
THE MEANING OF LIFE FOR ATHLETES WITH DISABILITIES

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Received: April 2026, Revised: May 2026, Accepted: June 2026

Abstract

Athletes with disabilities often face challenges in accepting their condition, losing their direction, and finding meaning in life after experiencing a disability. Although various studies have identified factors related to meaningfulness in life among people with disabilities, research on how athletes with disabilities construct meaning in life through their experiences in Paralympic sport remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to explore the meaningfulness of athletes with disabilities through their experiences in Paralympic sport. This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological design and was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Participants were selected using purposive sampling and consisted of three athletes with disabilities: a blind chess athlete, a physically disabled table tennis athlete, and a physically disabled bowling athlete. All participants had been active athletes for at least 1 year and had experience competing in national-level competitions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis. Findings indicate that participation in Paralympic sport helps participants move from a state of existential emptiness to self-acceptance, increased self-confidence, and personal development. Social support from family, coaches, and fellow athletes reinforces this process, resulting in positive changes in psychological, social, educational, and economic aspects that ultimately shape a sense of meaning in life. The themes of process and self-development emerged as central themes connecting the entire process of developing meaningfulness in athletes with disabilities.

Keywords: Meaningfulness of Life, Disabled Athletes, Paralympic Sports, Phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

Disability is a community that faces a range of barriers to active participation in social environments, arising from the interplay between individual limitations and environmental factors. According to the World Health Organization (2023), disability concerns not only functional problems but also activity limitation and participation restriction that can influence an individual's quality of life. Besides suffering from physical limitations, people with disabilities frequently face discrimination, stigmatization, and obstacles in building social relationships that lead to low self-esteem, self-acceptance, identity formation, and psychological well-being (Elvia Agustina et al., 2023). This makes disability not only a physical but also a whole-life experience of finding one's

meaning in life.

In this context, sports serve as a tool in the process of self-development and psychosocial rehabilitation for people with disabilities. Participation in adaptive sports and Paralympic sports helps boost self-confidence and foster a more positive sense of self-identity (Çelenk, 2021). Sports activities provide athletes with opportunities to engage in social interactions, expand their social networks, and experience recognition within their social circles (Lindseth & Norberg, 2022). Consistent engagement in training and competition contributes to improved emotional well-being and psychological resilience, enabling athletes to face various life challenges adaptively (Kim et al., 2022). Through these experiences, athletes with disabilities gradually develop a more positive outlook by focusing on their abilities, achievements, and opportunities for growth, rather than on their limitations.

The link between sport and the meaning of life can be understood through the logotherapy theory advanced by Viktor E. Frankl. Frankl (1992) explains that the primary human motivation is the will to meaning, namely the drive to find purpose and meaning in life even in situations full of suffering and limitations. If a person fails to find meaning in their life, they will experience a condition known as an existential vacuum, a state characterized by a sense of emptiness, a loss of direction in life, a lack of purpose, and the feeling that their life no longer has meaning. In Indonesia, this concept was developed by Bastaman (2007), who explained that the search for meaning in life is a systematic process that helps individuals accept themselves, cope with difficulties, and establish more meaningful life goals. This concept is highly relevant to the experiences of athletes with physical disabilities who face significant changes due to their limitations. Individuals who find meaning in life tend to have greater psychological resilience, a clearer sense of direction, and stronger motivation. In contrast, a lack of meaning in life often leads to a sense of aimlessness and existential emptiness (Oblinger-Peters et al., 2025).

From the available literature, it can be seen that a sense of meaning in life among people with disabilities stems from several factors, such as self-acceptance, social support, and participation in sports activities. A study by Yusuf et al. (2025) states that a sense of meaning in life among people with non-genetic disabilities is attributed to self-acceptance, independence, experiences of overcoming challenges, and support from family, friends, and the community, which encourage individuals to remain productive and play their part in social life. Marwaziah (2020) explains that the sense of meaning in life among athletes with non-congenital physical disabilities develops through a process of self-acceptance, adaptation to physical limitations, active involvement in sports, and support from family and the social environment. Meanwhile, Nopiyanto et al. (2022) suggest that athletes with disabilities achieve a sense of life's meaning



through stages of suffering, self-acceptance, the discovery of life's meaning, the realization of that meaning through commitment to sports, and ultimately, the attainment of a more meaningful life.

