



# VI Friendly Athletics

A Guide for Supporting Visually Impaired Adults and  
Children in Athletics

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# Introduction

Welcome to the Visually Impaired Athletics Resource produced by British Blind Sport in partnership with England Athletics.

At British Blind Sport we believe that every person with a visual impairment has the right to participate in the sport of his or her choice. We understand that there are many hurdles and barriers to overcome in order for each and every VI person to have the same accessibility as a sighted person. This resource has been created with the specific purpose to assist anyone who is delivering athletics activities with support, ideas and guidance on how to include people with a visual impairment.

This resource is all about helping mainstream athletics providers to be VI friendly through their provision of training, resources and support. These include:

- Athletics clubs

This resource will enable coaches, leaders and parents/carers to:

- Have a better understanding of the needs of people with a visual impairment.
- Apply their knowledge to meet the needs of people with a visual impairment.
- Use basic communication skills to support the needs of people with a visual impairment.
- Understand where you can obtain further support to ensure your club/group is fully accessible and inclusive to people with a visual impairment.

By making small and simple changes you will be able to include people with a visual impairment in your mainstream athletics sessions. Many of the tips you will find here will be beneficial to all the participants in your group, not just people with a visual impairment.

## **Alaina MacGregor – Chief Executive Officer, British Blind Sport**

“Our vision is to ensure that blind and partially sighted people have as many opportunities as possible to participate in sport. The key to raising participation is ensuring that there are plenty of coaches and teachers across the UK who understand how to create an inclusive sporting environment. The purpose of each of our bespoke educational resources is to raise awareness and knowledge of how to include a visually impaired person to ensure that they have a positive and meaningful experience in the sport of their choice. I am delighted that England Athletics provided expertise when we put together this resource and I would like to thank them on behalf of British Blind Sport and the visually impaired community.”

## **Chris Jones – Chief Executive, England Athletics**

“We are proud that athletics is perceived by many as being a trailblazing sport in the area of inclusive delivery.

“We have made a deliberate commitment to ensure that all resources, events and delivery programmes are inclusive at the point of use in recognition that the sport of athletics should be accessible to all and that there should be no divisions.

“I would like to take this opportunity to thank British Blind Sport for their continued partnership and expertise. We hope that you enjoy reading this resource and that it provides inspiration to you to take action in whatever important role you play making athletics a visually impaired (VI) friendly sport”

## **Rt Hon David Blunkett MP**

“Whether you join in sport recreationally or compete to represent your country, the positive experience of participating in sport starts with a knowledgeable coach or teacher. British Blind Sport have recognised the need for coaches and teachers across the UK to understand how to adapt sport and activities to be fully inclusive for visually impaired children and adults.

“These fantastic resources help to break down barriers to participation as well as assist and provide tips on how to make each sporting experience enjoyable for every visually impaired person regardless of their ability. We know sport can be the springboard for so many things for a VI person such as; to increase confidence, develop spatial awareness, grow a social network and provide a sense of accomplishment.

“With this in mind, I wholeheartedly support this educational programme as I recognise British Blind Sports ambition to make a visible difference through sport.”

## **Sally Gunnell – Patron, British Blind Sport**

“Great sporting experiences start with great coaches. When working with visually impaired (VI) children and adults, it is more important than ever for coaches to be skilled in knowing how to provide the right support so that the VI person has a positive experience whether it’s their first time on the track to winning a Paralympic medal.

“I fully support British Blind Sports educational programme to educate coaches and teachers to ensure that visually impaired people can maximise their sporting potential.”

# 1 Understanding Visual Impairments

There are two terms regularly used to refer to people with a sight loss condition. These are severely sight impaired (blind) and sight impaired (partially sighted). British Blind Sport uses the term Visual Impairment (VI) to refer to all levels of sight loss. Please note that throughout this document a person with a visual impairment (either adult or child) is often referred to as a 'VI participant'.

## 1.1 What is Visual Impairment

Visual impairment can be broadly defined as 'a limitation in one or more functions of the eye or visual system'. It can be congenital (someone is born with the impairment) or acquired and can range from blind to partially sighted.

Sight is classified on more than one measure. The main measures are 'Visual acuity' and 'Visual field'.

### 1.1.1 Visual acuity

A person's ability to see fine detail e.g. reading text is often tested by reading down an eye chart.

### 1.1.2 Visual field

The boundaries of what a person can see in one instant i.e. the entire area that can be seen without moving the eyes.

### 1.1.3 Severely sight impaired (blind)

- People with a visual impairment in this category will often use Braille to access text.
- They will not be able to see a demonstration.
- They will need to orientate themselves correctly (to ensure they are facing the correct direction) before taking part in an activity.
- They may not know when they are standing too close to a fellow participant.
- They may become disorientated part way through an activity and need your voice to find the correct direction.

