

# **So You Want To Be a High School Track and Field Athlete**

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## Life, Goals and Rights.

I am Phil Galli, father of four-time Track and Field Paralympian Jessica (Galli) Cloy. When Jessica was entering high school in 1998, she wanted to compete in sports. In Jessica's case, she wanted to be part of the high school's track, swimming, and cross country teams. At the time, what was troubling to me was that it seemed like every time a wheelchair athlete started this process of integration it seemed like he was the first person to ever go through this experience. Because of my experience with Jessica, I knew I wanted to be a part of the solution rather than perpetuate the problem.

In 2004 I brought together Pam Carey, who worked high school sport inclusion in Louisiana, and Teresa Skinner, who did the same in the state of Washington, to form the High School Committee within Wheelchair Track and Field USA. Since its inception, our committee has sought to compile information needed by parents and states so that each new journey of inclusion can learn from the past. Joining the effort 4 years ago, Cathy Sellers of US Paralympics has brought her strengths in coaching and coaching education to the mix. She has helped identify and create training courses that are now available to guide coaches through the process of coaching an athlete with a disability.

This article seeks to cover the history of wheelchair high school track and field in the US and the paths that individuals have taken to compete in high school sports. We will share the tools and knowledge we have learned, the pieces that are in place today, and the changes we hope to see in the future. Although this article centers on wheelchair track and field we realize that there is also a need for an ambulatory para-athletics component in high school athletics. We will touch on the emerging work being done in this area to make this a reality as well.

## History

It is the goal of most athletes and parents to want the best high school experience. For a wheelchair student wanting to participate in high school sport and wanting to be a part of a high school team, sometimes this journey is easy, sometimes interesting, and in some cases hard. The good news for about 20 states in 2013, the road is defined and just a matter of enrolling and making it happen. But this was not the case in 1990.

Depending on the State the rights for wheelchair athletes to compete was/is either an easy or difficult process. For those States who were/are slow to change, State's put obstacles in the path to inclusion. It usually starts with a simple NO. We do not want a wheelchair division. We can't have a sport program for only 1 person. When pressed for a more defined response they move the objection to wheel chairs will ruin the track, claiming the manufacturer of the track surface will void the warrantee if we allow "bicycles" on the track. When we convinced them that a wheelchair or racing wheelchairs are wheelchairs and not bicycles and they do not cause harm to the surface they would immediately move their objections to safety. They would state that putting wheelchairs on the track with able-bodied runners will cause accidents and their insurance would not cover them. We would then have to show them that in over 30 years of junior wheelchair competitions held by Wheelchair and Ambulatory Sports USA (WASUSA) safety was not an issue and that with proper athlete training and the use of helmets and the authorized equipment safety was not an issue. When all of the above are defused the next move always moves to a delay strategy. They would meet, seem like they really would move forward and allow wheelchair athletes to compete and then just before the beginning of that season say that time had run out and it would have to wait until next season. This would continue until the student graduated and usually with no other athlete asking for inclusion, at that time, the issue would die only to be started over for the next student request.

The above is not true in every case. Sometimes somewhere along the continuum both parties would come to a compromise and the student would be allowed to participate. If this was not the case and an athlete and or parent really pushed; the only avenue left was/is to bring the matter to court. The parent would sue the state's interscholastic sports organization. In these cases the state high school interscholastic sports organization would first delay, stating they needed time to prepare their position, then comes the deposition stage which delays the case further. When the athlete's day in court finally arrives most often the state will start their defense by stating that they are not bound by the ADA legislation and they can do what they want and therefore the case should be dismissed. In every case, however, the athlete will prevail but with all the delays the involved student's high school experience will probably be over or nearly over by the time they win.

Fortunately, with everyone's efforts in the past 20+ years, the cycle from an athlete's request for inclusion (in a state which does not have a Para High School Track and Field division) has gotten much shorter. Although in some cases we are still going to court. My personal advice is that it is much better and usually faster to avoid going to court at any cost, for even when you win there is still the whole process of writing and implementing the state process and procedures for implementation which adds additional time and usually means that the child who stated the journey has missed their high school sport experience. Finally going to court also has a negative effect on the next state taking the journey. The next state internally says "I don't want to go into this it only brings law suits".

