

The role of sport for people with a physical disability

Executive Summary of Research Study

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Allianz SE
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Background and objective



In a research study, Allianz and TNS Infratest examined the life circumstances of athletes with a disability in comparison with those of non-athletes with a disability – both looking at leisure sport and high-performance sport.

Key question :

What role does sport play in the lives of people with a physical disability? What motivates them? What benefits do they get from sport? And which problems does a person with a disability face when being physically active?

Three target groups were examined:

- § Recreational athletes with a physical disability
- § Top athletes with a physical disability
- § Disabled persons who do not play sport (focus: what stops them from playing sport?)

Technical details of the study



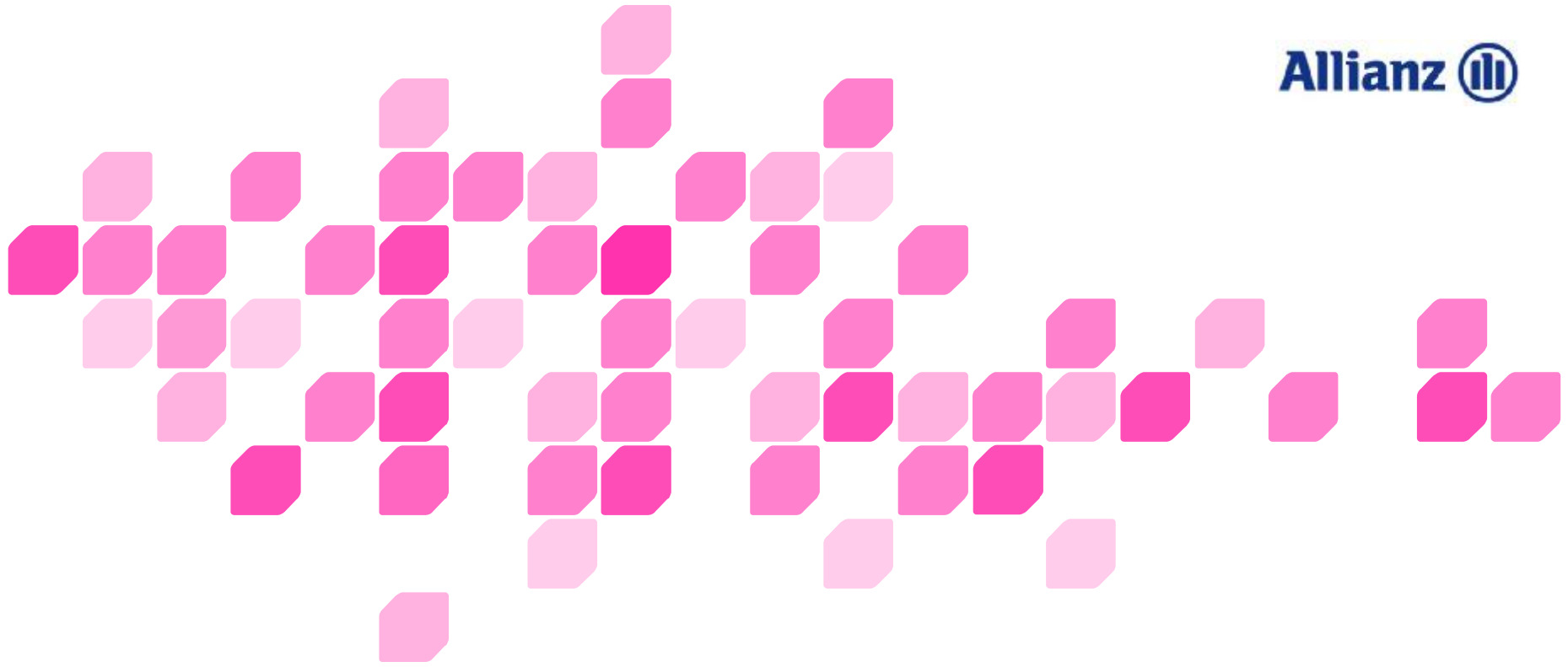
18 ethnographic in-depth interviews were conducted in 2011/12

Gender	Women	14
	Men	11
Age	16 – 29 years	7
	30 – 39 years	6
	40 – 49 years	10
	50 + years	2
Occupation	Student	3
	Part-time work	4
	Full-time work	9
	Early pensioner	8
	Housewife	1
Type of sport	Table tennis	4
	Handbiking	4
	Basketball	5
	Swimming	2
	Winter sport	2
	Other types of sport	2

Type of Disability	Paraplegia	11
	Visual impairment	3
	Amputation	2
	Multiple Sclerosis	2
	Other*	7
Cause of disability	Illness	10
	Accident	9
	Genetic defect / birth	6

* Infantile cerebral palsy, polio with spinal curvature, dwarfism, chronically obstructive lung disease (COPD), hereditary spastic spinal paralysis, atypical Parkinson

6 interviews with non-athletes.
 6 interviews with competitive athletes.
 6 interviews with leisure athletes.
 Each interview lasted app. 2 hours. Athletes were mainly interviewed at sport facilities, non-athletes at home.
 Geographic focus: large German cities.



