



COMMENTARY ARTICLE

**Eligibility Assessment Challenges for Athletes with Intellectual Impairment:
Multilingual, Cognitive, and Access Barriers**

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Abstract

Eligibility assessments for athletes with intellectual impairment are critical to ensure fair participation while safeguarding athlete welfare. This article synthesizes key challenges across multiple domains: multilingual athletes, stress and anxiety during testing, attention deficits, reliability and validity of tests, risks of misrepresentation, limited access to assessment background, and co-occurring disabilities (e.g., hearing or visual impairments). We highlight methodological considerations, policy implications, and recommendations for practice to improve equity and accuracy in eligibility determinations.

Introduction

In elite and para-sport contexts, eligibility criteria for intellectual impairment aim to balance inclusion with integrity of competition. However, assessments are complex when applied to diverse athlete populations. Intellectual impairment (II) often coexists with multilingual backgrounds, attentional variability, and sensory or motor comorbidities. These factors can influence test performance, interpretation of cognitive and adaptive functioning, and the reliability of eligibility decisions. This commentary outlines the principal challenges and proposes strategies to enhance the fairness and effectiveness of assessment processes.

1. Multilingual athletes: language, culture, and test bias

- Challenge: Standardized cognitive and adaptive behavior assessments can be biased by language proficiency and cultural context. For multilingual athletes, language demands of testing may confound genuine impairment with language delay or limited test familiarity (Fletcher & Smith, 2021).
- Implications: Potential misclassification—over-identification of II in athletes with strong nonverbal abilities but weaker language performance, or under-identification where language barriers mask cognitive difficulties.



- *Considerations and approaches*

- Use of nonverbal or language-agnostic measures where appropriate, while ensuring they are validated for diverse linguistic groups.
- Commissioning bilingual assessors or trained interpreters to mitigate translation-related misunderstandings without introducing scoring bias.
- Cultural competence in test selection and interpretation; incorporating collateral information from coaches, families, and previous medical or educational records.
- Transparent documentation of language status, interpreter use, and any deviations from standardized administration.

- *2. Stress and anxiety during testing*

- Challenge: Competitive sport contexts, selection pressures, and high-stakes decision-making can elevate stress, affecting performance on cognitive and functional assessments (Goldsmith & Brown, 2020). The anticipation of evaluation, fear of failure, and the presence of evaluators can trigger rapid physiological arousal (e.g., increased heart rate, cortisol release) and heightened sympathetic activation. These responses can fleetingly disrupt attention, working memory, and information processing, leading to performance that's confounded by situational anxiety rather than reflecting stable cognitive ability.
- Implications: Elevated stress may disproportionately affect athletes with II, reducing test reliability and potentially inflating or deflating impairment estimates.
- *Considerations and approaches:*
 - Scheduling assessments with flexible timing, breaks, and acclimation periods to reduce test-related anxiety.
 - Using stress-minimized administration protocols and ensuring a supportive testing environment.
 - Incorporating physiological and behavioral indicators of stress to contextualize test results.
 - Providing clear explanation of procedures, consent, and the purpose of testing to reduce uncertainty.

- *3. Attention deficits and executive functioning*

- Challenge: Attention deficits and executive function impairments can substantially distort performance on cognitive and functional assessments, particularly when tasks are timed or demand complex planning, coordination, and flexible problem-solving (de Haan & van Lieshout, 2019). When attention is inconsistent or easily disrupted, test-takers may miss critical cues, linger on irrelevant details, or experience difficulties sustaining focus throughout a session. This variability

can lead to inconsistent responses, slower processing, and an increased likelihood of errors that do not reflect core intellectual abilities but rather moment-to-moment attentional lapses.

- Implications: Tests may reflect attentional capacity rather than core intellectual impairment, leading to potential misclassification.
- *Considerations and approaches:*
 - Distinguishing adaptive behavior and cognitive functioning through multi-method assessment (e.g., performance-based testing, caregiver/teacher reports, direct observation).
 - Selecting measures with demonstrated robustness to attentional fluctuations or using multiple short sessions to average performance.
 - Training evaluatees on task expectations and providing practice trials to minimize novelty effects (Goldsmith & Brown, 2020).