For Jessica and the Galli family in NJ in 1998 this was an easy process for there were many who had gone before. We in New Jersey were lucky that for 6 years (1992) disabled athletes had been given the rights to compete at the High School State Track and Field meet and were able to set records. Other states in 1998 were also allowing Wheelchair athletes to compete at local and state level. In Louisiana it was Janice Fruge' at the Louisiana Department of Education and consultants, Sis Theuerkauf and Phil Carpenter, along with LHSAA Commissioner Tommy Henry, who petitioned and were given permission in 1990 to have a wheelchair division at the state high school championship. Georgia was in place in 2002, Iowa was engaged, as well as the state of Washington in 1997. See the enclosed chart for the most up to date state by state information we have (we are always learning so if the information is incorrect please let me know so we can update the chart).

The process and procedure rules for High School Athletics inclusion are different from State to State. At this time there are 3 main models which states have adopted to include Wheelchairs into their state's program. Each has strengths and weaknesses. The 3 main models are the inclusion model started in New Jersey, the Louisiana model of awarding points (which Pam Carey worked to implement after the state agreed to include the Disabled Division) if standards are achieved, those points could make a school with wheelchair athletes the co-state champion and the Washington State model which sets up a new division at the state level so teams with disabled athletes vi for the State's integrated athletes division trophy.

The difference between the Louisiana approach and the New Jersey approach is that New Jersey includes the wheelchairs into the state program but no points can be earned by the athlete for their high school. The inclusion approach gives the athlete the right to earn medals and to set a state record at the state track and field meet but the athlete can not earn any points for their team. The Louisiana approach sets up state time standards for track/field and if an athlete meets the standards that athlete earns points for their school. The number of points earned is dependent on the number of disabled athletes entered in that event (1 athlete, 1 point; 2, 2 points for 1<sup>st</sup>, 1 point of second; For 3 athletes

3,2,1 and so on). Those points earned are added to the team total but cannot win the meet but can be used to tie the meet.

When the State of Washington came on in 1997 Washington became the third state model. It follows the Louisiana model but added a separate state division trophy in which a high school could win the State integrated able-bodied and wheelchair division title.

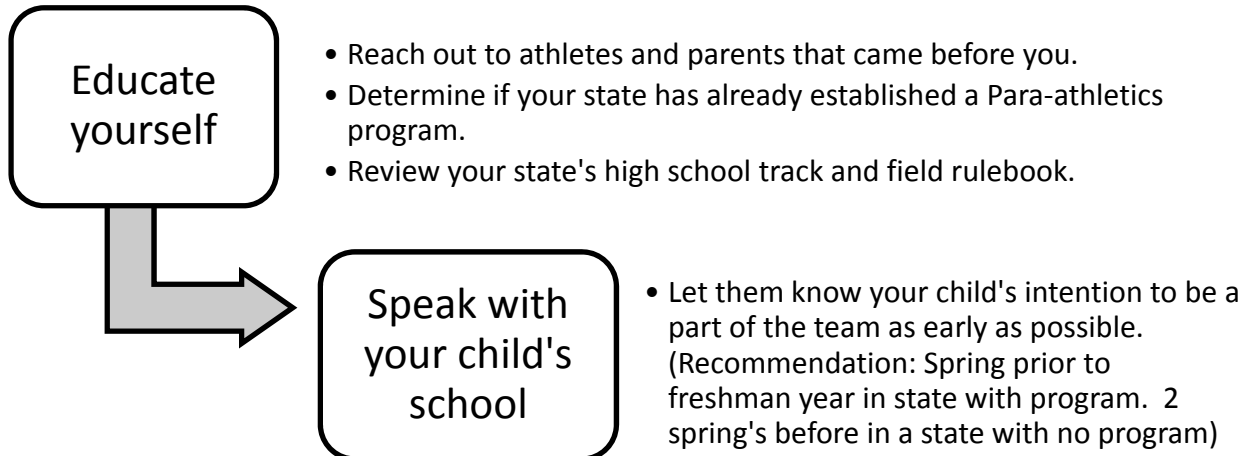
High School Letters are given to athletes in all 3 models. For the inclusion model most often an improvement plan is set at the beginning of each season and if the athlete reaches their improvement goals coupled with an agreed to performance at the state meet a letter is awarded. For athletes in the Louisiana and Washington models a typical points earned model is used to determine if the athlete has earned a letter. In all three cases however letters are not earned and given due to participation only. Based on these 3 models other states have come on board. The Georgia model adopted in 2002 used the New Jersey approach but added the criteria that only the top 8 Male and 8 top Females would make the state meet based on their dual and qualifying meet performances. Athletes are required to submit their dual and regional meet times and distance results to a state committee and this committee invites the top performers to the meet for a timed final at each distance and field event contested. Maryland, after a law suit, started in 2010 and implemented a model similar to Washington. North Carolina followed the Louisiana model in 2010, Florida also started in 2010 following the Georgia approach and Maine joined using the Louisiana model in 2011.

