

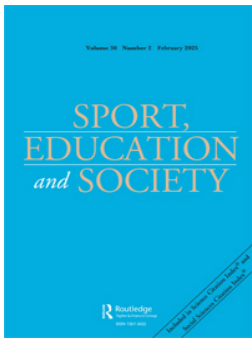
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## **‘Yes, everyone is blindfolded but that doesn’t make it equal’: the intersectional experiences of visually impaired women footballers in England**

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# 'Yes, everyone is blindfolded but that doesn't make it equal': the intersectional experiences of visually impaired women footballers in England

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, there have been concerted global efforts to develop women's visually impaired (VI) football. However, these developments have not occurred without challenges and the players' experiences during this significant period of progress have received no academic attention. We adopt an intra-categorical complexity approach to intersectionality to explore VI women's experiences of becoming and being footballers. The study utilises a focus group and in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of seven women, with differing sight conditions, who have participated in VI football in England. Using abductive analysis, we examine how the players' lived experiences have been shaped by the complex intersections of being female, disabled and, more specifically, VI. Our analysis reveals that these intersections create inequitable outcomes for footballers with various subordinate identities. The main inequities derive from the historic marginalisation of women in disability football and include the challenges of learning a new sport, players with different sight conditions adjusting to wearing blindfolds in blind football, and tensions between players brought about by the combination of B1–B3 classes. The findings reveal the complex lived realities of VI women footballers, which have implications for key stakeholders tasked with growing the game in a manner that leads to more equitable outcomes for VI women.

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Visual impairment; gender; football; disability; intersectionality

## Introduction

Blind and partially sighted football are thought to have begun in schools for visually impaired (VI) children (IBSA, n.d.), with Spain and Brazil acknowledged as pioneers during the first half of the twentieth century (Mayr de Oliveira Silva, 2008). In 1996, both formats of the game came under the governance of the International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA), with internationally recognised rules and competitions established (IBSA, n.d.). Over the last two decades, blind football has received increased exposure as part of the Paralympic Games since 2004, but partially sighted football remains absent from the Paralympics (IBSA, n.d.).

Traditionally, blind football is played by people who are classified as B1, meaning they have the most severe visual impairments and are regarded as blind. The game is 5-a-side with teams consisting of four blind outfield players and one sighted or partially sighted goalkeeper. Outfield players

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wear blindfolds<sup>1</sup> to ensure as level a playing field as possible between players who may experience variations in light perception (Runswick et al., 2021). The ball makes a rattling sound to enable players to track its location and movement. Kick-boards along the touch lines of the pitch act as a physical boundary against which the ball can be played.

Partially sighted football is an adapted version of futsal played by four outfield partially sighted players and one sighted or partially sighted goalkeeper. Players are classified as B2 (severely limited visual acuity and/or field in both eyes) or B3 (limited visual acuity and/or visual field in both eyes) and utilise their usable vision to play (Runswick et al., 2021). The game is played on indoor pitches with equal light intensity and with a ball that contrasts with the pitch and lines.<sup>2</sup>

Both formats of VI football<sup>3</sup> have been regarded as mixed-sex in many domestic leagues, and international competitions governed by IBSA; however, women have been significantly under-represented and the development of football specifically for visually impaired (VI) women is in its infancy. Acknowledging the need to attract more women to VI football, IBSA launched the Women's Blind Football Network in 2015 (IBSA, 2015) and subsequent training camps in Austria (2017) and Tokyo (2019). In January 2020, IBSA made the decision to open women's blind football up to partially sighted players (classified B2 and B3), recognising that despite recent efforts:

We are not quite at the stage where we have enough B1 players on each team ... we need to start by allowing a larger number of athletes to compete together. We want to encourage countries to invest in their programmes and recruit more female footballers, especially B1s. (IBSA, 2020a)

