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**JOURNAL OF**  
**Venue**  
**& Event**  
**Management**

**Understanding the Needs of Spectators with  
Disabilities Attending Sporting Events**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study was to assess the needs of sport spectators with mobility impairments attending live sporting events. The researchers identified the physical and service needs of sport spectators with mobility impairments, investigated whether their needs were being met, and analyzed what could be done differently in order to enhance the service experience. Through the use of focus group and semi-structured in-depth interviews with sport consumers with mobility impairments, observations at sports facilities during events and interviews with sport facility personnel, an understanding of the needs of spectators with disabilities emerged. The interaction of the physical and service needs were found to produce a service experience that meets the patrons' needs. This set of needs can be conceptualized as a hierarchy whereby certain needs become salient at different stages of the service delivery. Sport facility managers should therefore focus on identifying specific needs at various stages of the service experience to more effectively accommodate sport spectators with disabilities.

Keywords: Spectators with disabilities, stadium accessibility, disability legislation, needs assessment, facility management

## Understanding the Needs of Spectators with Disabilities Attending Sporting Events

### Introduction

Despite clear advances in safety, security, and quality in postmodern stadia, contemporary sport facility managers in the United States and Europe continue to experience challenges in how to enhance the stadium experience for spectators with disabilities (Grady & Paramio, 2012; Paramio, Buraimo, & Campos, 2008). In the United States, service providers cited lack of prior knowledge of the guest's needs as a major obstacle to effectively serving people with disabilities in sport and leisure service environments (Grady & Ohlin, 2009). Enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) in the United States, as well as similar disability rights legislation in the United Kingdom (Disability Discrimination Act 1995; Equality Act 2010) and Australia (Disability Discrimination Act 1992), has served as the impetus for a more concentrated global effort by the sport industry to welcome people with disabilities as customers, including in their role as sport spectators. Moreover, with demographic trends indicating an increasing number of people with disabilities, a solid business case can now be made for the benefits derived from delivering a high-quality customer experience for people with disabilities in several industry sectors, including sport (Grady & Paramio, 2012), hospitality (Grady & Ohlin, 2009), and recreation (Devine & McGovern, 2001).

Disability legislation has had a positive impact on

creating sport opportunities for people with disabilities both as participants and spectators. Since passage of the ADA in 1990, people with disabilities in the United States now experience greater accessibility to sport, recreation, and hospitality facilities and services (Grady & Andrew, 2003; Grady & Ohlin, 2009). According to a national survey on recreation and the environment (McCormick, n.d.), people with disabilities in the youngest and oldest age groups participated in sport and recreation at rates equal to, or greater than, people without disabilities. As a result, understanding the needs of people with disabilities as sport consumers has become an increasingly significant concern for sport service providers. With an estimated 56.7 million Americans with disabilities, representing 18.7 percent of the U.S. population, (Brault, 2012), as well as a growing older population that may require similar accommodations, identifying and meeting the needs of this segment of sport consumers while they are attending sporting events has become a top-of-mind issue for senior management at U.S. sport facilities. Similarly, statistics from Europe suggest that 40% of the total European population could benefit from accessible and inclusive environments, demonstrating "the growing economic influence of sport customers with disabilities" (Paramio-Salcines & Kitchin, 2013, p. 339).

Historically, accessibility at sports facilities has been addressed by the work of architects and engineers, rather than academics, and has focused mainly on the re-

removal of physical barriers (Goldsmith 1997; Thomson, Dendy & de Deney, 1984). However, these early studies “lacked a systematic approach to [managing] stadium accessibility” as a critical component of the overall spectator experience (Paramio-Salcines & Kitchin, 2013, p. 338). Previous scholarship concerning people with disabilities in sport has primarily focused on their role as participants and has emphasized the need for accessible sport facilities. Yet, there is also an increasing awareness of the need to also provide access to sport services offered by spectator-based facilities, thus creating demand for an accessible sport service environment. From the perspective of managing a sport facility, this raises the need for a dual emphasis in service provision: providing not only a physically accessible environment, including ramps and accessible restrooms, but also an accessible sport service environment, one that is inviting and accommodating to people with disabilities.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to assess the needs of sport consumers with disabilities attending live sporting events.

Three research questions guided this exploratory study.

- **Research Question 1:** What are the physical and service needs of consumers with mobility impairments?
- **Research Question 2:** Are the needs of sport consumers with mobility impairments attending a live sporting event being met?
- **Research question 3:** If a need is not being met, what could be done differently by the service provider in order to enhance the fan experience?

## Review of literature

### Americans with Disabilities Act requirements in sport facilities

Since this study focused on the experiences of sport consumers with disabilities in the United States, the Americans with Disabilities Act was the legal framework used as the backdrop for this study. The ADA was enacted to provide a national mandate to eliminate discrimination faced by individuals with disabilities on a day-to-day basis (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990). The key provisions of the ADA applicable to sport facilities are Title II and Title III (Grady & Andrew, 2003). Title II mandates public entities, including state and local government, give people with disabilities

an equal opportunity to benefit from all of their programs, services, and activities (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990). Title III provides protection for individuals with disabilities seeking access to places of public accommodation (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990) and prohibits denying people with disabilities the opportunity to benefit from goods or services, or by providing people with disabilities with different goods or services (Nondiscrimination on the basis of disability by public accommodations and in commercial facilities, 2000).