Wisconsin and Minnesota joined in 2011 and adopted a Louisiana point model but the state meet qualification process uses the state's able-bodied qualification rules to advance athletes through. Finally Ohio and Illinois (after a law suit) joined in 2012 and adopted the New Jersey inclusion model. In all cases athletes competing at the state meet are timed final track and final field events with no preliminary rounds.

Which model is best? Personally I think the Louisiana model is the better choice over inclusion and whether a state uses the Louisiana or Washington model to determine State Champions is a state's choice. The issue with the Inclusion model is there is no incentive for schools to look for and add Para Athletes. Without the ability to score points there is no reason for Athletic Directors or coaches to go and look for athletes and after the first season of competition there is less reason for an athlete to get excited to participate other than for the daily practice time, if they can only be recognized at the State meet. After over 20 years of states including Para athletes the program works best when both the athletes and the coaches want the system. Sometimes, however, states are not ready to heap this far.

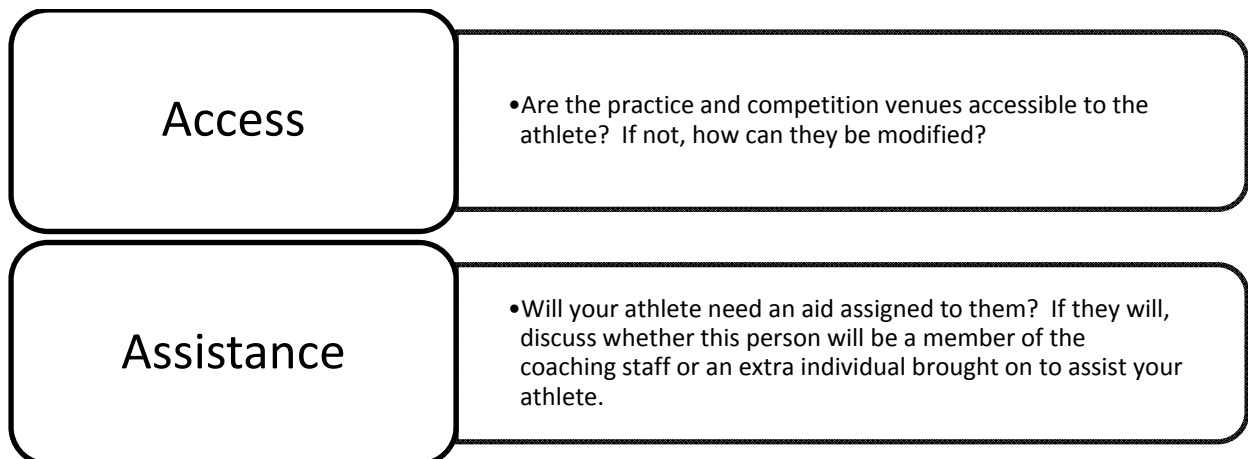
### **How To Get Started:**

If you are a parent looking to get your child involved in high school sports, we recommend you follow the two steps detailed below.



As part of this preparation, it is imperative that each parent and athlete read the state's able-bodied sport rules and regulations. This will give you a good sense of how the current process works and the rules they follow at Dual, Group, and State level meets. It will also tell you, in a state that does not have a Para-athletics program, how a new sport/division can be added.