Under these conditions all players (B1–B3) are required to wear a blindfold, the implications of which we discuss later. In February 2020 IBSA announced plans for the inaugural Women's Blind Football World Championships (IBSA, 2020b). Despite the postponement of this landmark event due to Covid-19, the announcement triggered the formation of women's blind football squads in several nations, including England, adding to more established national squads such as Argentina and Japan. While this progress is welcomed, it must be contextualised alongside the status of blind football as a male-only event at the Paralympic Games. Following the 2016 Rio Paralympics, Cerebral Palsy (CP) football – also a male-only event – was removed from the Paralympic programme. Subsequent attempts by the International Federation of Cerebral Palsy Football to reinstate CP football at Tokyo 2020 and Paris 2024 were rejected, with IPC President, Andrew Parsons, declaring that 'if the sport continues to make progress and further develops the women's game, then it will be in a much stronger position for inclusion in future Paralympic Games' (Pavitt, 2019). The threat that blind football may suffer the same fate, as the IPC strive for a more gender-equitable Paralympics (Dean et al., 2024), is likely to have contributed to recent efforts to develop the game for women. The inaugural Women's Blind Football World Championships at the 2023 IBSA World Games and recent application for the inclusion of women's blind football in the LA 2028 Paralympics signify IBSA's efforts to grow the game globally and safeguard the future of blind football in the Paralympics.

In England, football for blind and partially sighted players has existed since the late 1970s (Partially Sighted Football League, n.d.). Despite both the National Blind Football League (NBFL) and the Partially Sighted Football League (PSFL)<sup>4</sup> being mixed-sex, they have always been male dominated with the presence of female players a rarity. Having committed to developing disability football in 1999 (Macbeth & Magee, 2006), the Football Association (FA) arguably made limited progress with the participation of disabled women and girls over the subsequent two decades. The recently launched game plan for disability football, 'Football Your Way' (FA, 2021), acknowledged the under-representation of women across all impairment groups and committed to the 'general development of all women's para teams across the disability spectrum' (p. 12). This constitutes the most concerted efforts by the FA to attract disabled women and girls to football and recruit players into the talent system. More specifically, the FA committed to launching new blind and cerebral palsy England women's teams by 2024, a timely target given the 2023 IBSA World Games were due to take place on home soil.

An England blind football development squad was launched in May 2022 to compete in the inaugural European Championships in Italy, June 2022. However, the tournament was contested

between only Germany and England (IBSA, 2022a), indicating inconsistent development across Europe. Similar patterns are evident in other regions, with Japan winning the 2022 Blind Football Asia/Oceania Championship after only two matches against India (IBSA, 2022b). The inaugural Women's Blind Football World Championships at the 2023 IBSA World Games was contested between eight nations, with Argentina crowned champions and England finishing eighth. There are currently no international women's partially sighted football competitions and no England women's partially sighted football squad.

No academic attention has yet been paid to VI women's experiences of becoming and being footballers. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore the lived experiences of women who play VI football in England using an intra-categorical complexity approach to intersectionality. We investigate how their experiences of VI football have been shaped by the complex intersections of being female, disabled and VI.

### ***Research on disability, football and gender***

In their recent scoping review of research on gender equity in disability sport, Culver et al. (2022) acknowledge the intersections of gender, disability and sport as an emerging area of academic intrigue. While disability football is gaining academic interest, attention to disabled female players is limited. Research on partially sighted football in England has explored the career paths of elite players (Macbeth & Magee, 2006), equity issues within the game (Macbeth, 2008), restrictions of activity experienced by grassroots players (Macbeth, 2009) and player perspectives on classification (Powis & Macbeth, 2020). However, female players are entirely absent from samples due to their limited presence within these footballing contexts when research was conducted. Richardson's (2020) and Richardson and Fletcher's (2022) Zimbabwe-based studies are the first on VI football to include female players. Although their analyses do not consider the influence of gender in detail, they reveal that females faced more barriers to accessing facilities for regular participation, leading to challenges in mastering the technical demands of blind football (Richardson, 2020). Work focusing exclusively on disabled women's or girls' experiences of football is limited to: Stride's (2009) and Stride and Fitzgerald's (2011) research on after-school football initiatives for girls with learning disabilities; studies on gender construction in the co-ed male dominated sport of powerchair football (Cottingham et al., 2018; Richard et al., 2017); and Menke and Braycich's (2014) work on girls and women's football in the Special Olympics. As we witness a crucial stage of development for women's VI football globally, we offer a significant and original contribution to the field by amplifying the intersectional realities of a group of women who have been historically neglected in international sport, football and academia.