Although some of the aforementioned studies have successfully identified factors and processes that influence the meaning of life for people with disabilities, most of these studies remain focused on psychological factors, adjustment, or other influences on meaning in life in general. Studies on how athletes with disabilities create and give meaning to their experiences through their subjective experiences of participating in Paralympic sports and the factors that shape this meaningfulness using a phenomenological approach remain very limited. Furthermore, there is limited research examining how self-development, social support, athletic experience, and future orientation interact as a unified whole to shape the meaningfulness of life in athletes with disabilities. Therefore, the existential process that transforms experiences of limitations into sources of personal growth and meaning in life still requires a deeper understanding.

Given these circumstances, this study offers a novel approach by exploring in depth how athletes with disabilities make sense of their lives through their experiences of participating in sports and competing, as well as by identifying the factors that influence the formation of this sense of life's meaning. Using a phenomenological perspective and grounded in Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, this study seeks to understand how personal experiences, social relationships, and involvement in Paralympic sports serve as sources of meaning in life. The findings of this study are expected not only to contribute to the development of psychological research on the meaning of life among athletes with disabilities but also to broaden the public's understanding of the struggles, potential, and abilities of individuals with disabilities in building meaningful lives. Therefore, this study aims to explore the meaning of life for athletes with disabilities and to identify the factors that influence the formation of that meaning through their experiences in Paralympic sports.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design is used to understand the subjective experiences of athletes with physical disabilities in making meaning of life through sport (John W. Creswell, 2016). The phenomenological approach was chosen because this study focuses on the lived experiences, feelings, and meanings directly experienced by participants related to their involvement in sport. Through this approach, researchers can explore in depth how sport shapes self-acceptance, identity, self-confidence, and even the sense of meaning of life in athletes with disabilities.

Research participants were selected using purposive sampling, namely individuals with direct experience aligned with the research focus (Sugiyono, 2016). This study included three



athletes with disabilities: a blind chess player, a physically disabled table tennis player, and a physically disabled bowler. All participants were athletes who had actively participated in sports for at least one year and had experience in competitive sports. The number of participants was considered adequate because phenomenological research emphasizes the depth of exploration of experiences rather than the number of participants. Data collection continued until the amount of information obtained reached data saturation, that is, when subsequent interviews no longer yielded new themes of information relevant to the focus of the study.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, observation, and document analysis to obtain in-depth and comprehensive data (Kallio et al., 2016). Interviews were conducted individually at a mutually agreed-upon location and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes per participant. During the interviews, the researcher used a flexible interview guide that allowed participants to share their experiences, feelings, and perspectives in greater depth. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The data analysis technique used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) developed by Smith et al., (2009), through the stages of rereading the data, providing initial notes, developing themes searching for relationships between themes, searching for relationships between themes, and discovering patterns of experience among participants. Data validity was maintained through technical triangulation by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation so that the data obtained were more accurate and reliable (Nurfajriani et al., 2024). This study adhered to research ethics principles by explaining to all participants the study's objectives, procedures, benefits, and their rights throughout their participation. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, and participants were free to withdraw at any time without any consequences. To maintain the confidentiality of participants' identities, all names were anonymized using codes (P1, P2, and P3), and all research data were used solely for academic purposes and securely stored to protect participants' privacy.

RESULTS

This study uses phenomenological analysis to understand how people with disabilities perceive their lives in the world of the Paralympics. This approach focuses on how each person understands their life in a personal and meaningful way. Based on the results of the analysis of the three participants, four main themes (superordinate themes) were identified: the process and development of oneself; social support; the impact of sport on one's life; the meaning of life; and future orientation.

Four such themes indicate an interconnected process involved in the development of the



meaning of life. The process begins with the participant's personal growth following participation in Paralympic sports. Personal growth is supported by social support from family, coaches, teammates, and the surrounding environment. A combination of personal growth and social support leads to positive changes in participants' lives, contributing to the development of their life meaning and future orientation.

Process and Self-Development

The first theme describes the personal growth participants have experienced since becoming involved in Paralympic sports. This theme describes the participants' progress of self-improvement since learning about Paralympic sports. Each of the three individuals showed growth in self-assurance, encouragement, flexibility, and a desire to keep getting better.

