES**

**QUALIDADE DE VIDA NO ESPORTE COMO TRABALHO  
DE ATLETAS PARALÍMPICOS BRASILEIROS**

**CALIDAD DE VIDA EN EL DEPORTE COMO TRABAJO DE ATLETAS  
PARALIMPICOS BRASILEÑOS**

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**Abstract:** This research is about the investigation and discussion about quality of life at work in the context of sports, understood here as a work activity for a group of individuals with a specificity: “disability”. The study aims to comprehend what is quality of life in the sports as a job of Brazilian Paralympic Athletes of the track and field modality, who are in preparation for the next edition of the Paralympic Games. This is an exploratory-descriptive research with a qualitative approach. Interviews were conducted with a semi-structured script to 11 para-athletes. Four categories were identified that allowed to retrieve evidence from the para-athlete perspective about their conception on the sports as a job. The achievements and fulfillment achieved through sports brought a new meaning to their condition of disability, allowing a professional identification, pointing out that the work activity carry out a social purpose.

**Keywords:** Sports as a job. Quality of life at work. Activity-Centered Ergonomics. High-performance sports. Paralympic sport

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**Resumo:** Esta pesquisa trata da investigação e discussão da temática de qualidade de vida no trabalho a luz do esporte entendido aqui como atividade de trabalho para um grupo de indivíduos com uma especificidade: “a deficiência”. O estudo objetiva compreender o que é qualidade de vida no esporte como trabalho de atletas paralímpicos brasileiros da modalidade de atletismo, que estão em preparação para a próxima edição dos Jogos Paralímpicos. Trata-se de uma pesquisa exploratória-descritiva, com abordagem qualitativa. Foram conduzidas entrevistas com roteiro semiestruturado com 11 paratletas. Foram identificadas quatro categorias que permitiram resgatar evidências sobre como o paratleta concebe o esporte como trabalho. As conquistas e realizações alcançadas por meio do esporte trouxeram novo sentido à sua condição de incapacidade, apontando que a atividade de trabalho cumpre uma finalidade social.

**Palavras-chave:** Esporte como trabalho; Qualidade de vida no trabalho; Ergonomia da atividade; Esporte de alto-rendimento; Esporte paralímpico.

**Resumen:** Este estudio aborda la investigación y discusión del tema de la calidad de vida en el trabajo en el contexto del deporte, entendido aquí como una actividad laboral para un grupo de personas con una especificidad: la “discapacidad”. Tiene como objetivo comprender la calidad de vida en el deporte como trabajo de los atletas paralímpicos brasileños de la modalidad de atletismo, que se encuentran en preparación para la próxima edición de los Juegos Paralímpicos. Se trata de una investigación exploratorio-descriptiva con enfoque cualitativo. Entrevistas con guion semiestruturado fueron realizadas con 11 paratletas. Se identificaron cuatro categorías que nos permitieron rescatar evidencias sobre cómo el paratleta percibe el deporte como un trabajo. Los triunfos y logros alcanzados a través del deporte dieron un nuevo significado a su condición de incapacidad, señalando que la actividad laboral cumple una finalidad social.

**Palabras-clave:** Deporte como trabajo; Calidad de vida en el trabajo; Ergonomia de la actividad; Deporte de alto rendimiento; Deporte paralímpico.

## 1 Introduction

The theme of quality of life at work is strongly present in contemporary society. It became a topic of debate and social interest, and can be found in the discourse of managers and leaders within organizations (FERREIRA, 2012; MEDEIROS; FERREIRA, 2015; LIMONGE-FRANÇA, 2015). In Brazil, since the 1990s the theme of quality of life at work has raised a growing interest of researchers and professionals working in organizations. Many studies have

been conducted about this topic, mainly in the field of Administration and Organizational and Work Psychology (FERREIRA, 2011, 2012).

Considering the multitude of concepts and approaches to quality of life at work found in the literature, these can be summarized into two types: one hegemonic of individualistic and essentially welfare nature; and another of counter-hegemonic orientation, of preventive nature and interested in the worker's role and the meaning of work (FERREIRA, 2012). This paper adopts the second type from the perspective of activity ergonomics for quality of life at work, focusing on the removal of the causes of discomfort at work and, in turn, considering variables of working conditions, work organization and socio-professional relations, always from the perspective of those who work (MEDEIROS; FERREIRA, 2015).

In contemporary society the world of work undergoes profound and ongoing changes (SCHWAB, 2016) that impact the performance of workers, influence their levels of health and quality of life, their psychic and social dimensions, and their relationship with the work itself (GAULEJAC, 2007; FERREIRA, 2011). The professional sports practice, understood as a job, is framed within this context of continuous transformation and (re)configuration of new professions. Authors such as Rubio and Sanches (2011), Rubio (2012) and Campos, Capele and Maciel (2017) argue that sports practice may be considered as a professional career. Athletes, thus, start to sell their labor force, and become a sports worker in a relationship between money and sports performance. Sports becomes livelihood, a professional activity where the athlete spends most of their time devoted to training and competitions (RUBIO, 2001, 2012). Based on the binomial sport-job, sports is outlined as a professional exercise (VERMEULEN et al., 2016). In this sense, it is relevant to talk about quality of life at work, as the practice of high-performance sports absorbs and reproduces the systematization of the work characteristics in the capitalist society (RIGAUER, 1981; DEMAZIÈRE; OHL; LE NOÉ, 2015).