### ***Theoretical framework***

Intersectionality has been used to examine how the 'crosscurrents' (Crenshaw, 1989) of different forms of oppression manifest to shape 'individual, collective and structural conditions' (Naples et al., 2019, p. 10). Yet, most intersectional studies in sociology neglect disability (Naples et al., 2019). Similarly, intersectional studies in the sociology of sport have predominantly focussed on the intersections between sex/gender and race/ethnicity (Lim et al., 2021). Furthermore, sociological research on the experiences of disabled people in sport has not fully embraced intersectionality, and disabled women have received limited attention.

Whilst disabled men and women are subjected to similar forms of disablism, their experiences contrast in significant ways. In the lives of disabled women, Gershick (2000) contends that 'two stigmatized statuses converge ... further diminishing their already disadvantaged gender status' (p. 1265). This convergence plays out within sport, influencing the status and experiences of disabled women (Culver et al., 2022; Lynch & Hill, 2021) who, Cottingham et al. (2018) argue, 'must reconcile their interest in sports with societal expectations of female passivity and disabled fragility' (p. 1819).

Despite the potential for a more inclusive environment, disabled women are 'undervalued and discriminated against' in *disability* sport (Dean et al., 2022, p. 223) and can experience 'rolelessness', what Fine and Asch (1981, p. 239) describe as a lack opportunities to perform valued social roles.

Collective categories such as 'disabled women' are often unhelpful because they fail to reflect the heterogeneity within these groups. Similarly, the category 'VI women' suggests a degree of homogeneity when in fact their (dis)connections to sports experiences are diverse. Discussing disability more broadly, Gershick (2000) encourages us to be mindful of the many ways it affects experiences of gender socialisation and to consider that 'the age of onset combines with the type, severity, and visibility of a person's disability to influence the degree to which she or he is taught and subjected to gendered expectations' (p. 1265). We therefore adopt an intra-categorical complexity approach to intersectionality because, while a specific social group – VI women footballers – is our focus, we regard such categories to hold an 'ambivalent status' (McCall, 2005, p. 1783). This is even more pertinent given that classification is a defining feature of disability sport, but it can mask diversity between those allocated to the same sport classes for competition (e.g. Howe & Jones, 2006; Powis & Macbeth, 2020). An intra-categorical complexity approach enables us to interrogate categories as 'misleading constructs that do not readily allow for the diversity and heterogeneity of experience to be represented' (McCall, 2005, p. 1783). We aim to offer a detailed portrayal of the complex experiences of VI women footballers, remaining sceptical of the 'homogenizing generalizations that go with the territory of classification and categorization'. This approach also responds to Bassey et al.'s (2024) criticism of intersectional studies for 'failing to take into account the heterogeneity of people with vision impairment and the variations in their social identities' (p. 13). Furthermore, VI women footballers have been consigned to 'intersectional invisibility' in football and society due to their 'multiple subordinate-group identities' (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008, p. 377).

Intersectional studies about the lives of VI people are sparse (Bassey et al., 2024). Notable exceptions include the work of Haegele and Kirk (2018), Haegele et al. (2018) and Haegele et al. (2019), on gender and visual impairment in Physical Education. Yet none of this research explicitly engages with the concept of ocularcentrism – the privileging of vision as the dominant sense through which knowledge is gained (Bolt, 2013) – to show how it works to devalue and oppress VI people in society. Sport is a cultural practice which perpetuates the notion that 'seeing is synonymous with knowing, that visual perception is necessarily the normal way of gathering knowledge' (Bolt, 2013, p. 18), resulting in VI people being disabled in many sporting contexts (Macbeth, 2021; Macbeth & Powis, 2023). Therefore, we seek to explore the complex intersections of ableism, disablism, hegemonic masculinity and ocularcentrism in structuring football opportunities for VI women and shaping their identities. Söder's (2009) description of two distinct, but potentially overlapping, perspectives within intersectional research – the structural and subjectivist – is useful here. The former enables us to explore how axes of power result in the creation of hierarchies and stratifications in football. Whereas the latter focuses on the diverse and fluid 'categorical belongings' which form the foundation of a person's identity and is 'more open to the possibility of positive combinations' (Söder, 2009, p. 75) or what Frederick (2023) describes as 'generative outcomes' at the 'intersections of inequity' (p. 1351). We concentrate, therefore, on how intersections give rise to several inequities for and between players, whilst also seeking to recognise their generative potential (Frederick, 2023).