Participant 1's self-development process began with a desire to try new things and eventually led to greater aspirations and motivation in the realm of sports.

"At first, it was just about gaining experience. Alhamdulillah, once you are in the game, you have to prepare yourself to give it your best. It started as just a way to gain experience and make friends. Now that I have competed several times, I have to do even better than in the previous competitions. If I used to win a silver medal, now I am aiming for gold, right?" (P1).

Furthermore, participant 1 also demonstrated a continuous process of learning and skill development.

"Chess requires constant practice. New theories emerge every day, so you have to keep practicing and learning every day" (P1).

A similar view was expressed by Participant 2, who sees challenges as part of the process of growth.

"That is our process, right? The process of working toward victory, haha. So yeah, Zi, I have to work really hard in practice. I hope to win the match. I am proud to be competing, especially since I am representing our region. I am the champion, of course, that is what everyone hopes for. However, winning and losing will be decided on the field; we all know that, right? Well, for now, I have to get through this training process, which is not easy" (P2).

Meanwhile, participant 3 described the major changes they experienced after getting involved in Paralympic sports. Before getting involved in sports, the participant was dealing with significant psychological challenges.

"At first, I felt inferior, going from being able-bodied to having a disability. I was at my lowest point for 10 years, embarrassed to leave the house. It was difficult to rebuild my mental health" (P3).

After participating in sports activities, participant 3 realized that his view of life had changed.



"My mindset, Alhamdulillah, has changed from being constantly pessimistic about life. I used to wonder, "What is going to happen to me in the future? What kind of work will I do?" But ever since I got into sports, and seeing so many friends who have achieved great things and earned big bonuses, it has really opened my mind about the future" (P3).

Social Support

The second theme highlights the importance of the social support participants receive while fulfilling their roles as athletes with disabilities. This support comes from family, partners, coaches, fellow athletes, and the surrounding community, providing a sense of belonging and encouragement to continue growing.

Participant 1 said that social support from family, coaches, team officials, and fellow athletes was an important part of his experience as an athlete.

"Of course, my parents, my younger siblings, and my family are also very supportive. So are my coaches, administrators, and the Paralympic committee. Moreover, my friends too, because without them, I would not have been able to adapt this quickly" (P1).

It was also clear that the participant felt welcome in the sports environment.

"Alhamdulillah, I was accepted right away. The first time I joined, I was actually afraid I would not be accepted, but Alhamdulillah, as soon as I arrived, I was welcomed right away and invited to chat, so I was able to adapt more quickly to my teammates and the coach" (P1).

Social support for participant 2 came from his wife, family, and the local community.

"My wife and family are supportive; My neighbors support me and pray for me." (P2)

At the same time, participant 3 felt that their environment played an important part in overcoming difficult situations.

"Interacting with others: The important role of parents and sports." (P3)

Participant 1 also mentioned that the presence of other athletes in similar situations made him feel he was not alone.

"Yeah, the time I spent adapting was at the Bina Netra Social Center, and that is where I met other visually impaired people and made friends with them. I realized I was not alone—there were actually many others whose conditions were even more severe than mine. So, that is when I started feeling grateful and was able to build connections, and I was able to learn more about life with a disability" (P1).

The Impact of Sport on Life

The theme alludes to the changes that individuals' lives undergo as a result of competing in Paralympic sports. These impacts include changes in economic, social, psychological, educational, and lifestyle.

For participant 1, sports activities have helped gain a better orientation in life and provided



financial benefits.

"Alhamdulillah, really helpful because, praise be to God, it is a little bit of income from that, and it helps my parents, too" (P1)

Participant 1 also feels that they have gained a lot of experience since joining Paralympic sports, as well as financial resources for future savings. In addition, they now have a more varied schedule of activities.

"Yes, Alhamdulillah, I have gained a lot of experience after joining this Paralympic sport. Alhamdulillah, I have gained experience, expanded my network of friends, and even earned a living. A little bit for the future; There are more activities like that because initially I only did it at home every day, but now there are activities once every two years or once every four years for the national level." (P1).

For participant 2, participation in sports was the beginning of major transformations in their family economy.

"I can build a house and pay for my children's schooling with my bonus; I can support my wife and children without help from others." (P2)

Moreover, participants stated that sports made them feel more respected.

