



ATHLETES²COACHES

A Mentorship Program for Athletes
Experiencing Disability
2021-2022

The Athletes2Coaches Pilot Project was made possible with support from
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Introduction

In autumn 2021, Athletes2Coaches was launched as a mentorship program for youth and young athletes experiencing disability. This pilot project was created with the aim to increase and sustain participation in para sport in Alberta by developing coaching and leadership capacity among young athletes experiencing disability.

Athletes2Coaches seeks to contribute to para sport participation in Alberta through the following goals:

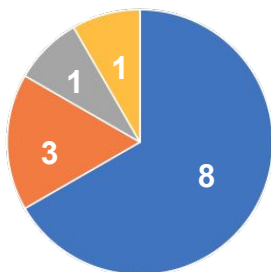
- Increase the number of trained coaches and volunteers with lived disability experience
- Increase the number of positive role models for young people experiencing disability
- Decrease dropout rate as participants are engaged in para sport in new ways
- Develop an Alberta focused mentorship framework for youth and young athletes experiencing disability that establishes a pathway from participant/athlete to coach/volunteer
- Establish a community of practice among young athletes across Alberta to enhance feelings of belongingness, share experiences, and create a space for long term connections.

Athletes2Coaches used a virtual environment to provide youth and young athletes experiencing disability with structured learning opportunities to develop leadership and coaching skills. By establishing an athlete network across the province, athletes experiencing disability were able to build skills, share experiences, and learn from one another.

Increasing the number of parasport athletes who become coaches can provide much needed role models for new athletes to 'see themselves' in leadership roles. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion is key to decision making roles (e.g., boards, senior leaders, coaches), and ensuring that there are skilled leaders (e.g., young people experiencing disability) available to contribute is critical.

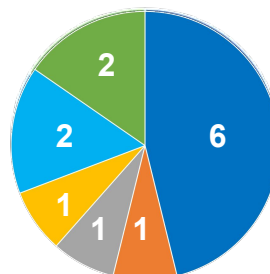
The following report includes interpretation of participant data from the focus group and surveys for evaluation purposes, as well as future directions for the Athletes2Coaches program based on participant input.

A2C: PILOT PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS 2021-2022



Location

13
ATHLETES



Sport



Coaching improvement and/or coaching experience was a main goal for athletes participating in A2C



Connection and community was an important and recurring theme to the athlete experience in A2C



The **personal and disability experiences** of coaches and athletes were mentioned as an important component of mutual learning, mentorship, and the coaching relationship

“Now that I have finished the program, the word **mentorship to me means teamwork**. Mentorship is the relationship between individuals”

Glow: what went well

- The opportunity to connect with other athletes and coaches with lived experience of disability
- The workshops
- A broader understanding of mentorship and coaching
- A confidence building experience
- Communication skills ready to be applied with athletes, children and youth experiencing disabilities

Grow: continued improvement

- Technology use: more efficient use of zoom screen time, and more incorporation of Discord or other social platform
- Less repetition in leadership and mentorship course content
- Incorporation of more practical skills and contemporary issues in coaching
- Option of in-person learning such as conferences or practicums
- Increased time or facilitation of social engagement as part of course sessions

Athletes2Coaches: Program Structure

The pilot of Athletes2Coaches had 13 participants from a variety of sport backgrounds: para ice hockey (n=2), para swim (n=6), blind hockey (n=1), goalball (n=2), wheelchair basketball (n=1) and athletics (n= 1). Participating athletes included 6 women and 7 men. The majority of participating athletes resided in Edmonton (n=8) and others were located in Calgary, Medicine Hat, and Red Deer.

Athletes met virtually once a week between November 1st and December 14th, 2021 while contributing to an ongoing online community of practice. Discord was chosen as the online platform due to its novelty and available features. Session topics covered mentorship, leadership and coaching content, including:

- Program welcome and community building
- NCCP Mentorship
- Transformational Coaching
- Coaching with a Disability
- Para Coach and Para Athlete Panel

In-person events and planned activities including an athlete 'summit', wrap-up, and coaching practicum opportunities were unfortunately unable to take place due to fluctuating public health restrictions. Additional training was made available to participants interested in further certifications, such as the Coaching Association of Canada courses.

Over the course of Athletes2Coaches, athletes were invited to participate in evaluation and feedback for the program. Of the 12 athletes, 9 completed the pre-survey, 5 completed the post-survey, and 6 participated in the wrap-up focus group. The evaluation captured additional participant demographic information. From the survey sample, participants' age range was 12-50 years with 2-17 years of para sport experience. 8 Participants had coaching experience prior to Athletes2Coaches.