### 1.1.4 Sight impaired (partially sighted)

- People with a visual impairment in this category may or may not be able to see print.
- They may not be able to recognise you from a distance when you greet them at the start of the session.
- They may not be able to see a demonstration due to light conditions or their position in relation to you.

### 1.1.5 No light perception

- When the eye detects no information, the brain is prevented from processing any information it gets from the eye.

How sight is affected by a visual impairment varies greatly depending on its cause, and where in the eye(s) or brain the visual impairment occurs. Visual impairment can range from the total loss of sight, to a disturbance within the field of vision e.g. loss of vision from the lower half of the field of view, to random loss (patchy) of vision from within the field of view, to tunnel vision. The age or stage of onset that the visual impairment occurs will have an effect on the child/adult's physical, psychological and emotional development.

## **1.2 Understanding Common Visual Impairment Conditions**

The common conditions below are all types of ocular visual impairments. This means the condition has affected a part of the eye. There are also cortical visual impairments, which occur when the processing of information received from the eye is at fault, and not the eye itself.

### **1.2.1 Albinism**

This condition occurs due to a lack of pigmentation in the skin or eyes; causing a reduced visual acuity. Bright light will cause discomfort to people with this condition. This is important to consider when holding a session in a brightly lit venue or in direct sunlight.

If sunlight or floodlights are shining into an environment, it may alter a person's vision.

### **1.2.2 Nystagmus**

Nystagmus is the involuntary movement of the eye, with the person's eyes appearing to shake or oscillate. This condition is often a factor in other visual impairments such as Albinism. People with nystagmus may find it difficult to follow a moving football, due to the movement of the eye. There may also be an angle of sight that the nystagmus affects the least. This means that the visually impaired participant may look indirectly at the point of interest.

### **1.2.3 Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP)**

This condition affects both the visual acuity and visual field, often resulting in tunnel vision. It will take time for a participant to adjust to new light levels when transitioning from poorly lit to well lit environments. If the change is very significant, it may leave the participant temporarily blind. Some forms of RP are progressive and may result in individuals losing all their sight over time.

### **1.2.4 Retinoblastoma**

Retinoblastoma is cancer of the eye. The resulting visual impairment will vary depending on the size and location of the tumour and whether it affects one or both eyes.

### **1.2.5 Colour confusion (also known as colour blindness)**

Although it is not generally seen as a visual impairment, due to its relatively high incidence, it is worth mentioning. This is when people see colours differently e.g. red green colour confusion occurs in 8% of males. It is found more commonly in males due to its genetic origin, causing faults in the cones on the back of the eye.

You may become aware of a participant with colour confusion in tasks that are colour centred e.g. "run to the red cone". An easy remedy to this situation is to ask the participant to name the colour of the item you want them to collect.

Partial sight and blindness can be broadly defined as a limitation in one or more functions of the eye or visual system, most commonly impairment of visual acuity (sharpness or clarity of vision), visual fields (the ability to detect objects to either side or above or below the direction in which the person is looking), contrast sensitivity and colour vision.

### **1.2.6 Conclusion**

There are some sight loss conditions that occur as part of a syndrome. These conditions affect more than one part of the body. For example, Usher's Syndrome affects both hearing and sight.

There are many different eye conditions that result in sight loss. If you need to know about specific eye conditions, please [visit the RNIB website](#).

## Case Study: Noel Thatcher

Noel Thatcher MBE began his sporting career with British Blind Sport and is now a Patron for the charity.

Essex resident and physiotherapist Noel is no stranger to BBS, having been a long-standing member of the organisation and often crediting BBS athletics youth events as the kick start to his sporting career.

British Blind Sport started Noel on his path to Paralympic success when he participated in a BBS VI schools athletics championship as a young person. Noel says 'I could never have predicted the impact it has had on my life'.

Noel represented the United Kingdom at the Paralympics for long distance running in 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004, winning a total of five gold medals during that time. His career highlights are winning gold and setting a world record at Barcelona in 1992, and winning the 5k race in Sydney in 2000, again setting a world record. One of his proudest moments was at the 2004 Games in Athens when he carried the flag for the Great Britain team at the opening ceremony.

His achievements at the 1996 Paralympics in Atlanta earned him an MBE in the 1997 New Year Honours for his services to athletics for disabled people. He was inducted into the England Athletics Hall of Fame in 2009.

"Throughout my career I also received the support of several guide runners. I trained with various guides but during competition chose to race solo. **It is important to note that each athlete's vision and preference is very different, therefore a coach and athlete must explore what works best for them.** Not all visually impaired and registered blind athletes need a guide. The rules for athletics also limit the use of guides to B1 athletes, and a choice for B2.