Considering that changes in work impact workers' performance, quality of life, health levels, family or social life and work context, and considering the universe of para-athletes in the sport-job binomial, the general purpose of this research is defined as follows: To understand what is quality of life in sport-job of the Brazilian Paralympic Athletes in the athletics modality, in preparation for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games.

This study is based on the concept of disability presented by the World Health Organization, understood as the combination of disability/incapacity concepts between medical and social models. The concept emphasizes the possibilities of including and rehabilitating the individual, and stresses that disability is not restricted to limitation of physiological or psychological functions of body systems. It also highlights the relevance of the interaction between an individual and personal factors and social environment (AMIRALIAN et al., 2000).

Some of the contributions by this research are described below. 1) It contributes to deepen the themes of sports activity as a job, and quality of life at work for athletes. According to the

bibliometric research carried out from January to May 2020, there are few studies on quality of life at work targeting athletes and para-athletes, as well as studies defining sports as a job. 2) The investigation and discussion about sports as a job and quality of life in this modality of job for a group of individuals with disability. 3) The theme is also relevant since the research was carried out in a year (2020) scheduled to be an Olympic Year (Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games). However, the global public health situation, and the declaration of the Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) pandemic by the World Health Organization drastically affected the preparation, training, and participation of athletes. In the end, the Olympic and Paralympic Games were postponed for the year 2021. The research contributes to understand how the postponement of the Paralympic Games affected the para-athletes' quality of life at work.

## **2 Theoretical framework**

### **2.1 Conceptualization of job**

We adopt the notion of work activity proposed by activity-centered ergonomics (the French-Belgian branch of ergonomics), a school that since its beginnings has enabled the understanding and transformation of work situations. It proposes an approach based on an anthropocentric perspective, starting from the comprehension that the main causes of current problems in the work context rest on the inadequacy of work to human characteristics. Transforming work is, thus, the primary purpose of ergonomic analysis and action (GUÉRIN et al., 2001). Its object of analysis is the person who works, and the purpose is to fit work for human being, adjusting it to the different characteristics of the human being, ranging from material aspects to the organization of work (TERSAC; MAGGI, 2004). The concept of work is focused on understanding human work, so as to transform it, in an attempt to adapt the work activity to human being and not the opposite, in order to humanize it and promote feelings of well-being rather than of discomfort (CAZAMIAN, 1973; WISNER, 1995).

Therefore, it is understood that work simultaneously comprises the activity of work, conditions of work, and the result of the activity. These characteristics cannot exist apart one-another, and work is the unity of the three realities (GUÉRIN et al., 2001). Work has a dual character, depending on the perspective from which it is approached: that of the person who works (personal character) or that of the company (socioeconomic character).

The analysis of real work situations plays a core role in this approach. Work activity can thus be defined as the space between what is prescribed and what is real. The work activity “[...] is a strategy of adaptation to real work situations, and the distance between the prescribed and the real is the concrete manifestation of ever-existing contradictions in contexts, and in the act of work” (ALMEIDA; FERREIRA; GUIMARÃES, 2013, p. 566) [*Free translation*]. In the prescribed work, the organization decides what should be done - the task -, whereas the real activity is what was actually performed. It is also the expression of human activity: thus, the work

puts into play physical, cognitive, psychological capabilities, sensory-motor reflexes, skills, and experience (GUÉRIN et al., 2001).

## **2.2 Sports as a job: approaches and conceptualizations**

In conceptualizing sport, we notice the presence of two common elements: the playfulness of the game, and competition (CONSTANTINO, 1990). The first refers to sports as playful and source of pleasure, synonym to amusement: sports is understood as a physical activity exercised in the sense of the game, the practice of which assumes training, rules, and a codified system of evaluation. The second embraces sports as a professional career that comes to be understood as work.

Sports in the work context is discussed in the light of activity ergonomics, differentiating the triple social dimension presented by Tubino (2010), who considers sports as a right available to all, without distinction. Individuals may exercise this right in several ways, whether through sport-education, sport-participation, or sport-performance, so as to contribute to nurture human being as an individual, and as a social being.

Authors such as Rubio and Sanches (2011), Rubio (2012), and Campos, Capele, and Maciel (2017) argue that the practice of high-performance sports may be considered a professional career, since fulfilling the goal of high-performance passes by specific stages. Athletes, thus, start to sell their labor force, and become a sports worker in a contractual relationship or formal employment (RUBIO, 2012). According to Rubio (2001, 2012) the end of amateurism in the mid-1970s led sports to change, establishing of a causal relationship between money and sports performance. It became livelihood, a professional activity where athletes spend most of their time almost exclusively devoted to training and competitions. The professional athlete emerges, as both sports spectacle, and labor system.

Since sports absorbed the elements of rationalization and connection with modernity, it became a complex and significant social and cultural construction. It provides a different image of our times' social aspects, depending on the dimension being focused, either as a game or as work (VERMEULEN et al., 2016).

In this line, Vermeulen et al. (2016) understand sports as an unstable balance between play and work, exposing this managerialist and disciplinary relationship of sports with its athletes on the one hand, and the pleasure and joy of engaging in it on the other hand. The dimension of work performance prevails in sports activity to the detriment of the importance of its flow, and the pleasure that the game brings about.

Athletes are the workers of sports. Sports activity is related to administration and management of excellence, leadership and direction, in the development of tactics and strategies. It has its own rules, procedures, controls, and disciplinary procedures (CRAIG, 2016). Sugden and Tomlinson (2002) indicated that sports configuration increasingly resembles that of

businesses, and criticized the format mirrored in Taylorism and Fordism: management mode, work measurement, control, repetitive discipline, and their presence in the planning work, coaching and training in contemporary sports. Through its athletes, sports become a product targeted by the commercial world, and the manipulation in the political game (DONNELLY, 1997; DONNELLY; PETHERICK, 2004).