### Implementing the ADA's requirements

Service providers continue to face challenges implementing the provisions of the ADA in a wide range of customer service environments, including stadiums, hotels, restaurants, and malls. Historically, these challenges have included physical barriers to accessibility at their facilities, financial constraints in providing additional programs, services, and equipment for people with disabilities, as well as a lack of awareness among professional staff of the needs of people with disabilities (Devine & McGovern, 2001; Rimmer, 2005). Few studies have specifically examined accessibility issues for people with disabilities in their role as patrons at live sporting events. Skulski, Bloomer, and Chait (2002) analyzed the ticket and accommodation policies at various sport and entertainment facilities throughout the United States. They found the level and frequency of accommodations for people with mobility impairments was much greater than the provision of auxiliary aids and services for people with other types of disabilities, such as visual or hearing impairments (Skulski et al., 2002). In addition, accessibility policies, such as ticket sales policies for patrons with disabilities, varied widely and only 48% of the facilities provided staff training in disability awareness (Skulski et al., 2002). A limitation of Skulski et al.'s study was that the survey was directed at facility managers' perceptions of accessibility at their own facilities, rather than surveying customers with disabilities about their perceptions of the service experience at the venues being studied. The current study was designed to examine customer perceptions.

### Method

A grounded theory method was used to develop an understanding of the needs of people with disabilities as spectators attending sporting events. With the goal of building theory, the use of a grounded theory approach allowed for a context-based explanation of the phenomenon of interest (Myers, 1997), in this case

people with disabilities attending a live sporting event. Through the use of multiple sources of data, including in-depth interviews with consumers with disabilities and sport facility managers, focus group interviews with consumers with disabilities, and observations conducted at sport facilities, it is believed that a deeper understanding of the needs of consumers with disabilities in the context of attending a sporting event emerged from the data, consistent with the grounded theory approach.

## Sample

In this study, criterion sampling was used. “Criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied have experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 118). The criterion used for this sample was individuals with mobility impairments who attend sporting events. The rationale for using such a criterion is that people with mobility impairments likely face a range of specific service issues when attending a stadium, including navigating the physical aspects of the facility as well as potentially needing to interact with facility staff. A snowball sample was also utilized in order to identify individuals with disabilities from the local community interested in attending sporting events. Snowball sampling “identifies cases that are of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28).

Six spectators with mobility impairments (n=6) who have attended events at all three collegiate sport facilities in the same Eastern city in the United States were included in the sample. Participants for this study were recruited at a large university in the Eastern part of the United States through the Center for Students with Disabilities in compliance with protection of human subjects. In addition, participants were recruited by asking for participation of people with physical disabilities in the local community who were suggested by colleagues and friends. The sample included males with permanent mobility impairments who were wheelchair users and users of crutches and canes. A list of informants

**Table 1**  
**Description of Informants**

Informants	Assistive device used
Don	Power Wheelchair
Mark	Manual Wheelchair
Jack	Crutches, Wheelchair
Ryan	Manual Wheelchair
Hank	Cane
Bob	Cane

with pseudonyms used and the assistive device they use is provided in Table 1.

In addition to the people with mobility impairments, two facility personnel, Dan and Larry (pseudonyms), participated in in-depth interviews (n=2). Dan has held the position of general manager of Facility 2 and also oversaw game-day facility and operations management at Facility 1 for many years in addition to his responsibilities at Facility 2. Larry is a customer service staff member at Facility 3 and is also a wheelchair user.

The facilities discussed in the interviews included two “existing” sport facilities (pre-1993 construction) and one “new” sport facility (post-1993 construction). The ADA requires “new” facilities to be fully accessible while “existing” facilities are held to less stringent accessibility standards. The two “existing” facilities were a college football stadium (Facility 1) and a multi-purpose arena (Facility 2). Facility 1 has a capacity of approximately 80,000. Originally constructed in 1934, Facility 1 has undergone several renovation projects, including a \$9 million renovation in 1995. Facility 2 is a multi-purpose arena that was the university’s basketball arena until 2002. It has 12,401 seats and was opened in 1968. Facility 2 currently hosts special events, such as high school graduations. The “new” facility (Facility 3) is a multi-purpose arena in the same Eastern city. The facility hosts sporting events, concerts, and other events. Facility 3 has a seating capacity of 18,000 seats. The differences in the characteristics of venues selected for this study include the capacity of the facilities, primary sporting event held at the facilities, and age of the facilities allowed for a broad range of service issues to emerge.

## Data Collection

Creswell (1998) describes the iterative cycle of data collection in a grounded theory project as a “zigzag” process where the researcher goes out to the field to gather data, analyzes it, then goes back to the field to collect more data followed by more analysis. Data were collected through focus group interviews, in-depth interviews, and observations at sports facilities. An in-depth pilot interview was initially conducted with one informant (n=1) (Jack) in order to explore initial ideas about the range of customers’ needs during a sporting event as well as to probe for a description of the ideal service experience for people with mobility disabilities while attending sporting events. A focus group was then conducted which consisted of three informants (n=3) who had attended an event at all the facilities be-

ing studied. Informants were screened to ensure they were current or recent visitors at the facilities being studied. Representative questions asked during the focus group included asking respondents to identify their physical and service needs during a sporting event, to describe their ideal service experience, and to identify ways that service providers could enhance the experience they currently provide. Semi-structured follow-up interviews were subsequently conducted with four informants to further probe service issues which had initially emerged during the focus group. Two of the informants had also participated in the focus group. These interviews were used as confirming/disconfirming interviews in order to enhance the credibility of the findings. A list of the interviews that each informant participated in is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Interview Participants**

Informants	Interview(s)
Don	Focus group, In-depth
Mark	Focus group, In-depth
Jack	In-depth (pilot)
Ryan	Focus group
Hank	In-depth
Bob	In-depth

To better understand the facility personnel's perspective in meeting the needs of people with disabilities as well as identifying the challenges the facility staff has observed by patrons trying to access features of the facilities, in-depth interviews were also conducted with senior facility personnel as well as a customer service staff member from the sport facilities being investigated (Dan and Larry respectively). By asking key facility personnel about these issues, it was presumed these are people who have the ability to make positive changes related to accessibility occur.

