



Volume 6 issue 1 2026 (80-84)

Contents lists available at APSS

Journal of Advances in Para Sport Science (APSS)

Journal homepage: <http://apssjournal.com/>

Doi: 10.32604/mcb.2026.0xxxxx

A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Practical Considerations in Administering the Wechsler Intelligence Scales to Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities: Clinical Experiences and Recommendations

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Received: 24-12-2025; Accepted: 14-2-2026; Published: 20-02-2026

This is a letter to the esteemed editor in chief from SeyedehMaryam Komarati, Ph.D. in General Psychology, and a psychologist working with athletes with intellectual disabilities. I prepare and organize their eligibility files for participation in Virtus competitions. Given that I have exclusively used the Wechsler Intelligence Scales in my assessments, I would like to share my experience in administering this test to athletes with intellectual disabilities with the readers of your journal and highlight several important points that may guide other psychologists working in this field.

Virtus is the international sports organization for athletes with intellectual disabilities. It manages the eligibility and classification of athletes with intellectual impairment for participation in competitions and for sport development pathways. Virtus has committed to increasing support and opportunities for athletes with intellectual disabilities to participate in international sport by 2030. As the official organization recognized by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), Virtus has established strict standards for the classification of athletes with intellectual impairment. These assessments play a vital role in ensuring fair competition and determining the appropriate competition level for each athlete.

According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), whose definition is consistent with that of the World Health Organization (WHO), ICD-10, and the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. This disability originates before the age of 21. Limitations in adaptive behavior affect both everyday life and the individual's ability to respond to life changes and environmental demands.

Based on this definition, the Virtus eligibility criteria for athletes with intellectual disability are as follows:

1. Significant impairment in intellectual functioning, defined as a Full-Scale IQ score of 75 or below.



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2. Significant limitations in adaptive behavior, manifested in conceptual, social, and practical skills.
3. Onset of the above conditions during the developmental period, from pregnancy through 21 years of age.

Athletes who meet all three of the above criteria are eligible for evaluation to participate in competitions for athletes with intellectual disabilities. The assessment of intellectual functioning must be conducted by a qualified professional using an internationally recognized and valid intelligence test. The Virtus list includes the following standardized tests:

1. Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) or Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS)
2. Stanford–Binet Intelligence Scales
3. Raven’s Progressive Matrices

The Wechsler test that I use is designed to assess intelligence and cognitive functioning and plays an important role in diagnosing intellectual disabilities and evaluating overall cognitive abilities in children and adults. It is one of the most valid and widely used cognitive assessments of intellectual ability. The test was first developed in 1939 by Dr. David Wechsler, and over the years, different versions have been introduced for various age groups. In his research, Wechsler found that individuals’ IQ scores are directly influenced by their living environment. In addition, he recognized that both biological and environmental factors play a role in the development of intelligence and cognitive abilities.

The verbal scale of the Wechsler test is influenced by cultural factors. Its subtests primarily measure knowledge, language, and personal experiences, which vary across cultures. In general, athletes performed better on the performance (nonverbal) scale than on the verbal subtests.

Most athletes with intellectual disabilities performed weakly on the subtests of Information, Arithmetic, and Similarities. Individuals with intellectual disabilities often have difficulty understanding complex instructions or abstract questions, which leads to poorer performance. Subtests such as Comprehension or Arithmetic require language skills, and acquiring and applying these skills can be challenging for some of these individuals. According to the test administration manual, it is necessary to use clear and understandable language during administration. The athlete should be encouraged throughout the testing process; however, encouragement must not guide them toward the correct answer. Athletes with very low scores on verbal subtests may quickly forget their sport-specific strategies, have difficulty learning movement sequences, may perform well when executing simple and immediate commands, but struggle to understand complex strategies.

In the assessments conducted, athletes demonstrated better performance on nonverbal scales. Most athletes obtained higher raw scores on four out of the five nonverbal subtests. However, a considerable number performed poorly on the Block Design subtest. Since individuals with intellectual disabilities often have difficulty understanding instructions—and many Wechsler subtests require comprehension of abstract concepts, verbal reasoning, or following multi-step instructions—they may fail to process the questions

correctly, even if they possess stronger practical abilities. In the Block Design subtest, the individual must reconstruct a visual pattern using blocks; however, if they do not understand the instructions, they may be unable to complete the task, even if they are practically capable of doing so.