Noel says "Guides are worth their weight in gold medals! For me, my guides were absolutely pivotal to my winning races. For the visually impaired person who would like to run but who lacks the confidence, a guide can make a huge difference whether you simply just want to go running in the area that you reside or have aspirations to take part in various competitions."

Unlike distance track and road events usually, with a guide there are technical challenges including a fair amount of physical interventions – shoulder knocking and pulling – and lots of verbal feedback and encouragement.

Noel's experience from grassroots participation to podium success means he has some amazing and moving stories to tell. He is a great ambassador for what can be achieved and no doubt will be an inspiration to visually impaired people across the UK, and in particular for the younger generation to look up to and aspire to emulate.

## 2 Making Athletics Accessible for Visually Impaired Participants

### 2.1 Visually Impaired Friendly Athletics

The emotional effect of having a visual impairment on a person cannot be quantified. Athletics can help to develop a number of skills but it can also be a vehicle for building self-esteem as well as providing a safe environment to extend experiences.

There are a number of factors to consider when delivering athletics sessions to people with a visual impairment, which will help with planning and ensure that the participant has a good experience.

#### 2.1.1 Advertising

- Provide information in an accessible format if required (e.g. braille, clear print or suitable electronic version for a screen reader. See Further Information section for more information).
- Advertise your sessions with local and national VI organisations such as British Blind Sport and RNIB.
- Use appropriate images of visually impaired athletes in your marketing material.

#### 2.1.2 Session venue and time

- Provide information about the nearest public transport and if possible provide a meet and greet service from there to the venue.
- Consider the impact of daylight on some sight conditions and organise sessions in good daylight where possible.

#### 2.1.3 Guide dogs

Some VI participants may have a guide dog. Find out if there is anywhere at the facility you use/meet at, that the dog can be left whilst its owner is training. This is often in the reception or offices where the dog can lie down and be supervised. The temperature of this area needs to be considered and water should be made available for the dog to drink. If you, or the facility owner, have any questions about having a guide dog at a facility, speak to the dog's owner or [contact Guide Dogs](#).

#### **2.1.4 Participant information**

- Provide a named contact, email and phone number and encourage VI participants to contact you in advance to discuss any additional support or find out further information.
- Ask for disability information on any PARQ forms or membership forms so you are aware in advance if a VI participant is attending.
- Contact the VI participant (and/or their parents/guardians/carers) before a session to find out things like the level and type of sight loss, whether they have had any sight previously and whether they require a guide.

#### **2.1.5 Coaches, leaders and volunteers**

It is important that coaches, leaders and volunteers are knowledgeable about working with visually impaired participants. Like any interaction between people, it is about assessing a situation and behaving appropriately.

Remember that just as we are all different, so each person with a visual impairment you meet will be different too – sight levels, personality, ability, culture, fitness levels. It is important not to generalise visual impairments across participants or across sight conditions but to understand how much the person can see and how to maximise, where possible, the use of any sight they have.

Here are some things to consider when working with VI participants:

- As facial expressions are learnt, don't be misled by a lack of facial expressions.
- Check the participant understands instructions by asking questions and using their name. It is good practice to ask the VI person to explain in their own words what actions are expected, as this clarifies what has been understood.
- Consider what descriptions you use when describing an activity or action. Some VI participants may not understand certain descriptions due to gaps in their knowledge or having no reference for that shape or action such as star jumps, high knees etc.
- General orientation can be difficult when the acoustics of the environment make it difficult to focus on the origin of the noise e.g. the leader/coach. This is especially so when there is more than one group training in an area.
- When approaching a person or a group, always say who you are by name. You may have to do this more than once to allow them to become familiar with the sound of your voice.
- Try and verbalise body language. Some VI participants may not be able to read facial expressions or make eye contact.
- Address a VI participant by name or lightly touch them on the side of the arm to indicate you are talking to them specifically. This is something to particularly bear in mind if people are

talking in a group, to make sure a VI participant is included in the conversation or knows that you are referring to them.