Summary of Findings

Benefits or non-benefits of doing sport for people with a physical disability



Clear benefits for athletes

They have a better quality of life, because:

They are more optimistic, experience fewer emotional ups and downs, have more fun

Experience themselves as independent, normal, experience a sense of achievement

Maintain or even increase their physical fitness

Are integrated in a community which provides them with important tips & tricks for coping with their disability

Leisure sport is "sufficient" to experience these benefits (it does not have to be competitive sport)

No benefits for non-athletes

They have a lower quality of life, because:

They are less optimistic, tend to brood over things more often, usually enjoy life less

Are less independent, "more handicapped" than athletes, are less confident

Do not optimally maintain remaining physical resources

Are not able to benefit to the same degree from the help & support of other people with a disability

Non-athletes are usually open to sport, IF: no barriers existed, there was more accessibility, greater awareness about sport offers, and if they did not feel a certain amount of inhibition

The significance and benefits of sport for people with a physical disability



The quality of life of people with a physical disability can benefit from sport in many ways:

The motivation to play sport goes far beyond the purely physical level. Sport is necessary for maintaining and increasing physical fitness, which in turn leads to more independence and to less restrictions in everyday life.

Sport contributes to quality of life aspects, such as self-confidence, self-esteem, integration, interaction, making contacts, information on how to cope with disability. This means that psychological and social aspects play an even bigger role than may be the case with able-bodied athletes.

Therefore, sport (organized or played in a group) is far more productive than pure "movement", as in the case of physiotherapy, where there are fewer psycho-social benefits.

Ultimately, sport supports people with an impairment in coping with their everyday lives, in gaining "normal" experience and to get a feeling of independence.

Sport plays an extremely important role for accident victims, who are confronted with a completely different life from one day to the next. For them sport is a bridge to their new life and can play a special role in helping them to master life and to accept their disability.

Access to sport and the role of competitive sport



Therapeutic rehabilitation sport often represents the first point of contact with sport for persons with a disability.

It can be assumed that not all people with a disability manage to come to terms with their new status as a person with an impairment or take advantage of sport activities offered to them during the rehabilitation phase – therefore it would be important to try to systematically introduce those people to various sport opportunities at other points of contact after the rehabilitation stage.

Competitive sport puts a focus on physical and mental challenges, as well as having clear goals

Success in sport leads to a feeling of happiness, self-affirmation and recognition. A larger degree of popularity, more professional conditions and a national and international competitive culture also opens up new worlds for top athletes.

Given the backdrop of this performance-oriented world, it is often a real "downer" for competitive athletes with a disability, if their achievements get overshadowed by public interest in their disability.

Important: the role-model character of competitive athletes with an impairment for leisure athletes is limited - high-performance athletes live in a "different world". This world is quite far from leisure sport.

Barriers: the home and the life beyond



The home plays an important role in the life of people, with an impairment since particularly those with a strongly restricted mobility spend a lot of time within their own four walls. Consequently they have a strong affinity to the Internet as a substitute for mobility. It is also an important research medium to “see” what places (for example sporting facilities) really look like.

One's home is seen as a retreat, a place where one can relax and it is a sign of a self-determination. The outside world, from the point of view of a person with a disability, is often seen as "unpredictable" and full of barriers.

The home is designed to signal "normality". Barrier-free renovations are only made if absolutely necessary – in any case, they should not stick out visually. Assistance is not urgently requested.

People with a disability are confronted by barriers virtually everywhere in daily life, whether they travel on public transport, go shopping or make use of leisure-time activities.

Activities of any kind require a high degree of planning – especially if a special car is beyond financial means. Altogether, financial problems take up an ever increasing part of life.

Thus, important features of a “normal life” – *spontaneity and economic consumption* – become difficult or impossible for many people with an impairment.