In order to answer questions regarding competition and the production of sports performance, Demazière, Ohl and Le Noé (2015) considered that competition and production of sports performance go together, and are the focus of all sports activity. To better address the issue, the authors focused on the work of sports activity and the mechanisms of performance production: sports as a job is related to the activity of sport, its careers, investments, and compensation. Likewise, performance in sports is being shaped by disciplinary issues with the emergence of new norms, new rules, new codifications.

Performance approach in sports work echoes in the work performed within organizations. Performance is expressed in figures, is measured, timed, quantified whether in score, distance run, time performed, or weight lifted. The idea of measuring and quantifying sports work's results introduced the notion of performance, increasing similarities between sports and work performed within organizations (DEMAZIÈRE; OHL; LE NOÉ, 2015; CRAIG, 2016), despite the more subjective ways to evaluate results, such as the athlete's engagement in the sports activity.

Rigauer (1981) detailed analogous behavioral aspects between work and sports. The author outlined several characteristics that showed the affinity of behaviors between both spheres. This sharpens the aspects of work rationalization found in sports.

In his work, Rigauer (1981) discussed how sports imitates the world of work and the industrial society, whether in the planning of sports activity, training cycle compared to a production process, or accommodation to the industrial system. Work mechanization in sports reduces athletes to mechanical conditions, as an integral part of a machine. Just like a machine part, during training the athlete must perform repetitive activities of muscular strength, explosion, physical synchrony of stride movements. The athlete's body is the machine, and the parts of the body correspond to parts of the gear, and must try features of speed, strength, power, lubrication in joints.

Similarly, the principle of work specialization proves to be similar in the world of sports practice. One may, thus, consider specialization in sports as a job when looking at athletes in athletics: different modalities among sprinters (100m, 200m, or 400m races, 4x100m and 4x400m relays), jumpers (triple jump or high jump), throwing athletes (specialized in discus or javelin), and specialized long-distance, middle-distance, and marathon events.

Contemporary sports holds attributes of technocracy, and its principle of fulfillment drives the practice of sports, just like in the workplace, always associated with monetary gains, professional status, high competitiveness, and social mobility. This principle is quite clear when

the athlete, for their excellent performance, has greater exposure to the media, and to the world of marketing.

The Taylorist proposal also applies to sports when the athlete is subjected to physical and mental stimuli in a systematic way until they achieve their best shape. The goals set are continuously raised to follow the tireless journey toward better results and breaking records, characteristics imported from the industrial society and markets where competition prevails, and the winner is an object of the best value of exchange of the output of their work activity (SUGDEN; TOMLINSON, 2002). This aspect sheds light on the design of the fight for the best performances in athletic competition, and it is in this way that high-level sports revisits the principle of competition (RIGAUER, 1981). During training periods, high-level athletes are fit into the activity, and conditioned to training, aiming exclusively at the goal of the next competition. This is how the calendar issued by national and international confederations, as well as world events of the major leagues, leads athletes to such an adjustment or conditioning of all their athletic, social, and personal behaviors. Similarly, the analytical methods of work and training are composed of repetitive and load-bearing processes, following the Taylorist model. Just as in the organization of industrial work, training in sports is planned to be performed in a coercive manner. Besides the method of repetition and load evolution, there is a widely applied and well-known method: circuit training with no breaks or short breaks to maximize the athlete's aerobic endurance.

Technical rationality is another existing element, and a trademark of modern sports (RIGAUER, 1981). The technical conditions of high-level sports are expressed in the standardized equipment used in competitions, such as standardized uniforms, apparel, and accessories (DEMAZIÈRE; OHL; LE NOÉ, 2015). Sporting events, in turn, are held in standardized sites or circumstances: all production conditions are met and integrated into the technology on which they become dependent. This same technology provides the instruments for controlling and quantifying the performance of sports activity.

### **2.3 Quality of life at work in activity ergonomics**

Activity ergonomics applied to the quality of life at work is a counter-hegemonic and preventive approach, based on the centrality of workers' perspective to investigate and intervene in their quality of life at work. Its “[...] pivotal focus is to remove or mitigate problems that generate discomfort in the contexts of production, acting, for this purpose, on the conditions, organization, and socio-professional relations of work, always from the perspective of those who work” (MEDEIROS; FERREIRA, 2015, p. 172) [*Free translation*].

In the light of ergonomics of the activity, the concept of quality of life at work is developed from the organizational view as a precept of management that is expressed by a set of standards, guidelines and practices within the scope of conditions, organization and socio-

professional relationships of work aimed at well-being, and from the perspective of workers through the organizational context and work situations, suggesting the prevalence of well-being experiences (FERREIRA, 2011, 2012). The intervention in variables of work context is then considered beyond the broader involvement of organizational members. Quality of life at work is understood as a duty of everyone in the organization, and harmony between well-being, efficiency and effectiveness in organizational environments should be consistently pursued (FERREIRA et al., 2013).

Quality of life at work is expressed through the workers' mental representations that unveil the work context in which they are inserted (FERREIRA, 2012). Three representation modalities are considered to understand it: 1) Descriptive representations of the work context: representations that reveal the workers' view on the multiple and distinct aspects that characterize the world of work; 2) descriptive representations of the human cost of work: representations that reveal the workers' view about the many impacts ensuing from the demands of work and organizational context experienced; and 3) operative representations of work situations: representations that reveal strategies of operative modes, how the worker deals with the world and that allows them to deal with the demands in work situations (FERREIRA; TORRES, 2015).