- Use everyday language such as “see,” “look” or “read.”
- If you know you have VI person coming to your session, prepare yourself. If possible, listen to sessions given by someone else with your eyes closed. How much detail is given in the description and instructions? How did each participant know when it was their turn? Did they know exactly what they should be doing each time? What information is needed to create a mental image of the skill or technique? Practise using this detail with your other participants, they will also benefit.
- Avoid having your back to a window or bright sunlight as the reflection will make it more difficult for a VI participant to see.
- Good clear communication is vital – give detailed explanations of drills, activity rules etc.
- When demonstrating, it may be necessary to do manual demonstrations with a VI participant. Always make sure you check with them that they are happy for you to do this first and tell them what you are going to do.
- Some VI participants, particularly beginners, may require additional support in athletics. This may be to provide hands-on support, act as a guide or caller or to provide communication support, including the reinforcement of skill repetition or instructions along with reassurance. Ideally, the additional support would be an Athletics Leader or Coaching Assistant, although they could be a learning support assistant or a volunteer who is familiar to the VI person and able to communicate with them such as a parent or sibling.
- Ensure you involve VI participants in all parts of the club/group including social activities.
- Keep the activity area clear of obstacles such as equipment that could cause someone to trip or fall e.g. a rake next to a long jump pit.
- Keep equipment in a well-defined area and clearly inform the group of where that area is and what is contained there.
- Do give precise instructions to help VI participants find their way, for example, “the equipment is to your left hand side”. It’s no use saying “it’s over there” and pointing.
- Where possible, think about colour contrast – if you’re using cones on a grass area use white or blue ones, avoid using green ones.
- Make sure all activities in the session are accessible including the fun activities! There’s nothing worse than taking part in the athletics drills and then being unable to take part in the fun game at the end with your friends.

- Be aware that depending on the person's eye condition, their level of vision may change from one day to the next depending on lighting, tiredness, general health etc. Someone may be able to do a task one day, but then find it more difficult the next.
- Be aware that VI participants may experience disorientation in certain situations such as when rotating during throws.

## Case study: Coral Nourrice (Coach)

Coral Nourrice is a coach at Newham and Essex Beagles who has coached a VI sprinter.

“When I was first approached by a VI athlete, the initial challenge was to get to know her and understand the nature of her visual impairment as well as how to integrate her into the current training squad.

“I communicated with her via email and telephone before meeting face to face. We discussed her impairment and I also gained additional resources and advice from England Athletics before introducing her to the squad and pairing her up with two guides.

“There were some challenges for me, remembering the athlete’s impairment when marking out distances for sessions and working with obstacles during a session, however the main ones were more athletics related, because the athlete was slightly older, it was harder to change/improve certain aspects of her running technique. I overcame these with time and also ensured I asked her for feedback. She soon started running Personal Bests which gave us both an indication that we were on the right path.

“Working with a VI athlete has helped improve my communication and over time we both communicated with each other better – there was a mutual trust between us and the rest of the squad. Coaching her has been a learning curve but it has opened my eyes and given me a better understanding of disability athletics.

“I’d advise other coaches working with VI athletes for the first time to ensure you communicate effectively, get to know the athlete as an individual and seek feedback from them just like you would with any other athlete. It can be a rewarding experience if you go into it open minded and are willing to adapt and make changes when and if necessary. You should also be willing to seek advice / educate yourself in this area if necessary.”

## **2.2 Guiding**

Anyone working with children, young people or vulnerable adults in a position of responsibility should be Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checked.

Some VI participants will need a sighted guide to support them to take part in athletics. How a guide and VI participant work together will depend on personal preference, level of sight loss and experience. The role of the guide is to support the VI participant to enable them to take part and in doing so keep them as safe as possible.

To enable the leaders to run the group safely it is recommended they do not act as guide runners during the session.

Having a pool of guides will ensure a visually impaired participant does not have to rely on one person in case of injury, illness, holidays etc.

### **2.2.1 Running and Sprinting – Guiding - Before you start**

- Before the first guided session runner and guide should meet or talk on the phone.
- Carry out a risk assessment (or ensure the club/leader/coach has) to ensure that any risk has been reduced as much as possible.
- Start slow, if possible run some strides.

### **2.2.2 For off-track running**

- Choose a simple, flat, traffic free route to begin with.
- Tell somebody where you're going.
- Know the route and the quick routes home.

### **2.2.3 Communication**

- Try describing the running environment out loud e.g. "Left turn 10m", "ramp" "tree root".
- Use a countdown to inform of approaching obstacles such as "kerb in 5,4,3,2,1"
- Simple, clear, concise advice and feedback is critical.
- Let the VI runner know if there are any weather, light, surface or gradient changes imminent.
- Use verbal caution and warning in advance wherever possible.
- Remember obstacles are high and low, and sometimes unexpected (e.g. tree branches, dogs, potholes).

### **2.2.4 Pairings**

- Ideally pairs should be of similar height and stride length.
- The guide should be faster than the runner.

- The speed/ability of the guide should be relevant to the session or distance.
- The pair should be able to synchronise arm and leg movements.
- Similar interests and humour definitely help!