Direct observations of the facilities were also conducted in order to familiarize the researchers with the physical features of the facility described by informants in the interviews as well as aid the researchers in becoming familiar with areas that had proven difficult for people with disabilities to access as identified through the focus group and in-depth interviews. At Facility 1 and Facility 2, observations were conducted while no event was taking place in order to primarily focus on the physical aspects inside the facility as well as adjacent to the facility which provide access for people with

disabilities, such as parking lots and accessible paths of travel. At Facility 3, the observations took place during a women's basketball game. Seeing how patrons in wheelchairs navigate through all areas inside of the facility enabled the researchers to observe the physical aspects of the facility as well as the process used by patrons to enter and exit the facility, access seating once inside the facility, and reach concession areas, and restrooms. The observations provided a more holistic understanding of the service experience as initially described in the interviews.

Despite the small number of informants, the rich data from both the focus group and in-depth interviews as well as observation data provided the researchers with sufficient data needed to inform the developing theory of service provision. As no new or relevant information was emerging that would inform the developing theory, data saturation was attained (Given, 2008).

## Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, information from the data collection was taken and compared to emerging categories, referred to as the constant comparison method of data analysis (Creswell, 1998). Several stages of coding are utilized in conducting grounded theory research (Creswell, 1998). The researchers used open coding followed by axial coding and then selective coding. Once the initial categories of physical and service needs were identified through open coding, axial coding was used to systematically develop the categories as well as link the categories to subcategories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). For example, coding for the category "Physical needs" contained several subcategories such as Parking, Seating, and Ramps and Elevators. These subcategories also contained further subcategories, such as Seating Location. After axial coding, the categories had to be integrated into the emerging theory. This required the use of selective coding which allowed for integration and refinement of the categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It was at this stage of coding that ideas about the relationship between the physical and service needs became clear which were used in the development of the emerging theory of service provision. In addition to coding, memoing was used throughout data analysis. In this study, memos "link[ed] emerging theory to the existing literature/research, thus providing a vehicle for the incorporation of existing research into the grounded theory" (Bernthal, 1999, p. 32).

The interview and observation data were coded and analyzed using the NUD\*IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theory Build-

ing) data analysis program (Version N6). This program is appropriate to use when conducting grounded theory research given it is geared toward theory building research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## Quality

Since the quality of the information obtained during interviews largely depends on the interviewer (Patton, 2002), researchers with knowledge of the ADA and an overall familiarity with a range of customer service issues for people with disabilities were utilized. Another way to improve the quality of the research process was through the use of a standardized interview guide for the focus group and the in-depth interviews. Use of an interview guide ensured that “the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed” (Patton, 2002, p. 343) but allowed flexibility to pursue certain areas of inquiry in greater depth.

The trustworthiness of the data was strengthened by using member checking as well as triangulating the data. Use of member checking improved the accuracy of the data since the researcher’s interpretations of the focus groups and interviews are verified by the participants and corrections can be made if errors exist. Use of member checking also improved the analysis of the themes that emerge from the data. In addition, triangulation using multiple sources of data and multiple methods was utilized “to compare and cross-check the consistency of different information derived at different times and by different means” (Patton, 2002, p. 559). In this study, the data from the focus group interviews were compared to the data from the in-depth follow-up interviews, observations, and data from facility manager and staff interviews. In particular, observation enabled the researchers to more authentically experience the problems and barriers faced by patrons with disabilities first-hand and provided a more holistic understanding of how patrons with mobility impairments experience a sporting event. This also allowed for rich descriptions of the patrons’ experiences to emerge.

## Findings and Discussion

### Needs of Sport Consumers with Mobility Impairments

In trying to understand the needs of spectators with mobility disabilities attending sporting events, two basic categories of needs relevant to the sport service experience quickly emerged: physical needs and service needs. In some cases, the physical needs and ser-

vice needs were found to be mutually exclusive. For example, all of the informants in the in-depth and focus group interviews discussed the need for accessible parking. This was interpreted as a physical need because it does not involve a service component (i.e., a human component). In other cases, a particular need could not be exclusively categorized as either a physical or service need in that the physical aspects and the service aspects tended to blend together. For example, when asked about safely evacuating the facility in an emergency, one respondent discussed a concern about a loss of electrical power which would make the elevator inoperable, but also identified the need for a staff person trained to assist him in an evacuation. Therefore, for this informant, the need to evacuate safely in an emergency involves both physical and service aspects.

For ease of discussion, needs that primarily deal with the physical aspects of the facility, also referred to as the built structure (Bitner, 1992) or the interior layout and design (Brauer, 1992), are discussed under the category, “Physical Needs,” while needs that are primarily related to service provision will be discussed under a second category, “Service Needs.” Those needs that have both a physical and service component will be discussed under a third category, “Blended Needs.” A list of the categories and various needs identified is provided in Table 2.

### Physical Needs

#### Seating

The informants identified four primary areas of concern related to a need for seating: seating arrangement and location, barriers to accessing the seats, and adequacy of markings on seats. The data in the category of “seating location” was particularly rich in context as several of the informants painted pictures through the stories they told about how the accessible seating at the sport facility appeared to them. This made the data “come alive.” Don expressed his satisfaction with the location of the seating at Facility 3 (the basketball arena) with his comment:

I like what the arena has done as far as accessibility goes. ... The top of the bottom bowl—there is nothing but handicapped spaces at the top of each section, that is perfect ... That’s what it needs to be.