Thinking about quality of life at work actions based on representations that reveal the workers' dynamics of interactions with the social context in which they are inserted provides an integral view of the collective of workers and leaders, managers, technicians and workers (FERREIRA; TORRES, 2015). It focuses on the interaction between the individual and the environment, through the mediation of the work activity (FERREIRA, 2012). When observing the work activity, one can understand how worker inserts themselves in their work environment, as well as their processes of fitting into, identification, and meaning. Since sports as a job is approached as a new field of research, it is believed that ergonomics of the activity may shed new light on its understanding.

#### **2.4 The disabled person and Paralympic Sports**

This study is based on the concept of disability presented by the World Health Organization, understood as the combination of disability/incapacity concepts between medical and social models. The concept emphasizes the possibilities of including and rehabilitating the individual, and stresses that disability is not restricted to limitation of physiological or psychological functions of body systems. It also highlights the relevance of the interaction between an individual and personal factors and social environment (AMIRALIAN et al., 2000).

Sports professionals have understood sports as a pathway offered to people with disabilities to open opportunities, and thus achieve social inclusion (BARROZO et al., 2012).

Mello and Winckler (2012) recognize that Physical Education is a very favorable scenario to develop disabled individuals since it involves an educational environment that considers the



body as a whole. In this sense, sports emerge as a huge opportunity for cultural and social interaction through its endless possibilities of movements, thus becoming an outstanding tool for human development (MELLO; WINCKLER, 2012). Based on the proposed conceptualization sports is thought as a means of social inclusion for people with disabilities. The meanings of Paralympic Sports are also disclosed. The study considers Paralympic Athletes of the athletics modality, protagonists of the Paralympic Sports history, with a wealth of life narratives, and trajectories of self-realization and surmount.

### 3 Methodological procedures

The methodological proposal of this research comprises a study of qualitative approach, descriptive-exploratory nature, with cross-sectional field research. According to Creswell (2015), qualitative research allows interpreting data by developing the description, and in the case of the target-audience, based on how para-athletes perceive their world of work, the characterization of this activity, training and competitions, meanings of work to identify the high-performance athletes' perceptions about the quality of life in sports as a job, and the situations of pleasure or discomfort that they experience in this work activity.

In-depth interviews with semi-structured script were carried out with Paralympic Athletes of the athletics modality from October to November 2020. The research participants are Brazilian Paralympic Athletes in track and field events (men and women). They are part of the Brazilian Paralympic Committee's high-performance program. These athletes have already participated in one Paralympic Games, have achieved or are close to achieving the index established by the International Paralympic Committee - a requirement to participate in the event -, and are preparing for the next Paralympic Games. The athletics modality was chosen to reach the greatest possible number of participants, as this modality has the largest number of athletes.

Participants were selected based on a list made available on the Brazilian Paralympic Committee's website containing the 50 best-ranked athletes in track and field in 2020. All of them were contacted through social networks, and only 11 agreed to participate. The respondents' characteristics are presented in Chart 1.

**Chart 1:** Characteristics of the participants

Athlete	Sex	Age	Color	Born in	Marital Status	How got to sports	Class and event	Previous job
E1	M	41 years	Dark-skinned	Rio Branco/AC	Married (2 children)	Institutional invitation	T38 - sprinter	Fish seller
E2	M	28 years	Dark-skinned	Aiá/PB	Engaged	Presented by another wheelchair user	F57 - javelin	Rural worker
E3	M	23 years	White	Caicó/RN	Engaged	School Games	T47 - sprinter	Rural worker
E4	M	28 years	White	Marabá/PA	Single	School Games	T62 - sprinter	Has always been an athlete

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<b>E5</b>	F	24 years	White	Maringá/PR	Engaged	Start for playing	T11 - sprinter F11 - distance	Has always been an athlete
<b>E6</b>	M	29 years	Dark-skinned	Diadema/SP	Engaged	Transition from conventional athletics	T11 – middle-distance and distance running	Seller
<b>E7</b>	M	41 years	Black	Nova Venécia/ES	Married	Presented by a teacher	T11 - sprinter	Granite sawmill agent
<b>E8</b>	M	28 years	Dark-skinned	Duque de Caxias/RJ	Married (1 child)	Watching the Rio Paralympic Games	T35 - sprinter	Has always been an athlete
<b>E9</b>	F	38 years	Dark-skinned	Rio Branco/AC	Married	Invited by a friend	T11 - sprinter	CIEE intern
<b>E10</b>	F	25 years	Black	Rolim de Moura/RO	Single	School Paralympic Games	T12 - 400m	Non-remunerated training
<b>E11</b>	M	26 years	Dark-skinned	Porto Velho/RO	Single	Attending lectures about paralympic sports at school	T37 - sprinter F37 - long jump	Street trader

Source: Prepared by the author (2021).

Before the interviews, respondents were instructed about the voluntary nature of participation, and that they could give up before or after the interview. The Informed Consent Form (ICF) was sent to each respondent before the interview to be read and signed. Interviews were conducted by video call on WhatsApp and Zoom platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interview script was structured in four parts: a) questions to contextualize the participants and their disabilities, in addition to how they got to know sports, and how they got to high-performance sport; b) questions to typify sports as a job in the components of work activity, work conditions and results, its dimensions and meaning of sports as a job according to the athlete's perception; c) questions from the Inventory of Assessment of Quality of Life at Work (IA\_QVT) (FERREIRA *et al.*, 2013) related to the five structuring factors of quality of life at work according to the ergonomics of the activity, in addition to two questions related to the notions of well-being and discomfort at work; and d) questions about the impact of postponing the Paralympic Games due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The recording of the interviews totaled 13 hours and 22 minutes, making up 157 pages in Microsoft Word. The shortest interview lasted 50 minutes, and the longest one 1 hour and 28 minutes. The average length of interviews was 1 hour and 12 minutes.