### **2.2.5 Safety**

- Use a strap/guide rope which is strong and not too stretchy or long.
- Run 'tight' (shortened guide rope and closer together) and slow down when needed.
- Don't put yourself at risk of injury.
- Wear visible tops.

### **2.2.6 Field events - Guiding and calling**

- Guides are used during field events to help orientate VI participants to the throwing, jumping or activity area prior to participating. A caller then uses sound to help the athlete orientate themselves whilst performing. A coach/leader could perform these roles if required.
- During throwing events in particular the safety of bystanders is paramount. It is important that all participants have understood and respect the safety instructions of throwing events.
- A sighted support should always confirm that the throwing area is clear before a throw takes place, and that no one is behind or in front of the thrower.
- Familiarise the VI participant with the activity area. This may be through detailed description and/or physically moving around the area and allowing them to gauge distances and feel objects or surface texture with their feet or hands e.g. the length of a long jump runway, the feeling of the take-off board and landing area.
- Orientate the athlete so they begin the activity facing the right direction and are aware of where they are in relation to the activity area e.g. which way they are throwing.
- Use acoustic orientation during the activity to help the athlete maintain orientation e.g. clapping or calling at the end of the long jump runway.
- Maintain safety of guide/caller and athlete at all times, particularly if the caller is stood in the throwing area.
- Make sure the VI participant is kept informed as to the distance they have thrown or jumped so they are constantly updated as to their status within competition.
- During a training session it may be useful to allow the visually impaired participant the opportunity to take part in measuring the length of the throw or jump to help them develop their understanding of distances, and to appreciate improvements in their own performance, and that of their peers.

### 2.2.7 General Guiding

Unfamiliar surroundings can sometimes prove challenging for someone who is visually impaired (even if they run without a guide) so there may be occasions where they require assistance outside of the athletics activity e.g. before or after a session, at a competition, at a club social event. Note that guiding someone when walking is different to guiding someone when running.

- Identify yourself and ask the VI person if they would like some assistance; don't just presume that they do or don't.
- Offer your elbow or shoulder to the VI person for them to take hold of. Ask them which side they prefer to be guided on. If guiding a child, they may want to hold your hand instead of your arm, or may just want to touch your arm. Ask them the technique they are used to.
- Ensure you are always one step in front of the person that you are guiding, don't walk too fast or too slowly, ask if they are happy with the pace.
- Communicate at all times e.g. steps (up or down), handrails. Describe what is around them and explain any changes in ground surface.
- When guiding a VI person to a seat, place their hand on the back of the chair/bench. Do not back them into the seat.
- When walking through doorways ensure that the VI person steps behind you and ensure that they do not get struck by the door or catch their fingers, etc.
- Explain any loud noises.
- Keep your guiding arm still and relaxed. Don't start waving it about or pointing at things.
- Remember to give the person you are guiding adequate space around obstacles.

## Case Study: Gemma Ferguson (Guide runner)

“I took part in the Run England Leadership in Running Fitness training course and they contacted me shortly after about an opportunity to run with a blind lady. I thought it would be a very cool thing to do, and I do it because I believe if someone wants to get active, they should have the opportunity to do so. Choosing to be active is the hardest step, having someone support you to achieve your goals and keep you on track is important.

“Personally, I run as part of a running club within Loughborough University. I typically run half marathons but have led groups of all abilities and distances throughout the past two years. I thought it would be a great opportunity to do more 1:1 work with individuals and their fitness. We didn't have goals at the beginning, we just had a lanyard and we just chatted about anything and everything whilst I explained what was coming up. We started with interval training and then gradually started continuous running with the goal of a 5km road race. It is so simple, you just run and to your runner, you are like a human sat nav!

“We've had a few issues with the general public along the way. My runner is amazing, she is so determined and committed so is very easy to run with; but the public are not very accommodating of us and the fact that we need to run beside each other. We have had umbrellas in the eyes and been pushed off the pavement! Another challenge is uneven pavements. As my runner gets tired she doesn't lift her feet as much and man-holes and bumps have caused some accidents, and unfortunately pavements are sometimes the most even surfaces available. We just expect these things now to be honest. We can't really overcome the general public and footpaths! You just learn to adapt and let the runner know when the pot holes and bumps are coming up.

My runner loves seeing the improvements and taking part in the races. We have completed JOINTHE5000 5km race and Race for Life. She does kayaking, yoga, has a full time job etc. so we have just put it into our routine of exercise. For me, I have just enjoyed the experience! I was a run leader for my club last year but I enjoy this more. It is great to give people the opportunity to get out when they cannot do it themselves.