Verbal subtests (such as Similarities, Comprehension, or Arithmetic) are particularly difficult for individuals with language and communication difficulties. Some individuals with intellectual disabilities may not understand idiomatic expressions or abstract questions. For example, in the Comprehension subtest, questions such as “Why do people pay taxes?” or “Why are special laws needed regarding child labor?” require social reasoning, judgment, and understanding of social rules and norms, which may be complex processes for an individual with intellectual impairment.

Some Wechsler subtests (such as Coding or Picture Completion) are time-limited, whereas individuals with intellectual disabilities may have slower processing speed, which negatively affects their performance. These individuals often have weaker working memory and attention. Subtests such as Digit Span require strong working memory, while many individuals with intellectual disabilities have difficulty retaining and processing information, resulting in lower scores.

Individuals with intellectual disabilities are also more easily distracted and may struggle to maintain attention during lengthy tasks. The Wechsler test is relatively long (approximately 60–90 minutes) and may lead to fatigue or loss of motivation. Some athletes discontinued participation after a period of time. In some cases, allowing a short break resolved the issue; in other cases, incomplete testing affected the final scores obtained.

The recommendations I offer to fellow psychologists to facilitate smoother administration of intelligence testing are presented in two sections: the Verbal Scale and the Nonverbal Scale, as follows:

Verbal Scale:

1. During test administration, the athlete should be encouraged; however, encouragement must not lead them toward the correct answer.
2. Each question should be read slowly to the athlete. If necessary, the question may be repeated once, but no changes should be made to the wording.
3. It is essential to use clear and understandable language when administering the test.
4. Words should be pronounced clearly. If the athlete provides an ambiguous or incorrect response, ask them to elaborate slightly to ensure they have understood the meaning of the question.

Nonverbal Scale:

1. Since individuals with intellectual disabilities may have weak verbal skills, in certain subtests such as Picture Completion, if they indicate the correct answer by pointing, the response should be accepted.

2. Due to slower processing speed in individuals with intellectual disabilities, athletes may demonstrate slower performance on performance-based subtests. The examiner should be patient and allow them to complete the task within the time limits specified in the administration manual.
3. To encourage athletes to continue working, if they are unable to complete a task correctly within the allotted time, avoid giving discouraging feedback. You may correct the incomplete task (without awarding a score for it) so that they do not become discouraged by failure, and then encourage them to proceed to the next activity.

In summary, my experience in assessing athletes with intellectual disabilities has led me to conclude that, in order to ensure smoother and more appropriate test administration, psychologists should strengthen the following qualities in themselves:

1. Individuals with intellectual disabilities may see, hear, or process information differently. Therefore, the psychologist must demonstrate greater patience.
2. Create a safe and trustworthy environment. This may be especially important for these athletes. A highly formal atmosphere and the perception that repeated incorrect answers indicate inferiority compared to others can cause significant anxiety. Reassure them that the test is not a judgment of their performance, but rather a tool to better understand their strengths.

The following points should also be observed:

1. Before beginning the test, engage in brief conversation about their sporting interests, achievements, experience in their specialized sport, and other topics commonly used as icebreakers in professional sessions.
2. After 30–40 minutes, a noticeable decline in concentration, response quality, and increased restlessness may appear. When signs of fatigue or disinterest are observed, provide a short break and light refreshment if possible.
3. Anxiety affects every athlete's performance. By establishing rapport at the beginning of the session and explaining the test in a simple and clear manner, you can help reduce the athlete's anxiety and facilitate optimal performance.
4. Individuals with intellectual disabilities are more easily distracted and may struggle to concentrate on tasks. Choose a quiet environment with minimal external stimuli for test administration. Conducting the assessment in crowded settings or rooms filled with numerous visual stimuli is not recommended.

In closing, I wish success to all esteemed colleagues who carry the important responsibility of conducting fair and equitable assessments.

References

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