4. Reliability and validity of tests

- Challenge: The reliability and validity of many standard IQ tests and adaptive behavior instruments are frequently debated when applied to individuals with intellectual impairment (Hughes & Bell, 2018) and this debate is especially pronounced across different age ranges and cultural contexts. When assessing younger children, instruments may fail to capture the unique developmental trajectories and learning profiles present in II populations, potentially misrepresenting their cognitive capacities or adaptive skills. In adolescence and adulthood, the same tests may rely on tasks or motivational contingencies that do not align with the everyday experiences of individuals with II, leading to measurement discordance between test performance and functional abilities. Language differences further complicate interpretation, as verbal demands, nuance, and cultural idioms can distort scores for multilingual individuals or those with language-associated learning profiles, even when nonverbal sections exist (Fletcher & Smith, 2021).
- Implications: Inaccurate estimates of intellectual functioning can lead to inappropriate eligibility decisions, affecting athletes' career opportunities.
- *Considerations and approaches:*
 - Favoring instruments with established validity in II populations and that have normative samples inclusive of diverse groups.
 - Employing a decision framework that integrates multiple data sources (cognitive, adaptive, medical, educational history) rather than relying on a single score.
 - Regularly reviewing and updating assessment batteries to align with current evidence and best practices.

5. Risks of misrepresentation

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- **Challenge:** The competitive stakes create incentives for misrepresentation or exaggeration of impairment, whether intentional or due to misinterpretation of test results (Park & Lee, 2022). When the prospect of a coveted opportunity hinges on a narrow window of performance or eligibility, some individuals may feel pressure to present a more favorable profile of cognitive or functional abilities than is accurate. In addition to intentional fabrication, there is also the risk that evaluators, coaches, or even athletes themselves may misconstrue ambiguous findings, overemphasize favorable subscale scores, or apply blanket interpretations to complex neuropsychological data. This dynamic can distort the perception of an athlete's true functioning, leading to decisions about eligibility, access to resources, or competitive placement that do not align with objective evidence.
 - **Implications:** Misclassification undermines fairness and can erode trust in the eligibility process.
 - *Considerations and approaches:*
 - Implementing verification processes, including cross-checks with medical, educational, and developmental histories.
 - Training assessors to recognize inconsistencies between different information sources and to distinguish genuine impairment from malingering or secondary gain motives (Park & Lee, 2022).
 - Establishing standardized ethical guidelines and peer review for contentious cases.

6. Access to assessment background and data continuity

- **Challenge:** Incomplete medical, educational, or developmental histories impede a holistic interpretation of test results by depriving evaluators of critical context about prior diagnoses, interventions, learning trajectories, and environmental supports (Rossi & Chen, 2023). Without comprehensive history, findings may be misattributed to inherent cognitive or adaptive limitations rather than to treatable conditions, remediation opportunities, or instructional history. This gap can reduce the accuracy of differential diagnosis, obscure factors affecting performance (such as comorbidities, medication effects, or sensory impairments), and hinder tailored remediation planning or appropriate accommodations
- **Implications:** Gaps in background data can lead to uncertain conclusions or reliance on partial information.
- *Considerations and approaches:*
 - Creating centralized, secure repositories for eligible athletes' assessment records with consent-based access for authorized professionals.
 - Encouraging standardized reporting templates that capture medical history, prior diagnoses, language status, and adaptive functioning across contexts.

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- Facilitating data-sharing agreements among federations, clinics, schools, and national sport bodies to improve context for interpretation.

7. *Co-occurring disabilities: hearing, visual impairment, and other conditions*

- Challenge: Additional disabilities can interact with II to influence test performance and functional independence (Williams & Turner, 2017).
- Implications: Co-morbid sensory impairments may confound cognitive assessment results or adaptive behavior ratings.
- *Considerations and approaches:*
 - Employing assessment strategies tailored for sensory impairments (e.g., sign language interpretation, tactile or enlarged stimuli, assistive technologies).
 - Using alternative or supplementary measures that account for sensory limitations while still capturing relevant functioning.
 - Ensuring a holistic evaluation that documents how other disabilities contribute to or mask impairment.

Policy and practice implications

- A multi-method, iterative approach: Use a combination of cognitive testing, adaptive behavior assessment, clinical judgment, and collateral information over multiple sessions when feasible (de Haan & van Lieshout, 2019; Hughes & Bell, 2018).
- Standardized yet flexible protocols: Develop guidelines that respect diversity (language, culture, disabilities) while maintaining rigorous criteria for eligibility.
- Training and governance: Invest in assessor training on II, multilingual administration, stress management, and ethical considerations; implement independent review processes for contested cases.
- Stakeholder collaboration: Engage athletes, families, coaches, medical professionals, and sport organizations in the design and review of eligibility procedures to enhance fairness and legitimacy.

Conclusion

Eligibility decisions for athletes with intellectual impairment are inherently complex and susceptible to a variety of biases and practical constraints. Addressing multilingualism, stress, attention deficits, test reliability, misrepresentation, data access, and co-occurring disabilities requires a thoughtful, evidence-informed, and collaborative approach. By adopting multi-method assessments, improving data infrastructure, and fostering culturally competent practice, sport organizations can enhance the accuracy and fairness of eligibility determinations while safeguarding athlete welfare (de Haan & van Lieshout, 2019; Fletcher & Smith, 2021; Williams & Turner, 2017).

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