“To other potential guides I say 'Just do it!' It really isn't complicated, I had little to no help or advice, and we were just put in contact and were both as clueless as each other! At the start we literally guided each other as my runner let me know how to communicate. There really is no science; you just do what the runner needs and every runner is going to be different. There will be trips and falls, but if you expect them, then they won't be a shock and you can prevent them happening. One time I literally caught my runner mid fall. We still joke about my super-fast reactions, but I knew she was getting tired and not lifting her feet as much so was ready for any scuffs on the pavement that could lead to a fall. Despite the obvious threat of falls, I feel that sometimes it is made into such a mountain when it is a tiny mole hill. It is basically just like running with a friend.

“Lots of visually impaired people want to be active. Instead of trying to get people who maybe aren’t that inspired or interested in sport, I would say go to the people who physically cannot do it themselves but want to. Take away barriers and don’t make it a big deal, just do it!”

## **2.3 Health and Safety**

There are some health and safety considerations that parents/carers and teachers/coaches may need to take into account when a VI person takes part in athletics. Specific risks should be considered as part of the usual risk assessment for the activity and action taken to minimise any potential risks as much as possible.

### **2.3.1 Health and Safety Considerations**

#### **Obstacles**

- A VI participant may not see obstacles and be able to avoid them.
- Give detailed descriptions of the activity area and explain to a VI participant any obstacles or hazards. Always let the VI participant know if they are to spend any period of time on their own.
- Use a guide if necessary.
- If there are other people using the activity area e.g. on a track, make other coaches/ leaders and participants aware there is a VI participant who may not see other athletes running in front of them or equipment left out e.g. a hurdle placed on the track without warning.

#### **Fire evacuation**

- Make sure that there is a procedure in place to support a VI participant if they require it in a fire evacuation and that they know what it is, for example assigning a buddy or guide to provide assistance.

#### **Traffic**

- Use a guide runner and guide rope if necessary for road running.
- Use traffic-free routes until the guide is confident and competent.
- Wear high-visibility clothing.

There are health and safety considerations relating to visual impairments but these must never be a reason to exclude VI participants from any athletics sessions.

## Case Study: Dave Heeley

Dave Heeley is a long distance runner and member of West Bromwich Harriers. He was diagnosed with a sight condition called Retinitis Pigmentosa (RP) at the age of ten. He started running whilst at school and competed in track races and cross-country but at the age of 16 Dave's sight deteriorated so much that he became blind and stopped running and playing all other sports. 35 years later Dave agreed to run the London Marathon to raise money for Guide Dogs for the Blind and has been running ever since. In 2008 Dave completed the epic challenge of 7 marathons, in 7 days, over 7 continents, which began on 7th April in the Falkland Islands (Antarctica) then Rio (South America), Los Angeles (North America), Sydney (Australasia), Dubai (Asia) and Tunisia (Africa), with the challenge ending with the Flora London marathon (Europe), on 13th April.

"When I agreed to run the marathon I found out an old friend was a runner so he took me out in a pair of borrowed trainers and then, a few weeks, later the guy who had persuaded me to run the marathon also started guiding for me.

"The biggest challenge I've found as my running has developed was finding guides who were the right speed and could run when I wanted to run. Through running I met other people though who were happy to guide for me and when my first two guides were injured a friend put me in touch with Tony and he's still guiding for me now, he's always said that becoming a guide runner helped motivate him to keep running.

"Running has changed my life in a way I can't explain. I used to smoke and drink but now I'm much healthier and have fitness levels I never dreamed of. It gives me a real feel good factor and I've met people from all over the world. I never would have guessed when I took up running what an impact it would have on my life, I've even changed my career because of it now I'm a motivational speaker and even do TV and radio shows!

"If I had to give advice to other visually impaired people thinking of taking up athletics I'd say 'Do it!' It will change your life, build your confidence and give you independence as well as a social life and better well-being. It makes you a bigger part of the community and you never know what else it will bring, it's unbelievable where it might take you!

"Sometimes athletics clubs and groups might be a bit frightened or embarrassed if a visually impaired person turned up. They worry about offending them, saying the wrong thing or having to give up their own training to look after them. But if you just chat to them you'll find out they're just like everyone else and more often than not there are plenty of people in the club/group who would be really keen to help as a guide runner. Having a visually impaired runner can help promote the club and lead to participation by other disabled people, building another side to a club.

"Guide runners are brilliant, without them I couldn't do what I do and I owe them a lot but guiding has been positive for them too. They feel more confident to interact with disabled people

in general now and not worry about doing or saying the wrong thing. It helps get them out for a run and they've always got someone to run with. It gives them new experiences that they wouldn't have had, who would have known that one of my guide runners would have run around the world with me!"