## Materials and methods

This study adopted an interpretivist qualitative methodology which enabled us to explore how our participants perceive reality and construct meaning based on their interactions with the world (Gray, 2022). An interpretive qualitative methodology aligned with our intra-categorical complexity approach to intersectionality because it focuses on how different meanings can be assigned by different individuals to the same scenario (Gray, 2022). While our participants were all VI women embarking on playing blind football, we were intrigued by the diverse perceptions of reality and

meanings ascribed by participants based on their interactions in this 'new' social world of women's blind football. Methods included one in-person focus group and six online in-depth semi-structured interviews. The qualitative orientation and data generation strategy, which foregrounds the lived experiences of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), enabled VI women to share their experiences of football and capture their intersecting identities beyond the collective categories of 'women', 'disability' and 'visual impairment'.

The research gained ethical approval from the authors' institutional ethics committee (BAHSS2 0319) in May 2022. Seven participants were recruited through purposive sampling (Kenneavy & Harnois, 2023). Consistent with our intra-categorical complexity approach, the inclusion criteria required participants to be: female, aged 16 years or older, have a visual impairment (blind or partially sighted), and currently participate, or have participated, in VI football in any context in England (e.g. FA-organised VI activity days and/or development camps, the Partially Sighted Football League [PSFL], the National Blind Football League [NBFL], or other VI-specific football provision). A call for participants was circulated via relevant stakeholders' social media channels (including PSFL, NBFL, British Blind Sport [BBS], Metro Blind Sports) and through FA gatekeepers. The in-person focus group was conducted by Jessica and took place with four players at a VI football event, where time constraints limited the focus group to 42 min. Nevertheless, it generated insightful data and illuminated areas for further exploration through individual interviews. Three out of the four focus group participants took part in the subsequent online interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. Three additional interviewees were recruited through the call for participants and snowball sampling via those already recruited (Cheek & Øby, 2023). Interviews lasted between 51 and 107 min, with an average of 74 min. Three interviews were conducted collaboratively (Monforte & Úbeda-Colomer, 2021) with Jessica leading the questions and Andrew adopting a probing role. The co-interviewing approach enabled us to probe spontaneously, actively listen to participants and reduced the cognitive load of preparing for the next questions (Velardo & Elliott, 2021). The three subsequent interviews were conducted by Jessica alone due to difficulties aligning the diaries of participants and researchers. The focus group and interview guides followed the same structure with questions on participants' background and sporting biography, lived experience of visual impairment, socialisation into football, the impact of visual impairment on experiences of football, opinions of recent developments in women's VI football, aspirations for the future and an opportunity to offer any further information they deemed appropriate.

The participants' experiences of visual impairment are highly diverse, with a range of sight conditions, both congenital and acquired, stable and degenerative. Their ages range from late teens to thirties. All participants were in further or higher education or in employment. Despite variations in sight, all participants have played blind football, either in the mixed-sex NBFL, as part of the England development pathway (women-only), or both. We use pseudonyms for the participants and refer to the nature of their visual impairment only where necessary, providing no additional information about the individual participants. As participants are from a very small population group, they could be identifiable if additional individual identity markers – such as age, sport classification and football career information – were provided. Accordingly, we deemed it ethically imperative to navigate the middle ground between trustworthiness, through accurate and faithful presentation of findings, and protecting participants' identities (Baez, 2002).

### ***Collaborative abductive thematic analysis***

Data were analysed using abductive analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), and the process of developing themes was influenced by Thompson's (2022) guide for abductive thematic analysis. Whilst the use of abductive analysis for intersectional research is currently limited (see Herrick & Duncan, 2018; Kochanek et al., 2021), it was deemed contextually appropriate because it advocates the continuous oscillation between theory and empirical data. Put another way, the process of abduction is 'the form of reasoning through which we perceive the phenomenon as related to other observations'

(Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 171). Although data generation was facilitated through an inductive and dialogical process, we acknowledge and embrace that our *brought selves* (Reinharz, 1997) are imbued with pre-existing appreciations of intersectionality, hegemonic masculinity, ableism, disability and ocularcentrism. Therefore, we entered the research process with open minds, not empty heads, and interpretations of the data were theoretically framed from the outset. Abductive analysis, therefore, involves the harnessing of pre-existing theoretical insight and the recognition that empirical data becomes 'anomalous, novel, or surprising only based on what is already theoretically established or what is expected based on existing theories' (Vila-Henninger et al., 2024, p. 975). Relatively speaking, the development of women's VI football is in its infancy and the individual players are essentially venturing into the unknown. With the context of women's VI football being in flux, and the players' unique journeys giving rise to unexpected experiences, we were alive to the potential for anomalous, novel or surprising data.