The thematic content analysis proposed by Creswell (2015) was adopted to examine the evidence, and find meaning among the diversity of materials. We chose to use NovoNVivo software, a well-known software for qualitative data analysis that allows evaluate, interpret, and explain social phenomena.

### 4 Presentation and discussion of the results

In the following chart, the thematic categories extracted from the content analysis are presented:

**Chart 2 - Presentation of thematic categories**

Categories	Subcategories
1) A journey of surmount: the place of disability and sports in the life of the Paralympic Athlete	a) Double surmount of the para-athletes: surmount to disability, and high-performance sports as surmount to life.
	b) Adapted sports as a tool for social inclusion.
	c) The relevance of athletics for Paralympic Sports.
2) Sports as a job: an unveiled relationship	a) Characterization of sports activity as a job.
	b) Components of sports as a job: activity, conditions and results.
	c) Personal and socioeconomic dimensions of sports as a job.
	d) "I can't see myself doing anything other than sport": the post-career of the Paralympic Athlete.
	e) "It's my life": meaning of sports as a job.
3) Structuring factors of activity-centered ergonomics for quality of life in sports as a job	a) Working conditions and organizational support.
	b) Work organization.
	c) Socio-professional work relations.
	d) Recognition and professional growth: "unfortunately we are not so recognized"
	e) Work-social life link: the importance of sports as a job for the society and the athletes' families.
	f) Factors of well-being and discomfort.
4) Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and postponement of the Tokyo Paralympic Games	a) Feelings brought about by the postponement of the Paralympic Games.
	b) Adaptation of training, acquisition of materials, and decision to stay at home or return to their families.

Source: Prepared by the author (2021)

#### **4.1 First category: "A journey of surmount: the place of disability and sports in the life of the Paralympic Athlete"**

*Subcategory (a)* covers the double surmount in Paralympic Athletes' lives: the surmount to disability, and getting to high-performance sports. surmount started at the moment when disability was acquired, reported as congenital by some para-athletes, arising from postpartum problems by one athlete, and in situations throughout life by other athletes. According to respondents, the causes of most cases of congenital disability at the moment of birth are related to poor health care service for mothers who lived in rural areas or in outlying regions of small cities. Acquired disability is another form of disability of para-athletes due to genetic causes, and acquired disability caused by accidents in the work environment. Physical limitations have imposed on them difficulties of many kinds. The very life of para-athletes indicates a first great surmount: that of the disability itself. Difficulties include, among others, limitations of location, freedom of action, prejudice suffered, lack of social inclusion and opportunities to develop a professional life.

A second great surmount occurred through sports. Sports was a path found by the para-athletes to conquer autonomy, financial and emotional stability, and freedom. The many different situations that drove participants to para-sports stands out: leisure and play option at school (as for Respondent 4), teacher's invitation (as for Respondents 10, 3 and 7), and school lecture (as

for Respondent 11), resuming the theories of Cagigal and López-Ibor (1966) and Tubino (2010). The authors bet on the nurturing and educational value of sport-practice. Respondent 2 was approached by two para-athletes in a bar confirming that the subject, by relating to others and sharing their limitations and possibilities, can resignify their possibilities in processes of integration (CAMPEÃO, 2011). Respondent 6 was the protagonist of the transition from conventional sports to paralympic sports, and lived with the feeling of non-acceptance, postponing the moment to join para-athleticism.

*Subcategory (b)* is about sports adapted as a tool for social inclusion. Sports professionals understand it as a path offered to people with disabilities to enable opportunities, and thus achieve social inclusion (BARROZO et al., 2012). Mello and Winckler (2012) understand that physical education is important for the development of people with disabilities, being an excellent tool for human development. The social dimensions of sport (sport-education, sport-participation and sport-competitive) are understood as being promoted both by inclusive physical education and by para-sports, through physical activities developed for people with disabilities (COSTA; SOUSA, 2004; ARAÚJO, 2011). According to Respondent 5, the teacher went to the school for the blind where she studied to invite students. She said she fell in love with the sport. From school activity the student moved on to competitive sports; at 17 years old she participated in the World Championship for adults and, when she turned 18, she moved to São Paulo after being invited to join the high-performance team.

*Subcategory (c)* deals with the relevance of athletics for Paralympic sports. The eleven respondents feel proud to be part of the Paralympic team, and to have contributed, each with their best performance history, to win podiums and medals for the national team. In the last Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, Brazil reaffirmed its improvement in medal performance as one of the powers of Paralympic sport (SILVA; WINCKER, 2019).

#### **4.2 Second category: “Sports as a job: an unveiled relationship”**

The second category encompasses the participants' views about sports activity as representing their job, referring to the profession of athlete. Five subcategories were distinguished.

*Subcategory (a)* seeks to characterize the sports activity as a job. The participants' speeches characterize sports as a job - according to Respondent 4: “Being an athlete is my profession” -: it is about exclusive dedication, discipline, work routine, pre-defined training schedules, compensation, contract, commitment, charges for results, goals-setting, and competitiveness among athletes. According to Sugden and Tomlinson (2002), sports setup has resembled the organizational context in terms of work practices. The mechanization of sports as a job, in turn, reduces the athlete to exclusively mechanical conditions: metaphorically, the

athlete's body is the machine; the principle of specialization is also present in sports practice (RIGAUER, 1981).