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...it was super valuable to hear people's opinions...experiences...and the fact they can bring their experiences as a person with a disability to being a coach



Why join Athletes2Coaches?

Coming into the first year of Athletes2Coaches (A2C), evaluation participants were asked about their goals and motivations for joining the program. The main goal for the majority of participants was gaining coaching experience and coaching knowledge. Participants' motivations related to their trajectory as a coach, whether they were already coaching or considering the pathway. However, another theme to participation was personal improvement. Athletes considered the opportunity to learn from one another, continue their education, and grow as a mentor as exciting potentials of A2C.

Athletes2Coaches Experience

Athletes were asked about their learnings, experiences, and 'take-aways' from their A2C participation. The main themes included: connecting with others, becoming a coach, and role modeling and mentorship.

Connecting with Others

'Connecting with others' refers to the social aspects, feeling of community, networking, and mutual learning experienced in A2C. Connection was perceived as a main outcome and benefit by athletes participating in A2C. As one participant explained, "I found A2C to be a great way to connect with other aspiring coaches across Alberta. I think it was a really cool opportunity to meet other para-athletes from such a variety of sports in an online platform". Athletes valued the opportunity to connect with peers of similar experiences and learn from one another's sport and coaching experiences. For example, "it...created my own kind of coaching community, where...people who are going through similar experiences, but also...have just very different and innovative ideas, which for me, is really awesome" And, "we need those people who are in our fields, to spring up new ideas. And because we all think so differently, I think it'll be really cool. Now that we've all gone through this, even if we're in different sports, I feel very comfortable hitting up anybody".

Athletes spoke to 'community of practice' in coaching, but also as a broader and deeper concept in their experience, "I think for me, what stood out was I realized that not just in [A2C], but how much community practice I have in my life...how many groups and people, and how everybody likes to support one another, and be there for one another. So I think it really helped me realize how much support I actually do have and how much support I give to other people". Athletes mentioned that they saw themselves staying in touch with the group into the future, and that they would have appreciated even more time to get to know one another in the A2C sessions. "...these connections are for life...I'm a huge people person. And I rely on people for every aspect of my life and for supporting me...And coaching is no different".

“the really cool part for me was... building connections with people who live the disability experience...people who identify as having a disability is already a small population...people who identify as an athlete with a disability is an even smaller population...having that tight knit community, and being able to bounce ideas off of somebody who's living the disability experience...is very valuable”

Becoming a Coach

The theme of 'becoming a coach' refers to athlete's mentions of their roles as coaches, instructors, and volunteers and the impact of A2C. Building skills and capacity for coaching among athletes and early-career coaches was a main goal of the program. As such, participants had many reflections on their coaching trajectory and the relationship to A2C. Having access to para specific training for coaches was valuable to participants: "I just never really trained properly coach para sport so I think [A2C] gave me the knowledge and just helped my confidence to be able to coach [at a] better capacity" and, "I really wanted to learn a little bit more about what goes on behind the scenes as far as how to coach para especially because I feel like it's such a different world than coaching able bodied."

A key coaching skill developed by athletes, through A2C, was communication. Athletes mentioned communication skills among the most important skills for a coach to have, and a skill they valued to develop in their own coaching and instruction. A2C helped develop these skills, for example, "I've built a lot of confidence in being able to be transparent with people" and, "[I'm] being mindful of the things that I say because everything I say has weight to it...good, bad, neutral...being aware of what I am saying so the effect on the athletes can generally be positive."

Athletes aim to follow through on these communication skills in the future: "I'm definitely going to continue working on my listening and communication skills and I'm going to make sure to take into consideration what some of the athletes have said about their favourite coaches and try to apply some of those skills to my future career as an educator and mentor."

Athletes also spoke to the influence of A2C on their confidence, especially to lead and coach. For example, "I think it helped me become more confident in my ability to be a mentor and communicate with my mentee" and, "This course has helped me become more confident, and in different ways". Confidence also relates to both communication and connection: "I have grown in my leadership skills and become confident as well...really working on establishing that human connection with people".