Given the nature of intersectional research, it is important to provide a brief note on the contextually appropriate researcher positionalities. Jessica is a white, non-disabled female who has no personal lived experience of visual impairment. She has been researching the lived sport and physical activity experiences of VI people for 20 years, is a guide runner and involved in developing VI sporting activities in her local area. These experiences have enabled Jessica to develop a disability and visual impairment consciousness and while she cannot speak from lived experience, she identifies as a temporally sighted and non-disabled ally. Andrew is a white, non-disabled male who has no experience of visual impairment. With limited research experience in disability and/or visual impairment, his contributions to this research were largely methodological, particularly data analysis. He is, however, committed to inclusive practice, both in school-based physical education and in higher education.

Our decision to adopt collaborative abductive thematic analysis – resulting in over 20 hours of recorded online discussions – enabled us to benefit from our differing relationships to the field, and regularly question each other's interpretations. Whilst a critically reflexive commentary is beyond the scope of this paper, the collaborative analysis afforded us the space to employ reflexivity-in-action. We achieved this by working through the following steps with both interview and focus group data: (1) familiarisation with the data independently, bookmarking responses of significance throughout each transcript; (2) collaboratively working through each transcript in turn and undertaking two rounds of data coding, the first being semantic in nature and the second a more selective process of consolidating codes as we deepened our understanding of patterns in the data; (3) creating a simple codebook with columns for both rounds of coding and their location within each transcript, serving as a useful organisational tool and, through colour-coding, enabling us to visualise salient patterns. During this step we were also able to confirm no significant discrepancies, only corroborative responses, between interview and focus group data; (4) returning to the transcripts to perform data clustering for round two codes; (5) collaboratively reviewing and discussing the clustered data to develop themes; (6) being guided by our intra-categorical approach to intersectionality and the concepts of ableism, ocularcentrism and hegemonic masculinity to help us make sense of the themes and relationships between them. While this step focused exclusively on theorising, we actively engaged in theorising during the coding process by making tentative connections between data and theory. At this stage in the analysis process we were able to identify aspects of player experiences that could be explained by existing theoretical and conceptual lenses, whilst navigating the 'interactions, exchanges, or contextual anomalies' (Thompson, 2022, p. 1415) that triggered theoretical refinements; (7) finally, we engaged in a comparative analysis of how themes and codes were expressed differently depending on the nature of players' sight conditions and previous footballing experiences.

## Results and discussion

To begin this section, we offer a brief overview of how players were socialised into blind football, a more detailed analysis of which, along with their sporting biographies and experiences of PE, will



form the basis of other papers. Players came to blind football with one of the following previous experiences: no interest or participation in football; participated in 'mainstream' or 'sighted' football prior to acquiring a visual impairment or the deterioration of sight; fleeting experience of pan-disability or partially sighted football (at recreational levels). However, blind football was a new sport to all players within the last 2 years. Some had participated in other sports at high levels, whereas others described themselves as not particularly 'sporty'. Most players were unaware of opportunities for females to play blind football and their routes into the sport involved an element of chance, being in the right place at the right time, with specialist VI educational settings proving influential. We now turn to several salient themes generated from our analysis: learning blind football; adjusting to blindfolds; and tensions about combined classes. Within these themes, we also draw attention to several generative outcomes for players.