*Subcategory (b)* comprises the components of sports as a job: activity, conditions and results. According to literature, work may designate any of these three realities: activity of work, work conditions, and the result of the activity. The interviews clearly identify the activity of work as training and competing. They do not exist apart one-another, and work is the unity of these three realities (GUÉRIN et al., 2001). Respondent 3 refers to sports as a mission, and relates the effort of work and exclusive dedication with a view to improving the level in the struggle for the podium as the result of the activity. On the other hand, Respondent 11 says: "My work demands my dedication, my focus."

*Subcategory (c)* implies personal and socioeconomic dimensions of sports as a job. According to Guérin et al. (2001), work bears the characteristic of being a human activity performed by the subject, who uses their body, subjectivity, and sociability in a collective way in a given social and economic reality. These dimensions are expressed in the following statements:

My personal growth was my development, and my move to São Paulo was very big. I changed a lot. Now I'm only evolving in the details. I got here rough, a very big stone, and now I am like a little crystal, but I still need to get a diamond shape. (Respondent 11).

I have already had a team from the [Brazilian Paralympic] Committee, [but] today I have my own team. So, I always try to work with the best professionals [...]. (Respondent 7).

*Subcategory (d)* covers the post-career of the Paralympic Athlete. It identifies common elements mentioned by athletes when asked about the moment of withdrawal from the competitive universe, and the insertion in a new professional situation outside the routine of training and competition. Respondent 5 said he changed his degree from Law into Journalism to be a commentator in Paralympic competitions, while Respondent 11 said he intends to open a gym. It can be seen that most athletes seek proximity with activities and functions related to sports, as a way to remain active and useful to society.

*Subcategory (e)* deals with the meaning of sports as a job. It portrays speeches expressed about the meanings assigned by para-athletes to sports as a job, the centrality of sports as a job in the lives of these people, and the changes that sports as a job has caused in the life of each of them. Interviews denote feelings of surmounting, overcoming limits, and fulfillment of personal dreams, autonomy, sense of accomplishment before the society, generation of new meaning to life through sports practice. This diversity of representations about work is significant in the literature on the meanings that work has been assigned in contemporary society (ROSSO; DEKAS; WRZESNIEWSKI, 2010).

[...] I have not achieved much yet, but everything I have achieved was through my work in sport; so, for me sports is everything, it changed my life, I say that sports changed my life, it is not even 100%, it is more than that. (Respondent 2).

[...] we don't want others to see us as handicapped, you know, as the poor little thing there. We want them to see us as efficient, as a conventional athlete, normal. (Respondent E3).

Sports allowed me to do this: overcome every day, overcome every result, overcome every training. (Respondent 11).

#### **4.3 Third category: “ Structuring factors of activity-centered ergonomics for quality of life in sports as a job”**

The third category encompasses the participants' views about quality of life in sports activity as a job. Analysis was performed based on the five factors that make up the approach of Activity-Centered Ergonomics Applied to Quality of Life at Work (EAA\_QVT) according to Ferreira (2012). Factors are: working conditions, work organization, socio-professional relationships, professional growth and recognition, and the Work-Social Life Link. Each subcategory expresses one of the factors of quality of life at work, and the last one integrates the views on well-being and discomfort at work.

*Subcategory (a) Working conditions and organizational support.* It refers to material and instrumental working conditions that are responsive, not precarious, and contribute to the good performance of the work activity, and the well-being of those who perform it (FERREIRA, 2012). For Respondent 4, “[...] it is the best structure we could have”; for Respondent 1: [...] “looking at the structure we have at the CPB [Brazilian Paralympic Committee] and at the NAR [High-Performance Center], it leaves nowhere in the world to be desired”.

*Subcategory (b) Work organization.* It appears in the respondents' statements impregnated with a strong component of similarities with the characteristics and modus operandi of the industrial society's work activity. When looking at sports through the prism of the organizational view, Vermeulen et al. (2016) understand sports as an unstable balance between play and work, exposing this managerialist and disciplinary relationship of sports with its athletes on the one hand, and the pleasure and joy of engaging in it on the other hand. Respondents disclosed details about the organization of sports work, and itemized the labor division, hierarchy, organizational mission and goals, work time, prescribed work, norms and standards of conduct.

According to the Respondent 1, “in the day-to-day routine of training, we already have a routine scheduled: time to train, time to go home, time to rest [...]”. Respondent 10 points out that “we have a lot of rules. The most important ones are that we always have to wear uniforms all the time, because we are a company, we always have to show the CPB sponsors. [...] I think these are the rules of a standard company”. On the other hand, performance is expressed in figures. The idea of measuring and quantifying the sportive work results introduced the notion of performance (DEMAZIÈRE; OHL; LE NOÉ, 2015; CRAIG, 2016). This concern about improving times and

records is a constant for athletes willing to remain in the elite group. It can be found in the speech of Respondent 8 “only that, if you want the highest level, if you want high-performance, you have to work, so you have to work so you can be recognized, you know?”

*Subcategory (c) Healthy socio-professional relationships.* Healthy professional relationships with the immediate boss (technician), senior management (board of directors), co-workers, citizens, sponsors, and the media are a must for quality of life at work.

We now have a pretty good relationship. By the way, me and my coach, we have a relationship almost like father and son, he is always there telling me what to do, correcting me, not only in training, but also out of training. (Respondent 3).

