

# I Am An Athlete Too: The Story Of How One Athlete Broke Barriers And How You Can Too





# Learning Objectives

Understand

Understand current legislation and how it pertains to school athletics

Gain

Gain an understanding of different inclusion models used throughout the country

Learn

Learn strategies for implementing local, regional, and statewide change for adaptive athlete inclusion in school sports

## SESSION OUTLINE

Session Overview: 5 minutes  
(overview, learning objectives,  
introductions)

Maria's Story and State of MI: 15  
minutes

Pertinent legislation, legal  
requirements for schools and  
athletic associations: 10 minutes

Models for inclusion in track -  
what works, what needs  
improvement: 15 minutes

Discussion about National  
goals: 10 minutes

Q&A: 5 minutes

# Introductions



Dr. Abigail Hereau, PT, DPT, ATC, CSRS

- Doctor of Physical Therapy
- President and Co-Founder of I Am An Athlete Too
- Assistant Middle School Track Coach



Maria Velat

- University of Michigan Kinesiology student
- CEO and co-founder of I Am An Athlete too
- Wheelchair track and tennis student athlete



## Maria's Adaptive Sports Start





# Formation of I Am An Athlete Too

No adaptive category in Michigan

No known previous wheelchair racers

Designed guidelines off of California

Guidelines accepted in my 13 school conference

Denied competition at regionals and finals by MHSAA

# Pertinent Legislation: ADA and Rehab Act

- Prohibits discrimination and guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in the mainstream of American life<sup>1</sup>
- The ADA has five titles that deal with different areas of the public domain, Title II and III directly apply to athletics
- Rehab Act: Prohibits discrimination based on disability in any federally funded education program or activity



# ADA and Rehab Act


Title II: “No qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by such entity<sup>1</sup>”

Title III: “No individual shall be discriminated against on the basis of disability in the full and equal enjoyment of ... or accommodations of any place of public accommodation by any person who owns, leases (or leases to), or operates a place of public accommodation”

**Key Point: Title II directly applies to public institutions and high school athletic associations while Title III applies to places of public**

# Dear Colleague Letter: Students With Disabilities In Extracurricular Athletics (2013)

Clarifying the obligations of school districts to provide students with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate in extracurricular athletics



Initiated discussion drawing comparisons to Title IX's three-part effective accommodation test



Substantial Proportionality, History & Continuing Practice of Program Expansion, or Full & Effective Accommodation of Athletic Interests

## Dear Colleague Letter: Sections about Extracurricular Athletics

“A school district that offers extracurricular athletics must do so in such manner as is necessary to afford qualified students with disabilities an equal opportunity for participation ... making reasonable modifications ... unless the school district can show that doing so would be a fundamental alteration to its program”

“Students with disabilities who cannot participate in the school district’s existing extracurricular athletics program – even with reasonable modifications or aids and services – should still have an equal opportunity to receive the benefits of extracurricular athletics ... the school district should create additional opportunities for those students with disabilities”

# High School Track and Field: McFadden

1. McFadden sued the Howard County Public Schools in Maryland District Court during her 2006 track season
2. Raced alongside students without disabilities but only be scored against other female athletes using wheelchairs
3. Maryland Public Secondary Schools Athletic Association established a scoring policy under which team points for wheelchair race events would not be awarded
4. McFadden sued the MPSSAA in 2007 alleging that this policy violated the Rehab Act and the ADA by relegating her to a “non-scoring exhibition”



# McFadden's Lawsuit

The defendants argued that McFadden's requested accommodation was unreasonable because it would provide McFadden's team with a competitive advantage that would fundamentally alter the state track and field competition



MPSSAA claimed that participants in "new team events" cannot earn team points in the state championship meets until at least 40% of the high schools in the state participate in that event



## Where the court failed

This is about equal opportunity to participate, not asking for accommodation

The relative impact on total points does not create a competitive advantage

# Current Landscape

Most states allow wheelchair and ambulatory divisions at the state level

Few states allow scoring in both divisions at the state level

Michigan is among the states that allows for both divisions, but no scoring at MHSAA regionals and finals



# IEPs & 504 Plans



Students have the right to have extracurricular accommodations added under section five



This reflects the accommodations that are allowing a student athlete to participate



Transportation, support personnel, etc. may be added in



# Models for Inclusion: Track & Field

Each state has a different model. Some are participation/exhibition only, some allow advancement to state finals, and some include point scoring

Louisiana: able to score points but they cannot be what determines a team wins or ties a meet. They will be the co-champion and the other team will be named the champion.

California: able to score points which go towards the team total based on standards and the amount of athletes. Separate ambulatory and wheelchair categories

Michigan: exhibition only, must compete in 2 regular season meets to advance to regionals and state finals. No point scoring allowed at regionals or finals. Points may be allowed in regular season meets if all schools agree to it ahead of time

# MODELS FOR INCLUSION



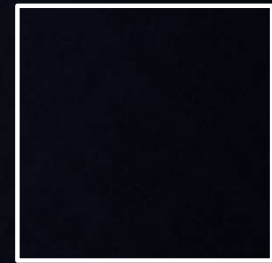
## Differences:

Points, exhibition/  
participation only, state  
meets vs. regular season,  
associations vs school  
legal obligation



## Categories:

Unified teams, Special  
Olympics, adaptive sports,  
wheelchair vs ambulatory



Other sports: swimming,  
cross country, wheelchair  
basketball, wrestling, etc.