When I was working with my daughter, the first step on this journey for us was to request a meeting with the school's Athletic Director. The purpose of this meeting was to state our intentions for Jessica to participate in cross country, swimming, and track and field. We also had the opportunity to discuss basic logistic issues that would make it possible for Jessica to participate. I would recommend that you seek out your school's Athletic Director to have a similar meeting. Remember this may be new to him or her and although s/he may be supportive s/he have no understanding of how to make it happen. The meeting clears the air and allows for both you and the school to work out the issues of inclusion and to assure them that there is support to help them accomplish the inclusion. Some logistical issues you will want to discuss with your Athletic Director or sport coach are:



## Transportation

- What does team transportation look like? Is it accessible? If not, are there ways to accommodate your athlete without getting separate transportation? Many positive high school experiences happen on the bus to an event and the happy or sad trip home. Work with the school to have the athlete transported with teammates on the same bus.

## Equipment

- Although the purchase of equipment may be deemed the responsibility of the school, I would suggest you be reasonable and work with the school to acquire what is needed. In a few instances equipment has been purchased by donors (booster clubs, or town service organizations) and donated to the school for athlete use.

## Coaching

- The school may have trepidation on how to train your athlete. You should be prepared to tell them that there are individuals willing to help them. To find professionals in your area, go to [www.usparalympics.org](http://www.usparalympics.org), [www.wasusa.org](http://www.wasusa.org) or [www.dsusa.org](http://www.dsusa.org) for information on teams and coaches with expertise in Para-sport.

## "Lettering"

- One goal of yours should be for your athlete to earn his or her high school letter. Depending on the model your state has chosen, criteria should be agreed upon to enable the athlete to attain their letter. Please note: not all high school athletes attain a letter. Establishing clear criteria on how your athlete can earn his or her letter is important.

I realize you may have additional concerns for your athlete that were not mentioned above. For this reason, it is important that you begin a dialogue with the Athletic Director and/or coaching staff early so that any possible concerns or issues can be worked through and explored ahead of your athlete joining the team.

Finally high school participation is a two-way street. Athlete and parents must abide by the same high school and state rules as their able-bodied peers. For example, coaches require their athletes to attend a certain percentage of practices. Athletes must go and participate at meets. Some states do not allow the athlete to compete in T&F events, outside of high school, during the season, and some do not allow athletes to receive compensation (such as monetary awards at road races, etc.) If you do not feel like you can make these commitments then high school sports may not be for you. Although able-bodied athletes join and leave a sport mid-season, please think about the commitment the school has made to include the para-athlete and be prepared to join and stick with the sport for that season. Remember the para-athlete is an ambassador for the community.

## High School Options:

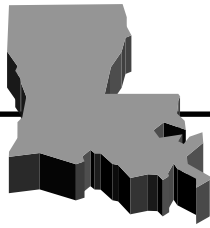
If your state does not have a Para-Division the first step is to agree to a model, then to decide on the number of divisions, then to agree on the methods to move an athlete through to the state championship meet, then to decide what events will be offered, to decide what field weights will be thrown and what standards will be adopted, and finally the state must define what constitutes a Para-Athlete.

### Models:



#### New Jersey

Any athlete from a member school can participate at the state meet and can earn medals but no team points are awarded at the dual or group championship levels. Georgia Option: limit the state meet athletes to the top 8 per event.



#### Louisiana

Any athlete from a member school can participate at the state meet. State sets standards for races and field events contested. If an athlete meets the standard he is awarded points. If one athlete competes 1 point is awarded. If two athletes compete, 2 points are awarded to the winner and 1 point to 2<sup>nd</sup> place. If three athletes compete, the points awarded are 3, 2, 1 for first, second and third respectively. A team cannot win the state title with these points but it can tie for first place.



#### Washington

Any athlete from a member school can participate at the state meet. This model is similar to the Louisiana model but teams with Para-athletes vie for the State's integrated team Championship trophy.