## 3 Competitive Athletics for Visually Impaired Athletes

### 3.1 Classification

Classification is the grouping of athletes with a specific impairment to ensure that there is a fair playing field. Athletes will first obtain a national classification and then if they show potential and are going to be competing overseas they will then obtain an international classification. Sight classifications are recorded by British Blind Sport as B1, B2 and B3. However, the classification terminology for athletics starts with the letters T/F (Track/Field).

It is important to note any sight classification/testing is done with best correction in best eye i.e. whilst wearing corrective equipment such as glasses or lenses.

- B1 – (T/F 11): These athletes are unable to see at all and are considered totally blind. They must wear blackened goggles when competing and will require a guide.
- B2 – (T/F 12): These athletes can recognise shapes and have some ability to see. There is a large range of vision ability within this class. Athletes can choose whether to use a guide or not.
- B3 – (T/F 13): Athletes who have the most sight but legally are still considered to have a visual impairment. They cannot use a guide.
- B4 and B4+: These classifications are not classifiable under national or international athletics rules.

#### **For more information on sight classifications visit:**

- Get a sight classification via British Blind Sport:  
<http://www.britishblindsport.org.uk/classification>
- British Athletics National and International enquiries: [classification@britishathletics.org.uk](mailto:classification@britishathletics.org.uk)

## 3.2 Competition

In competitive athletics, classification only refers to athletes wanting to progress through the Paralympic pathway, Any VI athlete can enter any open meeting and compete regardless of their classification outcome or having actually completed the classification process. This is only required if competing in Paralympic stream, competitions, such as Parallel Success series of events delivered by British Athletics. Classification T11-13 will allow an athlete's results to be added to the National ranking on the Power of 10 website under 'disability' rankings section and under an athlete's class and event. B4 and B4+ athletes will appear on a personal profile within this website or under the main age group rankings.

It is important to notify organisers of competitions when completing the competition entry form:

- That the athlete has a visual impairment and their classification category.
- What adaptations may be required for them to participate e.g. to take part with a guide runner.

### 3.2.1 Reasonable adjustment

Under the Equality Act 2010 VI athletes should be allowed to take part in athletics competitions with the support of a guide. Guides should be provided by the athlete and should not have to pay an entry fee. They will not be considered to be participating in the competition in their own right. Guides may be of either gender regardless of the restrictions of the race or the gender of the athlete. Guides should be identified in advance to the Race/Meeting Referee and should wear some visible or warning clothing to identify them to other runners.

### 3.2.2 Rules

Competition rules will be determined by either UK Athletics (UKA) or the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) depending on the event, please refer to [www.britishathletics.org.uk/competitions/rule/](http://www.britishathletics.org.uk/competitions/rule/) or [www.paralympic.org/athletics/rules-and-regulations/rules](http://www.paralympic.org/athletics/rules-and-regulations/rules) for up to date rules.

### 3.2.3 General

In order to compete fairly T/F11 athletes must wear approved opaque glasses to block out any light.

- No guide animal is permitted in the competition area.

### 3.2.4 Guide running

- T11 athletes compete accompanied by a guide-runner. Guide runners are also permitted for T12 athletes by choice and are not considered assistance or pacing. T13 or B4/B4+ are not permitted to run with a guide in competition.
- The athlete may receive verbal instruction from the guide-runner.
- The guide-runner can run or walk but is not allowed to use a bicycle or other mechanical means of transport.

- The athlete may use an elbow lead or tether (guide rope). The tether is made from non-elastic material and must not store energy and/or offer a performance gain to the athlete.
- For races of 800m or longer the guide-runner should be no more than one full stride length ahead of the VI athlete.
- The guide-runner is not allowed to push, pull or otherwise propel athletes in order to gain an advantage at any stage during a race.
- For races of 5000m or longer, athletes are allowed to use two guide-runners.
- One interchange of guide-runners is permitted for each athlete per race and the interchange must take place without any hindrance to other athletes. In track events it must take place on the back straight, for road races it must take place at the 10km, 20km or 30km marks.
- The athlete must cross the finish line in front of the guide-runner or the athlete will be disqualified.

### **3.2.5 Track**

- In events of 800m and above, T11/T12 athletes can have support from someone other than an official to call intermediate times from an area inside the competition area.
- In 100m-400m events each athlete and guide-runner are allocated one lane each.
- In relays, either the athlete or the guide-runner can carry the baton.