The relationship with the CPB [Brazilian Paralympic Committee] staff, with the coordination staff... I get along very well, with the president as well. There is openness to get there and have a nice conversation. (Respondent 8).

With the sponsors also [I have a good relationship]. When I do the event with them, they really appreciate my presence. (Respondent 8).

*Subcategory (d) Recognition and professional growth.* These two themes complement each other in the sense that the existence of professional growth implies having professional recognition, as Respondent 10 states:

I was a gift. I came from Rondônia in January 2018 with a very bad score, I virtually had no score to compete. [...] Today I am ranked first in the world ranking, and I have achieved many things that people have been training for a long time and cannot. So, this growth for me was fundamental to keep me here, because I needed this start from scratch to be able to keep me here. And, since then, I have not lowered my position, I am always among the three [best] in the world. I am achieving all the goals that I set, that I planned.

From this perspective, the understanding of how growth occurs at work involves highlighting the traits of recognition as a tool for quality of life at work (FERREIRA, 2012), as reported by Respondent 3: “What makes me good today, in sport, is the recognition and, through my effort, my story, to be able to motivate other people, to encourage other people who sometimes don’t believe in their own dreams.”

*Subcategory (e) Work-social life link: the importance of sports as a job for the society and the para-athletes’ families.* As pointed out by the Activity-Centered Ergonomics, the meaning of work includes relations of work as a source of pleasure, and as an appreciation of the time of life at work. It promotes health, and is synonymous to happiness in the sense of being subtle, source of joy, satisfaction, personal fulfillment, and of performing useful actions on behalf of society, being a social reference. As for the family, it is a vector of recognition, fulfillment, and sustenance:

[...] I feel very proud for this, I am very proud to be able to represent people, to be able to represent my country, to have been chosen among thousands. (Respondent 1).

[...] representing a suffered people, which is the people from the Northeast, [...] showing your social class doesn't matter, it doesn't matter where you come from, if you have some disability or not. What matters is the willpower. (Respondent 3).

I came from a very poor family, and today I am proud of my mother, proud of my father. I can give them today what they couldn't give me when I was a child. So, this is enough, it was something that sports gave me. [...] My father today cries when he sees me on the podium, he still cries today. (Respondent 11).

*Subcategory (f) Well-being and discomfort in the context of sport as a job.* It summarizes a singularity of feelings of well-being evoked in the respondents' statements, reinforced by the degree of importance of feelings of pleasure at work, sense of reference and inspiration, surmount, social inclusion and social usefulness, feeling of national pride for the results achieved in sports, and family recognition. The situations of discomfort were evidenced, notably regarding the issue of health. All of them generally expressed that high-performance sports is not synonymous to health and, on the contrary, it means pain and suffering because it implies taking the body to exceed its limits. Another situation evoked as origin of discomfort is related to the fact of having to stay away from their families for long periods. A similar situation was reported when talking about the exclusive dedication to preserve the body's rest, and even at leisure time, limiting moments of socialization with friends.

#### **4.4 Fourth category: “ Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and postponement of the Tokyo Paralympic Games”**

It presents the accounts addressing how athletes managed the postponement of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and implications on strategies for adapting their training routine. Manifestations were sequenced in topics of feelings brought about, training adapted during social isolation, and investments for training, recalling that in Olympic years all athlete's efforts are intensified.

Two subcategories were distinguished. The first relates to feelings brought about by the postponement of the Paralympic Games. The respondents' statements are a mix of acceptance, revolt, insecurity, fear, misinformation, financial concern, and adaptation, the wait for a new calendar, and isolation. For some para-athletes the impact was negative, while for others the impact even helped, becoming a longer Olympic cycle. Uncertainty was the feeling expressed accordingly. Para-athletes reflected on training periods, wear and tear of the last competitions they had to face, indexes won and to be won, uncertainty of the specific preparation for the Paralympic Games, how they will train during the pandemic, lack of a competition calendar, situation of the main opponents, and the pandemic in their home countries, how will be the protocols in Japan. These feelings are expressed in the following statements:



It was pretty hard. Because you already had a fantastic year, you ended up winning the world championship in the pre-paralympic year, you already had the index. You say you will start the year training, and get to the Paralympic Games ready to go. Suddenly, you hear the government announcing that the Paralympic Games have been canceled, that commerce had to close. You were ecstatic, wanting to get to the competition and do your best again and, out of the blue, you totally cool down. This issue of anxiety increased by the fact of being at home for so long, so you eat more and get overweight. (Respondent 6).

My thoughts were totally on how it is going to be, a tremendous feeling of insecurity, a feeling of fear, of uncertainty, I didn't know if I was going to Tokyo, if, in that period of the pandemic, I could be among the best in the world. So there is a feeling of uncertainty about everything. (Respondent 9).

In the beginning it was a little shocking because we didn't know what to do. We were in a small apartment here in São Paulo, and we were a bit lost. [...] So we were very scared. (Respondent 10).

The second subcategory encompasses the adaptation of training, purchase of materials, and the decision on whether stay at home or return to the family. After the training stoppage, the athletes carried out different strategies to continue training, and thus avoid a situation of detraining. Training routines in home confinement were adapted, leading the athletes to decide between staying in the large cities where they train, or returning to their families in their hometowns. Training at home brought difficulties for athletes.