### Divisions:

In the simplest model the Para-athlete division is divided into a male wheelchair division and a female wheelchair division. All athletes compete open within their gender. In some states, the male and female division is further divided into a division for athletes with a lower extremity disability and a second division for athletes with a disability affecting both the lower and upper extremities. You can

choose to have an open division in track but disability divisions in field or vice versa. It is up to you and your state to decide how to “classify” your athletes. The primary goal is to provide an opportunity to compete but a secondary goal for some states is to level the playing field so that athletes with like-disabilities compete against one another.

### **Events:**

In each of these models the state must decide what events are going to be contested at the state meet (and at other meets). The events offered vary from state to state. In addition, once a set of events are chosen the state must decide if an athlete can do some or all the events.

Some states have opted to use the able-bodied rules to govern the Para-athlete division and others have not set restrictions on the number of events an athlete can compete in.

Below are my suggestions for events to be offered:

- Track: 4 events the 100M, 400M, 800M and 1600M. This gives the Para-athlete a choice between short, middle and long distance events.
- Field: Shot, Discus, Javelin.
- If ambulatory Para-Field events are offered add long jump and high jump.

### Field Implements

Field implements used by the Para-division must be defined and all athletes in the division should use the same weighted implements. In an open Para-division, the implement weight should match those of the athletes’ able-bodied counterparts. If you choose to break down your Para-division into a lower extremity category and an upper and lower extremity category, then you can use the able-bodied weights for the lower extremity division and use less weighted implements for the upper and lower extremity division.

### Track Standards

For those states using the Louisiana model or the Washington model, Wheelchair Track and Field USA (WTFUSA) can assist you with establishing standards. WTFUSA has been collecting Junior records by disability class and age group for 30 years and has had great success with helping other states set standards for their athletes.

## **Defining a Para-Athlete:**

Once your state has decided to include a Para-athlete division, it will need to determine how it will define a Para-athlete.

Washington, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Maine & Minnesota

- A wheelchair athlete is defined as anyone with a PERMANENT physical disability. A statement of disability must be on file with the school nurse or designated personnel responsible for student health issues.

Ohio

- Ohio uses the 2011 International Paralympic Committee (IPC) Classification Rules and Regulations Manual. OHSAA reserves the right to update and modify these rules at any time and



without notice. Ohio has developed a protest and appeals process to determine eligibility questions.

Louisiana

- An ambulatory Para-athlete must have a permanent orthopedic, neuromuscular or other physical disability. Permanent orthopedic impairment shall be verified by a licensed physician and maintained on permanent file at the school. Additionally, similar requirements exist for wheelchair Para-athletes.

## States participating

See the participation chart.

## Where do I go from here?

We hope this article has given you information to help you make the high school sport experience successful. Although we focused on participation in track and field for wheelchair Para-athletes, the same approach can be taken to add an ambulatory division. Additionally, a similar model can be used to integrate Para-athletes into other high school sports. There has been success in the sport of swimming in both Illinois and Colorado. The Illinois rules for swimming can be found online.

We hope that the recent mandate by the Office of Civil Rights that states that schools must begin offering sporting opportunities to individuals with a disability will change the landscape of high school athletics for individuals with a disability for the better. A taskforce, which includes our group, with leaders from all disability and sport groups has been called together by Disabled Sports, USA to make recommendations for inclusion of sports for the disabled in all school systems across the country. The taskforce's objective is to offer school districts best in class processes and procedures in a number of easy to implement/integrate sports. The sports being evaluated are athletics, swimming, tennis, table tennis, basketball, indoor soccer, and archery. Others are also being evaluated. As the taskforce progresses, we will be able to offer more assistance and information to you as you take this journey with your athlete.

## Support Available

Websites:

- Wheelchair and Ambulatory Sports USA – <http://wasusa.webs.com/athletictrackfield.htm>
- US Paralympics – [www.usparalympics.org](http://www.usparalympics.org)

Individuals:

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Teresa Skinner WTFUSA High School Chair - [tskinner@usa.com](mailto:tskinner@usa.com)

Cathy Sellers – US Paralympics High Performance Track and Field Director. - [Cathy.Sellers@usoc.org](mailto:Cathy.Sellers@usoc.org)