# Proposal Acceptance and Category Creation

2021

- Maria and IAAAT submit proposal local schools
- Maria's the first Michigan adaptive athlete to score points for her team
- MHSAA did not allow this at state finals, even as exhibition

2022

- "I Am An Athlete Too" was born
- New statewide proposal created with GLASA and USATF help
- Category would have all events, point scoring, and advancement to finals.

2023

- MHSAA accepted a watered-down proposal with no points, limited events, and no ambulatory category
- 2 year pilot program which would stay based on athlete participation.
- IAAAT and UM ASF began putting on free clinics

# Growing the Category And Athletes Competing

2024

- 2 year pilot program ended
- MHSAA voted to keep adaptive category
- They added a separate ambulatory category but still no point scoring and limited events

2025

- IAAAT continued free clinic, outreach, loaner equipment, and education for coaches, ADs, and officials
- At least 23 high school 6 middle school athletes competed statewide

2026

- MHSAA will add adaptive cross country rules & regulations this upcoming season
- Biggest clinic of 120 people for IAAAT
- Continuing work to expand events and include points scoring statewide

# Free Adaptive Track & Field Clinics



Two clinics:

Upper Peninsula clinic

Lower Peninsula clinic

Hosted each spring since 2023

Aimed to be before track season starts

Athletes are able to leave with free loaner wheelchairs from our organization

Attended by: athletes, coaches, parents, athletic directors, officials, physical therapy students, college students, etc

# Free Adaptive Track & Field Clinic Format



- Five hour clinic split into presentations, breakout sessions, and skills sessions
- Presentation topics: Athlete's rights/legislation, current rules & regulations, methods to help expand the category, coaching
- Breakout session topics: Sports psychology, sports nutrition, strength and conditioning
- End the day with hands-on learning with racing chairs, ambulatory racing, and seated shot put
  - Train new and returning athletes
  - Demonstrate and give out equipment
  - Finish off with a mini track meet

# Clinic Additions Over The Years



Additions based on audience and experts available

☐ Officiating clinic

☐ Kinesiology student/class attendance

☐ Breakout session for future healthcare professionals

Biggest partners: many U-M ASF staff and athletes, Amie Day from GLASA, several other USA and Canadian paralympians

# Michigan - Specifically What We Did

## Used existing models

- Used California model, adjusted to include more events, submitted it to conferences

## Challenges/barriers facing

- MHSAA acts as private organization
- Lack of communication from athletic associations
- Lack of transparency in how rules are established
- Year-long process to change rules

## Benefits we've seen

- Social: connecting with high/middle school teammates
- Physical: increased recovery and overall health
- Educational: increased commitment to classes to pursue college athletics
- Community: growing connections with other adaptive athletes

# Current and Future Michigan Goals

A background image showing three wheelchair athletes in cycling gear sitting on their bikes in a dimly lit room. The athletes are wearing helmets and cycling jerseys. The room appears to be a gym or a training facility.

## Current state of MI rules

1. Presence of adaptive category and rules is based off of local conference rules
  - ☐ Several conferences have adopted point scoring based of IAAAT proposal
  - ☐ Several conferences have adopted MHSAA rules
2. MHSAA rules (no points and only four events) is at regionals and finals
3. Qualify for regionals and finals by competing in two regular season events

## Future goals for Michigan

- ☐ Consistent, state-wide adaptive category
- ☐ Points scoring statewide including at finals
- ☐ Expanded event choices

# Lessons Learned

## What works



- scoring points
- wheelchair and ambulatory division
- racing with non-para athletes if no other adaptive athletes

## What doesn't



- no point scoring and limiting events
- only one "adaptive" category
- racing one para-athlete by themselves



# National Goals

1. Create a standard model for inclusion adopted nationwide that allows for full competition
2. Increase visibility and awareness of adaptive athletes in their schools
3. Create a competitive pipelines from high school to college for athletic endeavors and scholarship opportunities

☑ NCAA/IPC Collegiate inclusion program

# FUTURE STEPS

## What's Next?

Help every state have provisions for adaptive T&F that include point scorings

Increase awareness and recognition of these athletes

Have schools, coaches, athletic directors, and athletes be knowledgeable advocates

## What you can do

Know your state's rules

Contact schools/conferences to advance and/or include rules

Use resources we have available



Questions?



# I AM AN ATHLETE TOO

Supporting the inclusion of adaptive athletes in  
Michigan high school sports

**I am a part of my team**

**I train hard, compete, and represent my school**

**I should earn points like any other member of my team**

**My results should be compared  
to other adaptive athletes**

**I should be able to compete in any event**



[Learn More](#)

# EQUALITY MATTERS

## CONTACT US

Email: [info@i-am-an-athlete-too.org](mailto:info@i-am-an-athlete-too.org)



Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/lamanAthletetoo/>

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# Q & A

Proposal

MHSAA Officials guide

website/IG/FB/emails

Checklists for start of season