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At Paralympics, First Thing Judged Is Disability

By SARAH LYALL
The New York Times

LONDON — Anthony Dawson, who has cerebral palsy and little muscle function on his right side, rode for South Africa in the first round of the equestrian dressage competition at the Paralympics on Thursday, guiding his horse through an intricately choreographed series of movements.

Last summer he had to perform an altogether different set of exercises in front of a medical professional, a way of determining what for many is the most crucial and potentially fraught aspect of the Paralympics: the disability category in which he would compete.

There are five grades for Paralympic equestrians, ranging from 1A, for the most severely disabled riders, to IV, for the least impaired. Dawson, 17, was put in Grade II, the group to which he has been assigned in every evaluation he has gone through. He is confident that he belongs there, though some of his competitors clearly are not: so far in his brief career, Dawson said, he has been the subject of eight official complaints about his classification.

“They were saying that I’m too able for Grade II,” he said. “But Grade II is by far the most diverse grade, and that’s where I’ve always been placed.” He added dryly, “I have really gotten to know the classifiers.”

The London Paralympics, which opened Wednesday, are no less competitive than the Olympics held here earlier this summer. The Paralympics are the largest ever, with 4,200 athletes competing in 20 sports. Some are in wheelchairs, some are wholly or partially blind, some have three, two, one or no limbs, some have dwarfism, some have intellectual deficits, some have complex coordination and muscle-control problems and some have multisymptom conditions like multiple sclerosis.

The classifiers, as they are called, must ensure that athletes compete against others with similar levels of ability — an exercise in physical examination and assessment that exists nowhere else in sports.

“Its not always as simple as if you’re just dealing with amputations, for example — one arm, one leg,” said Christine Meaden, chief classifier for the International Paralympic Equestrian Committee. “We have people with coordination problems, paralysis, amputations and visual impairments — and people who have a mixture of types of disabilities.”

Paralympians have to be assessed by international classifiers before arriving at the Games. But, said Peter van der Vliet, the International Paralympic Committee’s chief medical classifier, some 245 athletes here have been deemed borderline — hovering between one grade and another — and have been reassessed at the Games. Forty

have been moved to different classifications, and eight athletes (in track and field, swimming and judo) have been ruled ineligible and sent home because, he said, they did not meet “the minimal disability criterion.”

The classification process is multifaceted and different for each sport. Riders in international equestrian events are observed riding in competition. They also have to undergo face-to-face medical evaluations from two international classifiers, involving a range of movements that tests for strength, coordination and flexibility. The exercises can be as straightforward as touching a finger and thumb together, moving the shoulder, or placing a heel in set spots on the ground.

“They seem like simple tasks,” said Dawson, “but when I started doing them I was like, ‘Oh, my life — this is so difficult.’ ”

The system is meant to focus on the athletes’ physical abilities and on the limitations their disabilities impose, not on their riding prowess. But it can anger competitors who believe that they are being forced to compete against people who are less disabled than they are.

“People will say, ‘You shouldn’t be in grade 1A — you ride so well,’ ” said Donna Ponessa, a rider on the United States team. She has multiple sclerosis and is paralyzed from the chest down. She uses a wheelchair and a ventilator, except when she rides. “But I’ve given up a year and a half of my life for the Olympics,” she said — time almost entirely spent riding, exercising at the gym or working.

Riders with fluctuating conditions like multiple sclerosis are frequently re-evaluated, and athletes unhappy with their classifications can appeal.

“There are two reasons for this,” Mr. van der Vliet said. “First, it’s a fundamental right that if an athlete believes a wrong decision is taken, he has a right to protest. And with some athletes their default mode is that they will challenge a decision any time they can when they are not in agreement with it.”

Swimming has 10 classifications for athletes with different physical impairments, plus three more for visual impairments and one for athletes with intellectual deficits. For that reason it is particularly prone to challenges, and swimmers say they sometimes suspect that athletes have not been classified correctly.

Three weeks before she was set to compete in the London Paralympics, Mallory Weggemann, an American swimmer who is paralyzed from the waist down, learned that officials from the International Paralympic Committee had questions about her level of ability and were requiring her to submit to reclassification in London.

Weggemann has always swum at the S7 level, against athletes who, for instance, might have double leg amputations or paralysis down one side of their bodies. But after a physical evaluation by two examiners four days ago, she was abruptly moved to level S8, a class in which the athletes are less disabled.

“I have no function or feeling from the belly button down, and now I’m competing against people who are, say, missing just one arm or have leg amputations below the knee,” Weggemann said. “I think there’s a significant difference in functional ability between myself and the new competitors.”

It works both ways, and athletes say they have all heard of instances of people trying to game the system.

“I think I’m in the right class, but always there are some people who — how do you say this? — lie a little more than others and pretend to be worse than they are,” said Amaya Alonso, a Spanish swimmer who competed Thursday in the women’s 400-meter freestyle S12 class, for swimmers with visual impairments.

One competitor, who did not want to be identified talking about cheating, said: "You hear people say, 'Well, I know what it takes to be a I or a II.' Everybody is in search of that win, present company included, and I'm told that some people are less than scrupulous."

Asked if the system was vulnerable to abuse, Mr. van der Vliet said: "I can counter that one with a question: can I eliminate doping from the Games?" (The answer is no.)

The most notorious example of Paralympic classification manipulation took place at the 2000 Games in Sydney. The Spanish men's intellectual disability basketball team was stripped of its gold medal after it emerged that many of its members were not intellectually disabled at all.

After that, mentally disabled athletes were barred from the Paralympics while officials revised the classification process; they are back again this year.

The athletes say they sympathize with the difficulties faced by the classifiers, who are forced to determine how to sort people who have several hundred different types and degrees of disability.

"No system is perfect," Dale Dedrick, a U.S. para-equestrian who has systemic lupus and competes at Level II, said in an e-mail. "Before I would wish to challenge someone else's disability, however, I would consider carefully the old adage of walking a mile in their shoes."