Larry also reported that this arrangement at Facility 3 provides patrons with good sight lines and no obstructions to their view. In an arena, for a wheelchair user, locating accessible seating adjacent to the main

**Table 3**  
**Categories of Needs**

<b>Physical Needs</b>	<b>Service Needs</b>	<b>Blended Needs</b>
Seating	Staff Responsiveness	Crowds
Companion Seats	Staff Awareness	Accidents
Parking	Staff Knowledge	Emergency Evacuation
Line of Sight		Accessible Policies
Restrooms		Role of companion
Elevators/Ramps		
Signage		
Heat-related protection		

concourse meets the patron's needs for restrooms or concessions but also creates a potentially ancillary benefit for the patron in that it puts him or her in the midst of the action without isolating him/her from the rest of the crowd.

In a follow up interview, Bob discussed the lack of accessible seating as well as poor design of the disabled seating locations in the football stadium. "Accessibility is very hard to find or either you are put in a location that may not be as desirable. That's always a problem." The accessible seating location in the venue can also enhance the overall experience for the spectator. One informant stated, "The seating arrangement, once you find it and once you can get there and once you have found a parking spot, it is a wonderful seat location for people in wheelchairs and also limited mobility." The response suggests, however, there could be several problems a patron may encounter before even making it to his or her seat. Bob discussed how he is partially mobile and needs assistance navigating steps, confirming that people with different types of mobility issues may have a range of needs related to seating. From the facility manager's perspective, ensuring accessible seating locations are dispersed throughout the entire facility is an issue of which the senior management of a sport facility is cognizant. In discussing seating at Facility 1, Dan noted, "We tried to make sure we had comparable areas that were acceptable all throughout the stadium."

Under the subcategory of "barriers to accessing seats," informants specifically focused on the period of time from arriving at the stadium to when he/she gets into the seat as a critical period of time in the service experience. All of the informants also identified an overall sense of apprehension and uncertainty as to the physical barriers a patron may encounter in trying to

access their seats as well as the frustration from interacting with crowds before they reach the seating areas and again when leaving.

The inadequacy of markings on the seats was found to be a unique problem for patrons with disabilities. This issue is problematic because, in some stadiums, the seats or open spaces for wheelchairs in the disabled seating sections are not marked with specific seat numbers. Instead, the ticket is only marked with a section number for the disabled seating section. According to Don, the inadequacy of seat marking creates confusion and causes conflict among patrons as well as between the patron and the usher assigned to monitor that section, especially when the disabled seating section becomes overcrowded. He summed up his frustration in a revealing comment, "We want to be treated just like everybody else is treated. Whenever we get our ticket we want to know exactly where we are going to be." The desire for equal treatment and the desire to experience the sporting event in the same way as able-bodied patrons is apparent.

### ***Line of Sight***

Reflective of the interaction of various needs, the location of the accessible seating section is often the cause of poor line of sight issues. The need for an unobstructed line of sight is a need that is a unique aspect of attending a sporting event for patrons with disabilities, particularly those in wheelchairs, because of their inability to stand or to see around able-bodied fans who might be temporarily standing during exciting moments of the game. Jack noted the poor sight lines at Facility 1 (the stadium), given the location of the accessible seating adjacent to the playing field which is also behind cheerleaders and other game officials standing on the sidelines.

### ***Companion Seating***

A problem cited by all focus group participants is the insufficient number of companion seats to allow the entire party to sit together. Companion seating is a complex issue in stadiums because sport facilities have typically only provided one companion seat for each disabled seat as required by the original ADA regulations. Most facilities will often only provide the minimum required by law, but may try to accommodate additional companions in nearby rows. If the facility cannot accommodate additional companions, especially during high-demand events, this requires the party to be separated. The lack of an adequate number of companion seats has resulted in some very strange experiences in stadiums that seem to be unique to patrons with disabilities

[W]e ran into the same problem where they have their wheelchair section and there are no spots for any companions. My companions had to sit behind me in the stands a good 20 feet away from me. I was left there by myself.

Recent changes to the ADA requirements, effective in 2011, now require sport and entertainment venues to sell the same maximum number of tickets per event in disabled seating sections that able-bodied patrons can purchase (United States Department of Justice, 2011). This significant legislative change should improve the situation so that spectators with disabilities can sit together with their entire party. Not every instance involving companion seats was dissatisfactory, however. Mark discussed a satisfactory experience where the facility staff was able to accommodate him so that his whole party could remain together.

Larry, the arena employee, stated that Facility 3 is usually able to accommodate more than one companion with each patron with a disability unless the event is sold out. In that case, the facility's policy is to limit the patron with a disability to purchasing only one companion seat which complies with the original ADA regulations. At Facility 1, the companion seat issues are somewhat different given that many of the patrons are season ticket holders so it is many of same people attending every game. In analyzing the interview data with the facility employees, the managers appear to be genuinely trying to make a good faith effort to ensure "equal enjoyment" for patrons with disabilities akin to what able-bodied people experience, yet these efforts seem to be going largely unnoticed by the patron.

### ***Parking***

The need for accessible parking was cited by all informants as a critical need when attending a sporting event. The informants discussed several key issues related to the need for parking: availability of a sufficient number of accessible parking spaces near the stadium, a safe and accessible route from the parking lot to an accessible entrance of the stadium, the location of the accessible parking spaces in relation to the entrance, and use of accessible parking spaces by people who do not have mobility impairments. A consistent theme was that disabled patrons perceived the facility staff members as not being empathetic to their needs related to parking and not cognizant of how the lack of a ramp or lack of a sidewalk would impede their ability to safely access a stadium. The observations at the sport facilities confirmed that, in several cases, the route from the parking lot to the sport facility contains several barriers which pose obvious safety hazards, such as a lack of curb cuts. In his role as the general manager, Dan noted that a frequent problem he faced was having patrons with disabilities show up without having made prior arrangements with the facility to provide additional assistance, such as a parking shuttle service, to meet their needs.