### **3.2.6 Field**

- F11/12 athletes can be accompanied onto the field of play by someone to act as caller and/or guide and assist the athlete by orientating them before each attempt.
- Acoustic orientation is permitted before, during and after each attempt.
- For T/F12 athletes: visual modification of the existing facility is permitted (i.e. paint, chalk, powder, cones, flags, etc). Acoustic signals may also be used.
- For T11 athletes: acoustic assistance is permitted, however, no visual modification to the existing facility is permitted.
- T11/ T12 athletes use a take-off area which consists of a rectangle 1.00m x 1.22m marked by use of chalk, talcum powder, light sand etc. that the athlete leaves an impression on the area with their take-off foot. All jumps are measured from the nearest impression left by the take-off foot. Where an athlete does not take off from the take-off area, but before, measurement is made to the edge of the take-off area furthest from the landing area.

## **3.3 Pathways for Visually Impaired People**

Visually Impaired athletes are eligible to compete at the Paralympic Games and the IPC World and European Athletics Championships provided that they have a valid international athletics

classification and IPC License. There are many other athletics competitions that VI athletes can compete in:

- Mainstream (non-disability) competitions e.g. county, regional and national championships, open meetings, league meetings, road races.
- Integrated competitions (competitions with events for both disabled and non-disabled participants) e.g. Parallel Success events, England Athletics Championships.
- Pan-disability competitions e.g. DSE (Disability Sport Events) regional and national championships.
- Visually impaired specific competitions e.g. Metro Blind Sport, Actionnaires events.

## Case Study: Erin McBride

Erin, who was born in 1998 is a T13 sprinter in 100m, 200m and 400m and a member of Liverpool Harriers Athletics Club. She started out in primary school sports days and schools competitions until she was spotted by a cross country coach from Liverpool Harriers AC who asked her to come to the Harriers. Erin did cross country races until she had a bad injury and thought it was best to stop cross country and move to track. Since then Erin has won silver and bronze at the 2013 UK School Games in 200m and 100m respectively, and has won bronze at the 2013 IPC Athletics World Championships in the 400m. She is currently ranked number one in Europe for the 100m, 200m, and 400m (summer 2014).

“I love athletics and it has already given me the opportunity to travel, and meet so many people who have other disabilities. There is always a story to tell from each athlete, but we are all the same when you perform, train and compete.

“Whilst in training and races it was always apparent that I was the slower athlete and I had to tell myself constantly that they don’t have a disability, and don’t have to focus on seeing 20m in front of them. Lane choice is also an issue as sighted athletes can see either side of themselves, but this is not the case for me. Some sessions were harder to complete because either the weather affected my sight or there were markings that I didn’t see. Coaches would raise their arms and then drop them to instruct go, but again, because I can’t see this I always started after the other athletes. At competitions results are always posted in small print or pencil and usually through glass so I can’t read the results and then have to ask my parents to read them and tell me.

“I think that because I have introduced my own coping strategies coaches and officials often just forget about my disability, but it is still there. Coaches should think about the disability and then how it would affect them if they were training. Ask the athlete before going to competitions about their impairment. My coach and I discuss the sessions and adapt them around my eyes if I feel it will affect my sight during the session. He has had to learn this as well!

“Nothing has changed as a visually impaired athlete but as an individual, it has taught me how others are affected by their disability and how strong they are. Athletics has taught me discipline, loyalty, how to monitor my own body in particular running conditions and how this affects my sight for a race or training.

“Visually Impaired athletes should not think because they can’t see that they are unable to complete a session made for a sighted athlete. Also, they should be comfortable to tell/ask people if they need help seeing something. For example, competition results after a race are always in small print which leaves the athlete not knowing their results, but it is okay to ask for help from others.

“Try, don’t be put off, it’s an opportunity to show your parents that you can manage your disability.”

# Summary and Best Practice

## Do

- Identify and introduce yourself. You may have to do this more than once to allow a visually impaired person to become familiar with the sound of your voice.
- Use clear communication and vary the tone of your voice.
- Use instruction and explanation; less demonstration.
- Ensure the VI participant has had the opportunity to orientate/familiarise themselves with the activity area and facility.
- Have a sighted guide to support where appropriate.
- Use tactile demonstration where appropriate.
- Ensure the activity area is well lit.
- Ask the participant what they can see and what support they require.
- Verbalise actions.
- Think safety first!
- Think about the colour of equipment used, and use audible equipment where possible.
- Remember everyone is individual and every eye condition is different.
- Ask the person questions to check they have understood.
- Make all activities accessible including the fun activities/games and social events.
- Give verbal directions and describe hazards where necessary.
- Allow the person to take your arm and then guide them if necessary.
- Use everyday language. For example, “see,” “look” or “read.”
- Remember some people may not have seen other people perform basic motor skills, so don't make assumptions that they know how basic tasks are performed.
- Ensure adequate space for running e.g. two lanes rather than just one.

## **Don't**

- Presume all people with a visual impairment can't see anything.
- Rely on demonstration – it may not be seen.
- Single out the person with a visual impairment.

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