Setbacks on adaptations defined by coaches, trainings restricted to non-essential points to cover preparation for competitions, and implementation in the new space. Lack of motivation to train continuously at home as well as suffering from injuries were other issues. The adaptation of training would require purchasing materials: even if this purchase is perceived as an investment, it is an expense that the athlete did not originally foresee, and which they paid from their pockets. These changes are disclosed in the following statements:

[...] the teacher [coach] made a differentiated spreadsheet, put me to do some activities indoors; he passed the training to me and I was performing, because we have a work sequence. (Respondent 7).

In this pandemic, I had to buy material to keep training at home, I bought bench press, I bought bar, I brought other materials. [...] we couldn't stay at home doing nothing all the time, so we had to find a way to train. (E2).

[...] I tried to train every day. Some days I just couldn't, others I was lazy and didn't train. (Respondent 1).

It was hard to maintain the quality of work in this pandemic. I tried to go to Maresias, to a friend's house to train. My assistance dog passed on an uneven terrain, I twisted my foot, ruptured two ligaments, ended up staying a month without training. I could have stayed at home doing nothing as I was injured. As I was injured and my sister had a gym bike, so I pedaled all the time until the 100% recovery. There was a trampoline, I worked on strengthening. (Respondent 6).

The study provided an opportunity for para-athletes to report these moments, evidencing the implications for quality of life at work.

## 5 Conclusion

This research aimed to understand what is quality of life in sports as a job for Brazilian Paralympic Athletes of the athletics modality, who are in preparation for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games

The analyses of interviews about sports as a job for para-athletes revealed a journey of double surmount, which first goes through overcoming difficulties related to the disability-related limitations that imposed several kinds of difficulties on them: limitations of location, freedom of action, prejudice suffered, lack of social inclusion and opportunities to develop a professional life, and that through the opportunities offered by sports, and then the arrival to the Paralympic Sport, recognized as playing a transforming role, and having an opportunity to acquire a new identity. The conquests of international medals and podiums are recognized as the apex of this journey of surmounting limits, and the demand for results so typical to organizations.

This work has also identified the characterization of this group's work activity, the "profession of athlete": performance, competitiveness, and goal setting are elements that belong to the work of industrial society; managerialism and discipline are values that belong to an organization; mechanization of sports with repetitive activities is part of the daily routine of high-performance sports; planning and training cycles are understood as part of a production process; there is a close link between performance and remuneration. Moreover, expressions that characterize the meanings assigned by para-athletes to sports as a job were recovered: the centrality of sports as a job in their lives, which contributed to reshape them, and rewrite a success story mixed with pain and sacrifice; feelings of freedom and autonomy, as through sports activity, the para-athletes decided to face their lives with normality, actively developing them and overcoming the limitations of disability; the achievements and accomplishments through sports gave a new meaning to disability, allowing professional identification.

The constitutive axes of Activity-Centered Ergonomics Applied to Quality of Life in sports as a job were identified. In the axis of work condition, adjustment of work conditions in Training Centers was pointed out as a factor closely related to the experience of quality of life at work, and which influences the athletes' performance. In the axis of work organization, managerial elements were characterized as division of labor, hierarchy, prescribed work (training journeys, breaks and rests, tasks and deadlines), performance, compensation, measurement, mechanization. In the axis of socio-professional work relationships, the experiences of quality of life at work go through the experience of healthy professional relationships, as well as clear and objective communication, despite disagreements between groups. In the axis of recognition and professional growth, feelings of satisfaction were pointed out simultaneously with situations of discontentment. In the axis of the work-social life link, work was pointed out as a source of pleasure, appreciation of the time spent on the activity, and the feeling of social usefulness.

The postponement of the Paralympic Games due to the pandemic of COVID-19 led this study to try to understand the consequences of this change for both personal and professional lives of para-athletes. A wide range of feelings and evaluations were expressed by the para-athletes: for some, the impact was negative, while for others the impact came as a positive contribution, becoming a longer Olympic cycle. Athletes reflected about training periods, wear and tear of the last competitions, indexes achieved and to be achieved, and the uncertainty of specific preparation for the Paralympic Games. The emergence of injuries and mental health problems and anxiety due to the absence of competitive activities was identified, as well as uncertainty about the schedule of competitions. Finally, the adaptation of training sessions by coaches to be developed in social isolation, and the fitting of training spaces were mentioned, as well as the return to the families' place of residence, expenses with the purchase of support material and training equipment.

Three the contributions of this research are described below. 1) Semi-structured script developed based on qualitative questions in the Activity-Centered Ergonomics Inventory applied to Quality of Life at Work. This questionnaire, in its qualitative part, is composed of only four broad qualitative questions. In the present research, questions referring to the five structuring axes of activity-centered ergonomics for quality of life at work were added, helping the process of identifying categories, and allowing deeper exploration of the phenomenon from the perspective of the research participants. 2) Conducting qualitative research using the activity-centered ergonomics approach to promote quality of life at work is considered another methodological contribution, since the vast majority of studies adopt a quantitative approach.

3) The study contributes toward a theoretical advance about sports as a job: the dimensions of sports as a work activity were characterized based on activity-centered ergonomics (work activity, work conditions, and result of the activity), and the factors of activity-centered ergonomics to promote quality of life and well-being situations in this work context were identified.

As for the limitations of this study, we highlight the following: the impossibility of accessing the Executive Board and the Brazilian Paralympic Academy of the Brazilian Paralympic Committee to conduct this research did not allow the inclusion of the institutional vision, and considerations about work management. Moreover, literature on social management and sports as a job is still scarce, and studies were predominantly found on sports training, exercise physiology, sports marketing, sports psychology, legislation, regulations, sports management through the lens of result management, and compliance. Social themes are the subject of new studies being carried out by the Olympic Studies group at USP.

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