### ***Restrooms***

The critical need for accessible restrooms involves several key issues: the accessibility of the restroom, the ability to navigate in the restroom, the size of the accessible stall, crowding in the restroom, as well as the cleanliness of the restroom. Problems related to the inaccessibility of restrooms are prevalent in older facilities but can also pose problems in new facilities during periods of heavy crowding. A critical issue discussed by Mark and Don was the cleanliness of the restroom, a particularly salient issue for people with manual wheelchairs who use their hands to operate their wheelchairs.

### ***Elevators/Ramps***

All informants cited the need for ramps and elevators and identified the need for more than one elevator at a facility, overcrowding of the elevators, length and steepness of ramps, and ability to navigate the ramp independently as key issues. Don noted the need for elevators that go directly to the disabled seating sections at the football and basketball venues during periods of heavy crowds while Jack also mentioned the steepness of the ramps as posing a problem for manual wheelchair users.

### ***Signage***

Informants in both the in-depth and focus group interviews cited the need for increased directional signage to elevators, ramps, and restrooms. One informant noted the need for “clear signs telling you where to go.” During observations at Facility 1 and Facility 2, ADA signage was almost non-existent with minimal signage provided about accessibility features, mostly in the form of restroom signage.

### ***Protection from Heat***

Don cited the need for protection from the heat at outdoor sporting events, discussing an experience where the heat caused him difficulty. While perhaps not a unique need for people with disabilities, Don explained that this need might cause people with certain types of disabilities to have more adverse reactions to prolonged heat exposure. He expressed hopes that with future stadium renovations, handicapped seating would be placed in luxury boxes where patrons would not be exposed to the sun and heat. Facility Manager Dan noted how they added a wind barrier at Facility 1 after a patron had complained about being exposed to the wind.

### **Service Needs**

Any of the data involving a human component (i.e. a staff member) was interpreted to be a service need. How the staff members interact with the patrons during the service experience and how the staff member can modify aspects of the service delivery process, such as purchasing tickets, became central issues of discussion. The informants’ comments focused on three categories of service needs: whether the staff members were knowledgeable about the accessibility features of the facility, whether staff members were responsive to the needs of the patron if they had questions or problems, and whether the patron felt the staff members were aware of their needs and truly understood them. In interpreting these three issues, the following three categories of service needs emerged: Staff Responsiveness, Staff Awareness, and Staff Knowledge.

#### ***Staff Responsiveness***

The staff’s responsiveness to the needs of patrons with disabilities was cited by several informants as an important need. Mark cited his positive interaction with members of the athletic department, the gate attendant, and the security guard as all contributing to his satisfactory experience at a football game. When asked if it was a combination of the physical and service aspects that made his experience positive, Mark responded,

“Yes, and just them working with you. Calling them up and telling them that I was in a wheelchair and needed special accommodations. They pretty much bent over backwards and I really did like that.” The informant’s reference to “bent over backwards” suggests that the patron with a disability is satisfied when he is served by a highly responsive staff as well as a staff which provides individualized attention. Jack recounted an encounter where he called to complain about the dirty windows of the one box seating section where patrons with disabilities sit. “I called the staff to ask them who to call in the facilities to get some maintenance clean up. He was very nice and said he was sorry they had overlooked that and at the next game it was clean, spic and span.” From the facility manager’s perspective, Dan noted that the overall feedback he received about the service experience for patrons with disabilities was primarily in the form of complaints. He detailed how the facility staff member responds to a complaint by a customer during the event.

We have usher supervisors and they first go to [the person with a disability] and they try to resolve it. If they can’t resolve it, then it moves up to a manager level. But first, the usher will try to resolve it if it’s something that’s fairly simple. If not, it may escalate up to the manager on duty.

Dan noted that the subject of the feedback is “almost always [about] the physical aspects.”

#### ***Staff Awareness***

Increased staff awareness of the needs of patrons with disabilities was cited by Jack as a need requiring further attention by senior management at Facility 3.

They’re not geared or trained ... to be aware of people that come in who have special needs and are going to need a little bit of attention. It seems like they’re trained to grab tickets and get people through as quick as possible.

According to Jack, the perceived lack of staff awareness of his needs while attending a sporting event results from an overall lack of familiarity with the needs of people with disabilities, as well as the perceived lack of staff training in disability awareness. The need for a staff with knowledge of the facility’s accessibility features and policies was also cited as important. Ryan, Don, and Mark also emphasized the individualized attention they received from the facility staff as a reason that an event was satisfactory.

From the facility manager's perspective, Dan talked about how the facility staff tries to become more aware of and empathetic to the needs of patrons with disabilities through use of members of the local disability community who provide input about their services. Dan discussed the general state of confusion that existed in the sport facility management industry when the ADA became law in 1990.

One of the big questions we really had was what does [the ADA] really mean? We all knew what it said, but how do you translate it? What are the implications for us? ... It was like nobody really wanted to stick their neck out there and say this is what it means. So we really struggled with that.

Dan felt the use of a member from the local disability community has helped improve their facility operations and has demonstrated that the facility was making a good faith effort to comply with the letter and spirit of the law.

### ***Staff knowledge***

Several informants cited the need for a staff with knowledge of the facility's accessibility features and policies. Asked if the staff is usually knowledgeable when asked questions, Ryan responded "Yeah, usually as in types of questions ... say, help me go here, where do I need to go, or where my seat is, they'll come up with an answer."