Recommendations for breaking down barriers and reaching more participation in sport



Non-athletes with an impairment are only seldom totally against sport. Moreover, the benefits of sport are obvious. TNS Infratest has identified **four main areas**, where barriers should be removed:

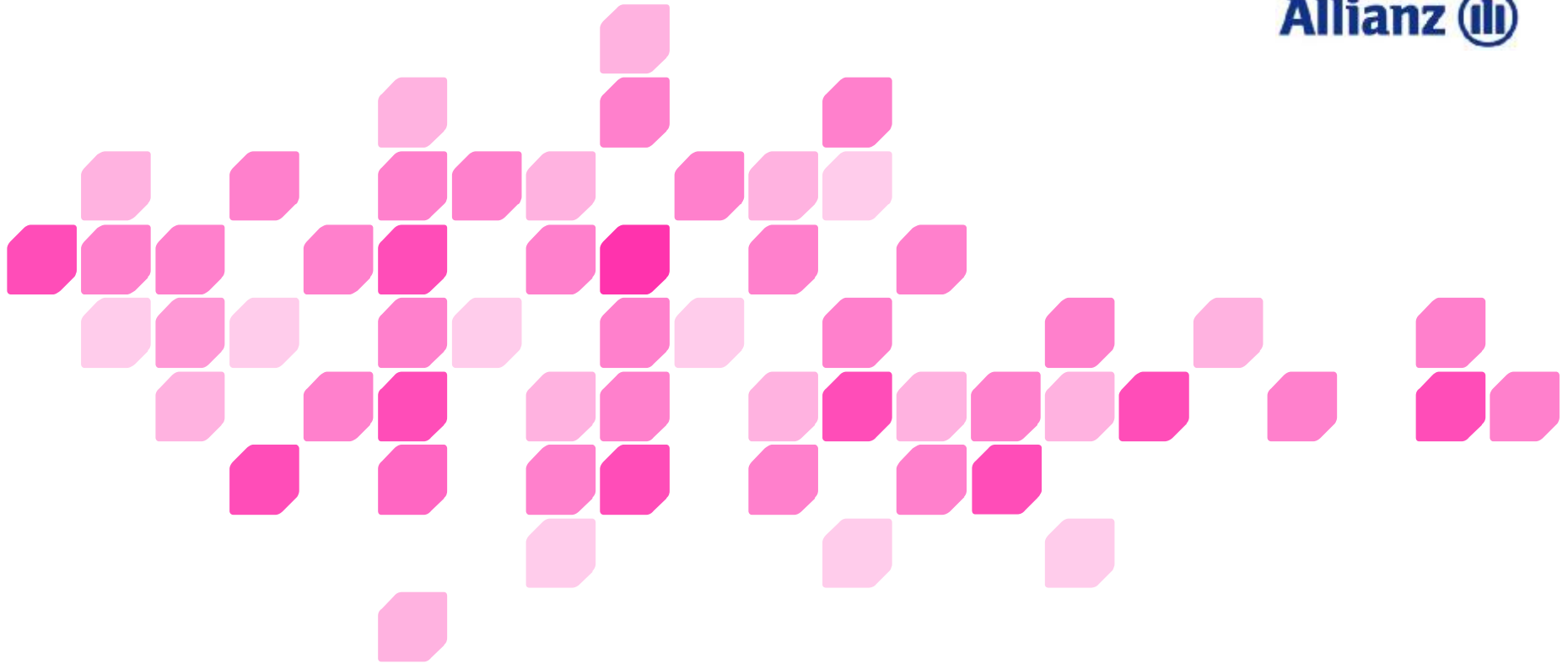
Mobility: improve travel to and from sport facilities – setting up driving services, providing financing options for hand-controls in cars. Helping to provide these services to a broader base of people.

Encouragement and awareness: creating more touchpoints with sport for persons with a disability in the health system (doctors, physiotherapists, clinics). Creating information resources and helping to set up networks among interested persons. Beyond the health system: helping "influencers" in recreational sport to win over other people for sport. Supporting activities at schools.

Making sport for persons with an impairment more attractive: Creating campaigns to counteract the image that "sport for persons with an impairment is a type of occupational therapy for a marginal group". Supporting integrative types of sports to make sport for persons with a disability more common place.

Optimizing facilities: improving sports facilities to make them more accessible. Building new facilities: involving the persons with an impairment in the planning phase. Removing barriers for buying equipment (making hire equipment available, hire-purchase plans, offering consultation). Providing teams of helpers at sport events. Competitive sport: increase the support of teams.

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