"I am no longer looked down upon." (P2)

For participant 3, participation in sports helped overcome difficulties and access educational opportunities.

"I got into college thanks to my athletic achievements; sports help in difficult times." (P3)

Participants also reported changes in their self-control.

"More organized / disciplined with time." (P3)

The Meaning of Life and Future Orientation

The theme concerns how participants perceive their life experiences as people with disabilities and as Paralympic athletes. The themes are associated with life's hopes for the future, life goals, religious perspectives, and the intention to benefit others.

Participant 1 perceived his life in relation to family members, the future, and his impact on others.

"A meaningful life is definitely one that makes parents proud and provides the best for the family." (P1)

Participant 1 also believed that they benefited others using the medium of social media.

"...usually they also say thank you for being beneficial to them. Sometimes, when they are at their lowest point, they see my content, which gives them the enthusiasm to live life again. So, I am also being beneficial to others." (P1)

In addition, the participants were full of hope for future international success.

"I hope to participate in the international Paralympics." (P1)



Participant 2 finds meaning in life through family well-being and a desire to continue contributing after retiring from athletics.

"Family well-being, peace, health, and happiness are the most important things in life." (P2)

The participants were also hopeful about contributing to society even after retirement from athletics.

"I want to be a coach when I retire." (P2)

Participant 3 saw his life as an opportunity to help other disabled individuals and to change societal stigma.

"Motivating friends with disabilities to rise; I want to change societal stigma about disability." (P3)

Religiosity was another important aspect of participants' lives.

"I must draw closer to God." (P1)

"I must uphold religious values." (P2)

The four main themes identified in this study form an interconnected process in the development of a sense of life's meaning among athletes with disabilities. This process begins with self-development through participation in sports, which fosters self-confidence, self-acceptance, and motivation to grow. This development is then reinforced by social support from family, coaches, fellow athletes, and the surrounding community. The interaction between self-development and social support has various positive effects on participants' psychological, social, educational, and economic well-being. All of these experiences ultimately shape a sense of life's meaning and future orientation, characterized by life goals, hopes, a desire to contribute to others, and a strengthening of spiritual values.

DISCUSSION

This study aims to understand how meaningfulness in life is shaped among athletes with disabilities through their experiences participating in Paralympic sports. The results show that meaningfulness in life does not emerge instantly, but rather through a dynamic and interconnected process. Before finding meaning in life through sport, some participants first experienced difficult times characterized by a loss of direction in life, low self-confidence, difficulty accepting their condition, and even social withdrawal. This condition can be understood as a form of existential vacuum, a state in which individuals lose purpose, meaning, and direction in life after experiencing suffering that significantly changes their lives (Frankl, 1992). In this situation, sport serves as a starting point, helping participants rebuild their identities and find new meaning in their lives.

The first theme indicates that participation in Paralympic sports contributes to the self-development of athletes with disabilities. After experiencing difficult times marked by a sense of



lost direction in life, involvement in sports provides participants with the opportunity to rediscover their abilities, build self-confidence, and develop the motivation to achieve specific goals. This finding aligns with research by Mira et al. (2023), which showed that participation in sport improves psychological well-being and resilience among athletes with disabilities.

However, this study demonstrates that the changes experienced by participants extend beyond improvements in psychological well-being. Participants also experience changes in how they view themselves, their disabilities, and the goals they aspire to achieve in life. These findings suggest that sports serve as a means of meaning-making, helping athletes develop a more positive self-identity.

The second theme indicates that social support plays a crucial role in the process of developing a sense of meaning in life. Support provided by family, partners, coaches, fellow athletes, and the surrounding environment helped participants feel accepted, valued, and confident in their continued development. This finding supports research by Aitchison et al. (2021), which demonstrated that social support plays a crucial role in maintaining the motivation and psychological well-being of athletes with disabilities. In this study, social support served not only as a source of emotional support but also as a factor in strengthening participants' self-acceptance.

The third theme shows that Paralympic sport has a broad impact on the lives of participants. This impact is not only seen in psychological aspects but also encompasses social, educational, economic, and daily-life aspects. Some participants gained the opportunity to continue their education through sporting achievements, while others experienced improved family economic conditions and greater social recognition. This finding builds on the research of Puce et al. (2023), which emphasized the contribution of sport to the quality of life of people with disabilities. In this study, sport not only improves well-being but also opens access to education, improves economic conditions, and strengthens social acceptance. Thus, sport can be understood as a means of empowerment that provides multidimensional benefits for athletes with disabilities.