One area cited by several informants where the knowledge of the staff is critical is with regard to the closest accessible entrance from the parking lot. Jack recounted his first few trips to Facility 3 (the arena) when it was first built and the difficulty he encountered in trying to find the closest accessible entrance. "I tried to talk to people about all the possible ways to get into this place...No one had the entire knowledge of that place that could say in here or here are all of your options." He further elaborated, "...it wasn't the staff people's fault that I was talking to, they were nice and wish they had some answers, but no one above them in management apparently was really concerned about taking care of handicap patrons." Interestingly, Jack attributed the cause of the problem to management's perceived lack of empathy to the needs of people with disabilities rather than blaming the staff person's lack of knowledge. Jack noted the level of staff knowledge was better at Facility 1 (the football stadium) given that many of the staff members had worked at the stadium for several years and were familiar with the facility.

## **Blended Needs**

A third category relates to blended needs, which have both a physical and service component. For these blended needs, the informants discussed some aspect of the built structure that was necessary to meet their needs, as well as some action by a staff member that was necessary to meet the patron's needs. The data for this theme was coded under five sub-categories: crowds, accidents, emergency evacuation, the need for more flexible accessibility policies, and the role of companions in the service experience.

### ***Crowds***

In discussing needs related to crowds, most informants focused on three time periods during which crowding can be problematic for a person with a disability: prior to the start of the event, during half time, and after an event has ended. The crowding issues that arise in stadiums are not necessarily unique to patrons with disabilities. However, what makes crowding a unique problem for patrons with mobility impairments is the need to navigate through the crowd in a wheelchair or using another assistive device. This can result in an able-bodied patron bumping into the wheelchair user or the wheelchair user bumping into other patrons and even having inattentive patrons fall into the laps of the wheelchair users. Crowding can also result from over-selling the seats in the disabled sections for high-demand sporting events.

Jack discussed his safety concerns when interacting with a crowd. "You always have to be careful when you're in a crowd rather than when you're by yourself because you ... could get hurt, get jostled around, and have an accident." Jack recounted witnessing people with disabilities on several occasions falling out of their wheelchairs due to the steep ramps in one particular disabled seating section at Facility 1. He noted, "There have been accidents. There are people [who fall] going up or down [the ramp] in a wheelchair even with people helping them." Dan, who managed game day issues at Facility 1, was never made aware of the accidents Jack discussed but reiterated that safety of patrons with disabilities is of paramount concern to the facility manager.

### ***Emergency evacuation***

The need to be able to evacuate safely in an emergency was identified as a critical need. Participants were asked if there was an emergency at any of the facilities that they had visited, would they be able to get out

safely? Mark responded, “All but the stadium,” to which Don agreed. Meanwhile, Ryan felt he could get out safely at all of the sport facilities he has visited. Asked whether the staff at Facility 1 was prepared to assist him in an emergency, Jack stated, “I’m guessing that there isn’t that much thought given to the folks with special needs.”

### ***Accessibility policies***

While there are several policies that a sport facility may have with regard to accessibility and accommodating patrons with disabilities (e.g., ticketing policies, security policies), many of the informants focused their attention on whether the venue had in excess of the one percent of seats required under the ADA for patrons with disabilities and how application of the venues’ companion seating policies had impacted their experience. While many sports facilities only make available the minimum number of seats that they are legally obligated to provide, Mark cited the need for more flexible policies that exceed the ADA’s minimum requirements. He also expressed dissatisfaction with the relaxed regulations for older sport facilities, suggesting that older facilities only have to try to make their facilities accessible if it is feasible to do so. Don also discussed the need for greater uniformity in how the accessible ticketing policies related to companions are enforced.

### ***Role of companion***

The role that a companion (e.g., spouse, parent, friend, caregiver) plays in the service experience for the person with a disability was an unexpected finding. Informants frequently discussed how the presence of a companion positively impacted their experience, the companion’s role in assisting them whether out of necessity or for convenience, and the social benefits of having their friends or family experience the event with them.

## **Expectations and Perceptions of the Service Experience**

In addressing the second research question (Are the needs of sport consumers with mobility impairments attending a live sporting event being met?), participants were asked about their expectations of the service experience, followed by questions about their perceptions of their experiences at sporting events they had attended.

One of the issues probed was whether the person with a disability had different expectations about the service experience when attending an event at a “new”

facility compared to an “existing” older facility. The original language of the ADA mandated that “new” facilities (post-1993 construction) must be fully accessible while “existing” facilities (pre-1993 construction) have to meet much less stringent accessibility standards (Nondiscrimination on the basis of disability by public accommodations and in commercial facilities, 2000). While Jack had higher expectations at the new arena (Facility 3) when it first opened, his expectations were not met. “I realize the general public would have a completely different perception of that place and they would think this is a wonderful place ... because they don’t notice the obstacles that some of us have.” By contrast, at the old stadium (Facility 1), Jack noted, “... Each person has their own individual needs so some people can cope with some things better than others but overall the facilities are a big negative.” Don shared a similar sentiment. “[W]hen I go to an older facility, I would have to say that I don’t have that high of expectations ... because the codes or guidelines that they built the facility [to comply with] aren’t what the code or ADA is today.” In discussing his expectations at Facility 3 when it first opened, he stated, “I just expected it to be accessible. I expected it to be ... disabled-friendly and it is.”

The expectation to be treated fairly during the service experience was cited by several participants. Don stated, “We want to be treated just like everybody else is treated.” Mark, meanwhile, expected to be treated as fairly as able-bodied patrons and not be harassed by facility staff during the event. Many informants cited their perceptions of unfairness as one of the factors that contributed to an unsatisfactory service experience, suggesting that the disabled patron feels that he/she is receiving inferior treatment when compared to their able-bodied counterparts. Bob expressed similar thoughts. “I didn’t expect that they were really going to cater to my needs, basically.... My expectation is that when I go there, I’m going to have to go on their terms not on my terms.”