### ***Learning blind football: 'We were trying to run before we were even standing, let alone walking'***

Depending on the players' levels of sight, age of onset of visual impairment, and previous experiences of football, this new sport required them to learn different skills. All players regarded the process of learning blind football as challenging, with Laura describing it as 'a shock to the system ... we have had to learn from scratch'. Players made clear distinctions between blind and partially sighted players entering blind football with different physical and sensory capital. There was consensus that, wearing a blindfold, blind players had better orientation, spatial awareness and tracking, and knew how to fall safely. Whereas partially sighted players were perceived to be better equipped with the technical aspects of football such as dribbling, passing, shooting and running, with many of these skills developed using visual modelling when previously playing either fully sighted or partially sighted football. Claire explains:

the football skills are hard to learn as a B1 ... like the technical skills, but they are learnable whereas the blind skills like the orientation, the listening to people ... the innate tracking are kind of harder to teach people ... like I don't have to think about tracking where the balls are, I just do. And it is so much more difficult I would say to try and teach someone that ... you're just not teaching them to see, you're teaching them to see with their ears.

However, the technical skills that partially sighted players bring to the B1 game still require some adjustments, as Sarah details:

you may as well have never played football before because your body wants to do something that you have to sort of then fight against and say you can't just kick the ball and run after it ... You have to retrain your mind and retrain your body ... it is probably better to train someone that has never played visually impaired football to play B1 football, than it is to try and untrain somebody and then retrain them.

In recognising the heterogeneity of VI people (Basse et al., 2024), these varied experiences reveal a highly nuanced form of granular intersectionality – that is, VI women in the context of football are by no means a homogenous group.

The contexts within which our participants have learned blind football are typically a combination of their own individual training, competing in the NBFL, and England development camps. Their experiences of playing in this mixed-sex NBFL have brought both benefits and challenges. Players acknowledged that, being novices, one generative outcome was learning from and been challenged by playing against more experienced men. However, all players reported that the physicality of male players was scary and potentially unsafe, as Lyndsey revealed:

I didn't like playing against boys at all, I didn't think it was right ... it is not safe ... I got injured really badly ... I went in to tackle and basically just got mowed down and the lad fell on top of me and kned me in the face and I had a black eye and swollen cheek bone for weeks. So that really put me off playing against males.

Recent research has recognised that women wanting to compete in mixed-sex disability sport 'must handle playing with, and against, men' (Dean et al., 2024, p. 221), yet this physical disparity and

hegemonic masculinity within VI football needs to be recognised as a potential deterrent for VI women and girls entering the mixed-sex league.

Finally, players suggested that with England due to host the 2023 Women's Blind Football World Championships, the launch of the England squad occurred rapidly. Claire's sarcastic observations capture what she perceived to be a knee-jerk recruitment process:

It was sort of a panic of we need a women's B1 team, but we didn't have one and we have like two years so there were *very stringent requirements* for this: be female, be VI and preferably have seen a ball before, but that is not necessarily required.

This placed unrealistic expectations by coaches on what was essentially a group of novice players. Claire elaborated:

We were trying to run before we were even standing, let alone walking ... I personally don't believe they should have tried to make a team for the world cup because it is rushed ... they expected you to be a novice and an elite player simultaneously.

After several tournaments players recognised that expectations have recalibrated, and they are no longer 'expected to be at the same level as the England lads' team' (Claire).

We contend that this situation derives from a complex interlacing of patriarchy, male hegemony and ableism relegating VI women to the lower echelons of football. This mirrors the broader findings of Dean et al. (2022) who note that disabled women have been marginalised *within* disability sport. The recent transformation of women's blind football, from widespread historic neglect, is welcomed but it has had consequences for players by depriving them of the time and support to learn the game before representing their nation. Another pertinent issue raised by the participants was their experiences of adjusting to wearing blindfolds, a consequence of combining B1–B3 classes to grow the women's game.

### ***Adjusting to blindfolds: 'Going from seeing things to absolutely nothing, I hated it, I despised it'***

The requirement in blind football for players to wear blindfolds is intended to make the game as equitable as possible amongst players classified as B1 who may experience variations in light perception (Runswick et al., 2021). The decision by IBSA to open women's blind football to B2–B3 players has created inequitable outcomes for players with differing levels of sight. Most B1 players were happy and confident to wear blindfolds, as Jenny explained, 'I am so used to being in the dark'. However, Laura, who has some light perception, acknowledged that she was 'quite scared to try it at first because obviously you're completely blindfolded, you know, light to dark is a pretty major change'.