The final theme indicates that meaningfulness in life among athletes with disabilities is related to life goals, hopes for the future, family relationships, contributions to others, and religious values. The participants felt motivated to succeed, make their families proud, improve their families' financial status, and show that people with disabilities can succeed. Some of the participants even confessed that they gained a renewed zest for life through participation in sports. This implies that the will-to-meaning dimension is present. Will to meaning refers to the motivation within people to seek out meaning and value in life. According to Schnell & Danbolt (2023), meaningfulness in life is linked to one's life objectives, self-growth, and psychological well-being. The researcher stated that meaningfulness in life not only provides direction but also acts as a shield



against emotional stress and existential crises.

Participants were not only focused on achieving success but also on making their families happy, inspiring others, and benefiting their surroundings. The finding aligns with research by Oblinger-Peters et al. (2025), which explains that the search for meaning in sport is related to life goals, self-identity, and positive social relationships. Besides that, religiosity was another significant aspect of the process of meaning-making of the participants in this study. Proximity to God, thankfulness, and the belief that everything that happens is a manifestation of wisdom were seen as sources of strength in coping with the disability. It helped participants accept their disability and build better lives for themselves. It resonates with the findings of studies conducted in regard to religious coping methods, where surrender and divine help, alongside individual initiative in finding meaning in hardships and forming positive attributes, such as patience, thankfulness, and acceptance, play a key role (Aliyah & Riadi, 2025). In this study, meaningfulness in life is understood not only as personal satisfaction but also as the ability to live a life that is valuable and beneficial to others.

One of the main contributions of this research is the process of discovering the meaning of life experienced by athletes with disabilities. The results of this study indicate that, before understanding the meaning of life, several participants experienced situations marked by a lack of direction, low self-confidence, and difficulty accepting their disability. Participation in sports catalyzes personal development, increasing self-confidence, motivation, and self-acceptance. This process is strengthened by social support from those around them, such as family, coaches, fellow athletes, and the surrounding environment. Self-development and social support, when combined, can create positive changes across psychological, social, educational, and economic domains. All of these experiences ultimately shape a sense of meaning in life and a clearer future orientation.

These findings differ from those of Marwaziah (2020) and Nopiyanto et al. (2022), which focused more on factors or stages in achieving meaningfulness in life. This study demonstrates that meaningfulness in life is formed through a dynamic interaction between self-development, social support, and positive experiences gained through sport. Using a phenomenological approach, this study uncovers the subjective experiences of athletes with disabilities, in which they interpret their disability, achievements, social relationships, and future hopes as interconnected sources of meaning. These findings make a new contribution to the study of meaningfulness among athletes with disabilities.

The results of this study have several practical implications. For coaches, it is important to create a training environment that is not only oriented towards improving sports performance but also supports the personal development and psychological well-being of athletes.



For disability sports organizations, the findings of this study demonstrate the importance of providing psychosocial support, mentoring programs, and an inclusive sporting environment so that athletes feel accepted, valued, and able to develop to their full potential.

For policymakers, the results of this study indicate that disability sports should be viewed as a means of social empowerment. Therefore, broader support for adaptive sports programs, access to education, and career development for athletes with disabilities is needed to improve their quality of life and social participation.

Overall, this study demonstrates that Paralympic sport is not only a means to achieve success but also a medium that helps athletes with disabilities overcome existential emptiness, develop themselves, build positive social relationships, and find a deeper purpose and meaning in life.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the meaningfulness of life among athletes with disabilities is shaped of self-development, social support, the positive impact of sport on life, religiosity, and the emergence of meaning in life and future orientation. Involvement in Paralympic sport helps participants build self-confidence, accept their condition, and develop a more positive self-identity. Support from family, coaches, and the sporting environment plays a crucial role in helping participants feel accepted and valued. At the same time, religiosity serves as a source of strength in coming to terms with their condition and living a more meaningful life. Furthermore, sport brings positive changes to participants' lives, both psychologically and socially, giving them a sense of purpose, motivation to develop, and clearer hopes for the future.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this research.

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