In analyzing participants’ perceptions of their experiences, the researchers probed whether the physical or service needs predominate while attending a sporting event. Bob responded, “I think the physical needs are more important. If I know where [the accessible features] are, I don’t need the staff to tell me what to do. I just need [the accessible features] to be provided.” This confirmed that while the physical needs may clearly be more salient for the patron with a disability, it is the interaction of the two elements that combine to produce a satisfactory service experience. Considering

the physical and service aspects as an interaction confirmed that service providers cannot focus their efforts on either the physical or service aspects but must focus on both aspects.

Regarding perceptions of interacting with the facility staff, Don noted that the facility staff at most facilities has been willing to accommodate his needs. “That’s been anywhere that I’ve gone to, more the newer facilities than the old ones.” Don also cited the staff’s knowledge about their facility as contributing to a satisfactory experience. However, he noted that at the football stadium, he perceived the senior management of the facility as not working to improve the experience given his needs. “If they are volunteers, those people need to have that section every week. If they are being paid, those people need to know the ins and outs every week.”

### **Changes by Service Provider to Enhance Experience**

Upon identifying the specific needs of people with mobility impairments during sporting events and determining if their needs were being met, in addressing Research Question 3, the researchers then probed the informants about what could be done differently by the service provider in order to meet their needs and enhance the experience if a need was not being met. Increased staff training, changes to the physical structure of the facility itself, as well as changes to facility operations were all cited as critical to improving the service experience. Jack expressed the opinion that making staff members more knowledgeable about the facility’s accessibility features and policies for people with disabilities, making staff more aware of the needs of people with disabilities attending live sporting events, as well as developing increased awareness about how to interact with people with disabilities to meet those needs, were changes that would improve the fan experience. Larry cited increased staff training and a greater sense of empathy by the facility management and staff as essential for improving the sport service experience for patrons with disabilities. According to Larry, “greater sensitivity” toward people with disabilities would help make sport patrons feel “more comfortable and happy and [let them know that we] want them to come back.” Don suggested that accessibility policies and procedures need to be more universally understood by the facility staff and, in turn, more uniformly applied. “The rules and regulations need to be laid out more plainly to us and to everybody. Everybody needs to be on the same page.” At Facility 1, Dan noted that senior management designated a staff member as the “disabled advocate” so that if patrons have unique

needs while attending the event, this staff member can try to accommodate a specific need.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings from this study indicate that the physical needs of people with mobility impairments are primarily focused around aspects of the built structure and include seating for people with disabilities as well as their companions, restrooms, elevators, ramps, signage, line of sight issues, and parking. The service needs centered around the person’s interaction with a facility staff member in terms of knowledge, awareness, and responsiveness. The informants also cited the need for a better way to navigate through crowds, the need to be able to evacuate in an emergency, the need for accessible policies, and the role of others during the service experience.

In discussing their perceptions and expectations of the service experience, the spectator with a mobility impairment perceives the facility staff should be more empathetic and more aware of their needs when they attend a sporting event. A second key theme is that while the physical needs may clearly be more salient for the person with a mobility impairment while they are attending a sporting event, it is the interaction of being able to satisfy both the physical and service needs that combine to produce a positive service experience. A summary of the key findings is provided in Table 3.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

Based upon the findings of the study, it is more appropriate to conceptualize the interaction of both the patrons’ physical and service needs as a hierarchy where some needs do not become salient unless and until more critical needs are met. In addition, through interpretation of the findings, three critical “stages” of the service experience were identified: before the event, during the event, and after the event. Moreover, certain needs are salient at different stages of the service experience. For example, there was a need for ramps and elevators prior to the beginning of and at the end of the event.

### **Hierarchy of Needs**

Through triangulating the various perspectives of patrons and sport facility managers as well as through observations, the researchers discovered that a “hierarchy of needs” exists for a person with a mobility impairment pertaining to attending a live sporting event. Consistent with the work of Maslow, some needs do not

become salient unless and until more critical needs are met. For example, given Ryan's concerns about not being able to navigate in the restroom, he may choose not to repatronize the facility. For Ryan, an accessible bathroom stall is a critical need. Similarly, Jack noted that, since he has difficulty navigating steps, he has a need for a ramp or elevator to access certain levels of Facility 3. For Jack, the physical need for a ramp or elevator is a critical need and other service needs do not become salient until his physical need is met.

Acknowledging a hierarchy of needs is not to say, however, that the service needs are not important. The follow up interviews contained several descriptions of positive interaction with knowledgeable and responsive staff members which ultimately contributed to satisfactory experiences for both Mark and Don, illustrating the "ideal" experience that a spectator with a disability could encounter. However, for patrons with mobility impairments, the accessibility of the facility itself (i.e., the built structure) plays a larger role in determining whether the facility staff is able to meet the patron's needs.

A particular need may become salient when it is not met. At Facility 3 (the newest facility), which has very few physical barriers, the physical needs were not sa-

lient because those needs were being met. However, at Facility 1 and Facility 2, needs related to physical accessibility became particularly salient because they were not being met. As long as a need was being met, that need was no longer a top-of-mind issue and the patron focused on enjoying the event itself. However, in cases where the physical or service need was not being met, the salience of that issue was elaborated in greater detail and seemed to predominate the patron's experience. There were instances where the informant focused solely on the deficiencies in terms of physical accessibility and barely acknowledged the service needs or the quality of the sporting event itself.