“ I can tell my coach, this isn't working, I need to figure something else out. I feel like [Athletes2Coaches] helped me advocate for myself in more ways



Role Modeling and Mentorship

The theme of 'role modeling and mentorship' refers to the athlete's understanding of leadership among other athletes, within their community, and beyond the world of sport. Role modeling and mentorship includes more holistic and informal mentions of leadership, as athletes expressed the impact of A2C not only on coaching roles but how leadership looks in other aspects of their lives. For example, "I think throughout the program has kind of taught me that you don't have to be like a an actual head coach or something to be a leader or a mentor, [even as] an athlete that is playing with these kids on the same ice surface, I can always...be a leader and mentor to them...trying to continue that role is kind of where I see myself going." At the beginning of A2C, many athletes defined leadership and mentorship in terms of a formal role, such as a coach and leader or as someone in charge. By the end of the program, their definition was more nuanced. For example, "Mentorship means relationship building in formal and informal ways. By looking at mentorship as little moments, it doesn't rely on a mentoring relationship with a really clearly defined mentee and mentor. Mentorship allows for both parties in the relationship to be the mentor in some moments, and the mentee in others." This understanding also relates to how the athletes see themselves as leaders in many different contexts, both in their sport and beyond. Athletes plan to continue their mentorship journey in a variety of ways.

Continuing the Journey

Athletes2Coaches aims to have a lasting impact on the athletes' para sport participation, coaching prospects, and leadership capacities. Athletes reported they would be applying the communication skills, mentorship for young athletes, and their community of practice from A2C to their future coaching and sport.

Athletes also explained that while they plan to continue in sport and in the sport community, their coaching pathway may be less certain. Athletes expressed confidence and self-efficacy in coaching and leadership, but they also felt there were limited opportunities or openings for para sport coaching positions. And, if they were already coaching, they were unsure of future opportunities, the continued time commitment, and compensation in coaching. Athletes felt more certain they would use the A2C skills to be a mentor, role model, advocate, and/or volunteer in the para sport or disability community. Athletes also expressed what they learned in A2C could apply to other jobs and leadership roles in the future. The majority of athletes felt their personal goal for participating in A2C was accomplished, however they also wished for further training.

“I want to do something where I'm taking my experience and I'm helping other people, whether that's a teacher, a social worker... I feel like I can take what I've learned from this program and apply it into daily life. Even if I'm not being a coach, or a leader in a sports-specific way. I feel like I can take what I've learned and use it in other aspects of life too

Athletes valued their experience in A2C and had suggestions for its continued success and unlocking its full potential. These suggestion are covered in the following and final section, Conclusion and Future Directions.

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I would like to give back to the younger kids...help them come up the ranks and move along...giving back to the community drew me to this [program] for sure



Conclusion & Future Directions

Based on the evaluation participant feedback and experience, the pilot phase of Athletes2Coaches has been successful in short term goals and with continued iterations can make progress on the long term goals that require larger numbers of participants and longer timelines to observe effects:

Goals achieved in the short term

- Develop an Alberta focused mentorship framework for youth and young athletes experiencing disability that establishes a pathway from participant/athlete to coach/volunteer
- Establish a community of practice among young athletes across Alberta to enhance feelings of belongingness, share experiences, and create a space for long term connections.

Goals to continue to work towards

- Increase the number of trained coaches and volunteers with lived disability experience
- Increase the number of positive role models for young people experiencing disability
- Decrease dropout rate as participants are engaged in para sport in new ways

Participant recommendations for future Athletes2Coaches programming:

- **Practice based content:** Suggested topics for future content included mental health, adapting exercise for a variety of needs, communication for coaches, and ethics.
- **Sessions accommodating a range of experience:** Sessions structured to accommodate different levels of leadership experience so all participants build on their existing knowledge and have an appropriate level of challenge. Alternatively, refine Athletes2Coaches to focus on a level, such as 'novice' coaches, and communicate that focus to potential participants.
- **In-person experiences:** The opportunity to have in-person workshops, social events, conferences, and/or coaching practicum experiences.
- **Technology use:** To drive more participation online, additional or alternative social media platforms may be used. Familiar platforms or technology preferences can be discussed with participants prior to enrolment.
- **Supporting social connections:** Personal connections were an important part of Athletes2Coaches participants. Connections could be supported further through more icebreaker activities, open discussions and special events for participants to get to know each other.



Contact

For more information about the Athletes2Coaches program, contact:

Jessica Ferguson, CSEP-CEP, CSCS
Partnerships & Para Sport Development Coordinator
The Steadward Centre for Personal & Physical Achievement
Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation | University of Alberta
1-670 Van Vliet Complex
Edmonton, AB T6G 1P7

Phone: (780) 248-1981

Email: tscparasport@ualberta.ca