

Disabled Athletes
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In the past, the lack of a limb posed an enormous obstacle to anyone trying to live a physically active life. People with missing or partial legs were unable to walk, let alone run, at great speeds or over long distances, and people without fully functioning arms and hands struggled with upper-body activities like carrying, throwing, and catching objects. Consequently, being competitive at almost any physical sport required fully functioning limbs.

Today however, the necessity of biological limbs seems to be decreasing. Cutting-edge prosthetic technologies combine complex computational modeling, high-tech synthetic materials, and sometimes even built-in electric motors to narrow the ability gap between the able and the disabled. Many sufferers of debilitating accidents and congenital defects have made significant improvements to their physical ability and thereby quality of life through the use of prosthetics, the most advanced of which are able to bend, grasp objects, and deliver sensory feedback like human appendages.

In addition to their utility in everyday life, modern prosthetics enable people with missing limbs to play certain sports. In the Paralympic Games, limb-deficient athletes compete alongside victims of other disabilities in 27 different summer and winter sports. The most famous Paralympic athlete, Oscar Pistorius, is a South African sprinter who runs on prosthetics in lieu of the congenitally deformed legs that were amputated below the knees when he was an infant. Pistorius competed in multiple Paralympics, but achieved the peak of his fame in 2012 when he became the first leg-amputee to sprint in the Olympics against fully able athletes. (Pistorius was convicted of murder in 2015, incidentally.)

Whether or not athletes with prosthetic limbs should be allowed to compete with four-limbed athletes is the subject of some controversy. Supporters of athletes like Pistorius claim that a ban on such technology would be a form of ableist prejudice. (Ableism refers to unfair discrimination or bias against people with disabilities.) They also emphasize the value of disabled athletes as inspirational figures for other people struggling with disabilities, showing that the challenges they face can be overcome. Opponents of prosthetically enhanced athletes assert out that prosthetics are unfair because they have the potential to be better than real limbs, possessing, among other positive attributes, immunity to fatigue and pain. They also worry that permitting prosthetics would leave rule makers no choice but to open the floodgates to all sorts of other enhancement technologies. These could include modern technologies like muscular steroids and blood-doping, as well as more dramatic future technologies like genetic modification and cybernetic implants.

Study questions:

1. Should athletes with artificial limbs be allowed to compete in the same events as athletes without artificial limbs? Why or why not?
2. What, if any, technological enhancements to the human body are allowable in sports? How can we differentiate between those that should and should not be allowed?

3. Is it a violation of a disabled person's rights to ban the technology on which they rely from a competition?
4. What is the purpose/value of large athletic competitions like the Olympics and the Paralympics?

<http://www.merckmanuals.com/home/special-subjects/limb-prosthetics/overview-of-limb-prosthetics>

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/scientists-debate-oscar-pistorius-prosthetic-legs-disqualify-him-olympics/>