### **Salience of certain needs at different stages of service delivery**

Determining which needs are salient at different stages of the service delivery is a valuable contribution of this study to the existing literature in sport facility management and can also be adapted to related fields like hospitality management (Grady & Ohlin, 2009). The informants discussed physical needs as being salient during the period of time up to when the patron reached his/her seat. After that stage, the patron's emphasis shifted to service needs, such as evaluating the knowledge or responsiveness of the staff member assigned to that seating area, as well as assessing the abil-

**Table 4**  
Particular needs during different stages of service delivery

<b>Pre-event</b>	<b>During event</b>	<b>Post-event</b>
Availability of disabled parking space	Staff responsiveness of ushers in seating sections	Ramp or elevator inside facility
Accessible route from parking lot to stadium	Staff awareness of ushers in seating sections	Directional signage
Ramp outside venue	Staff knowledge of ushers in seating sections	Restroom
Ramp or elevator inside venue	Restroom	Navigating through crowd
Directional signage	Navigating through crowd at half time	Ramp outside venue
Restroom		Accessible route from stadium to parking lot
Navigating through crowd		
Staff knowledge (parking staff, ticket takers, ushers, customer service staff)		
Staff Responsiveness (ticket takers, ushers, customer service staff)		

ity of the staff member to resolve any problems that might arise. At the conclusion of the event, the patron's emphasis shifted back to the physical needs, such as the need for a ramp or elevator to exit the facility. The physical needs are salient during two critical stages of the service experience: from the period of time prior to the event until the patron gets in his/her seat and the period after the event is over until the patron exits the facility. The service provider must be able to address and meet particular needs during different stages of the service delivery because the particular needs become salient at different stages. A table listing the particular needs that arose during each stage is provided in Table 4.

### **Emerging Theory of Service Provision for Patrons with Mobility Impairments**

The researchers were able to incorporate the key themes into an emerging theory of service provision for sport patrons with mobility impairments. The theory is "built" around the following ideas: the importance of the interaction of both the physical and service aspects, the salience of a particular need when that need is not met, the salience of the physical needs before and after the event, and the salience of the service needs during the event. Using these themes as building blocks for an emerging theory, service provision for people with mobility impairments can be conceptualized in a way that is uniquely different than service provision for able-bodied patrons. The findings of this study suggest that a person with a mobility impairment experiences the sporting event in a way that emphasizes more of the physical aspects of the facility as well as the staff members' ability to meet their needs, rather than focusing on the quality of the sporting event itself. While many of the informants discussed how barriers to accessibility had impacted their service experience on numerous occasions; very few discussed the quality of the event itself. This appears to be a unique difference in how sport spectators with mobility impairments evaluate the service encounter when compared to the able-bodied majority of sport patrons. Thus, for people with mobility impairments, the service provider's ability to meet the patrons' needs becomes the paramount concern. For this particular subset of sport consumers, the facility's senior management should concentrate on meeting the patrons' physical and service needs, recognizing that the physical and service needs become top-of-mind issues at different stages of the service experience, and understanding that a particular need may become salient when it is not met. This necessitates increased training in this area of facility management and operations, which the literature has confirmed is currently

lacking (Skulski et al., 2002; Paramio & Kitchin, 2013).

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was focused solely on patrons with mobility impairments. The intent was not to assess the needs of people with other types of disabilities (e.g., mobility impairment, hearing impairment, visual disabilities), but instead to focus initially on people with mobility impairments in their role as spectators at a sporting event. A second limitation of the study was that it focused on the experiences of a group of spectators who had attending sporting events at one university's athletic facilities. The participants were experienced consumers familiar with the venues being investigated. As such, it was not possible to capture the perceptions of consumers with no prior experiences at the specific sports facilities being studied. A third limitation is the limited generalizability of the findings. The purpose of this exploratory study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the needs of a small group of consumers with mobility impairments who had all attended events at the same college sport facilities, to understand their lived experiences in attending sporting events, and to identify the barriers to accessibility at sport facilities. The goal was not to generalize the findings to all people with disabilities, much less all people with mobility impairments. The findings should be interpreted as analysis of the reflections of these spectators' experiences attending sporting events.

### **Management Implications**

Until sport service providers better understand the unique needs of sport consumers with mobility impairments, the service provider continues to remain largely "in the dark" in terms of how to provide a quality fan experience which meets the consumer's needs. While tasked with implementing the legislative mandate provided in the ADA, sport facility managers need to be able to more precisely identify how and when the physical and service needs of people with disabilities become salient during different stages of the event at their specific venue given the current level of accessibility. This is useful for two reasons. First, it helps to identify functional areas where the facility is deficient in meeting a physical or service need. Second, it provides an opportunity for the senior management of the facility to devote both human and financial resources to remedy current problems. Based on the findings of this study, while some facility managers may feel frustrated by the lack of accessibility at their older facilities, this should not be perceived as a situation that cannot

be improved. Upgrades to the service environment and dedicated staff training sessions about disability issues and accessibility should enhance management's ability to better serve this growing segment of sport consumers. There also should be a more concerted effort to reach out to current customers with disabilities to gain more consistent feedback about their experiences as well as use of incident reports to document situations involving patrons with disabilities if they occur.

## Future Research

This work lays the foundation for further exploration of the needs and perceptions of spectators with other types of disabilities. There is also an opportunity to expand this scope of inquiry to focus in greater depth on understanding the facility manager's perspective in accommodating patrons with disabilities as well as to identify the barriers managers face in providing access. Future research could also be conducted to assess how accessibility is provided in related industries, such as hospitality and tourism, in order to identify best practices in providing a high-quality customer experience.

## Conclusion

This study is an initial step toward gaining a more holistic understanding of the needs of spectators with disabilities attending sporting events on one university campus. What became clear is that sport spectators with mobility impairments have a unique set of physical and service needs that may be attributed to the presence of their disability. Understanding how these needs reveal themselves during a sporting event and finding creative ways to meet the needs becomes the larger challenge for today's sport facility manager. Senior management at contemporary sport facilities has both a legal and managerial responsibility to be responsive to customers' specific needs. Continued efforts to enhance the fan experience, if properly implemented, should result in numerous strategic benefits for the organization while also simultaneously promoting greater opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in sport spectatorship.

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