Understandably, adjusting to wearing blindfolds most severely impacted partially sighted players who had some usable vision and had previously played football using sight. Steph recalled her initial experiences of wearing a blindfold as traumatic:

... it was terrifying. I still find it scary to this day sometimes ... Going from seeing things to absolutely nothing I hated it, I despised it ... I would take off my shades all the time because I was so scared ... it was a very hard thought that I used to have is the fact that I am wasting time not seeing. I think a part of me was just scared that I was going to take them off and that is what I am going to see ... I didn't want to be putting a blindfold on for like let's say 7 or 8 h a week and then just wasting those 7 or 8 h on not seeing.

Similarly, Olivia described the adjustment to relying on hearing when her usable vision is taken away by wearing the blindfold, 'I am still getting used to it because it is a completely different orientation wise, you have to completely rely on sound and people's voices, and it is very difficult to adjust to when you have useful sight'. Essentially, for partially sighted players, having to wear blindfolds can feel like 'everything is taken away from you' (Steph). This is arguably felt more acutely and variably by those with unstable conditions and deteriorating sight like Steph, who explained that 'sometimes I

am alright with it ... but I think sometimes when I have got a little dip in sight or realise something that I can't see anymore, I am just like ... I don't want to'.

With no current partially sighted England women's squad, partially sighted women aspiring to represent their country are currently faced with two options: learn and play blind football – and currently partially sighted players are needed to grow the blind game – or wait until international partially sighted football opportunities arise, a privilege afforded to their male counterparts since the late 1990s. It is a predicament rooted in gender- and ability-based hierarchies in football which have reinforced disabled women's marginalisation for several decades (Richard et al., 2023). Notably, all players acknowledged that the requirement to wear a blindfold could constitute a deterrent to playing blind football. This effectively consigns partially sighted women to 'rolelessness' (Fine & Asch, 1981) within football unless they are willing to temporarily sacrifice their usable vision to play blind football. The extent to which other partially sighted women and girls have been deterred from pursuing blind football for these reasons remains unknown.

Despite their initial fear, all partially sighted players acknowledged that, over time, they have become used to wearing a blindfold, with Sarah even displaying a preference for blind football, 'I actually find it easier ... because I am not straining my eyes looking for players and looking to track a ball'. Furthermore, Sarah and Steph recognised the potential value of their blind football experiences as a vehicle to simulate and prepare for deteriorating sight. As Sarah explained, 'I thought 'actually no, let's go and give it a go' because if I do eventually lose all of my sight, like everything, it would be good to learn it before I would then struggle'. For Steph, a coach convinced her that 'if I can run around on a blind football pitch with my shades on, tackle and know my orientation I will be fine if lose my sight, so that has kept me going with the shades'.

Whilst both players have made the best of a challenging experience, it is important not to gloss over the inequitable situation from which this generative outcome (Frederick, 2023) emerges. In fact, findings of classification research in VI sport reveal a consensus that wearing blindfolds is not a preferred choice for anyone not B1 (Mann & Ravensbergen, 2018). More specifically, Runswick et al. (2021) confirmed that the majority of VI football experts (including players), in a study funded by IBSA and the IPC, regarded the combination of blindfolded B1–B3 classes for competition as not feasible and all partially sighted players in their sample declared they would not want to 'compete with B1 adaptations such as blindfolds if it enhanced their likelihood of competing in the Paralympic Games' (p. 36). Decisions made to grow women's blind football and strive for Paralympic inclusion are therefore at odds with research evidence. Furthermore, whether female, particularly partially sighted, players were consulted during decision-making is questionable. Finally, while some blind players expressed empathy towards partially sighted players adjusting to wearing blindfolds, as discussed in the next section, compensations made to support this transition were a source of resentment and one of several tensions to emerge from combining B1–B3 classes within the game.

### ***Tensions about combined classes: 'Great, finally a sport that is for, you know, proper blind people like myself'***

All players appreciated the decision to combine B1–B3 classes were made to grow the women's game, but this caused frustration and tensions as Lyndsey, a blind player, expressed:

I thought 'great, finally a sport that is for you know proper blind people like myself' ... I didn't know that in the women's [B1] game they were going to let partially sighted girls play and just do it with a blindfold because in the men's game you have to ... be a very low B2 or B1 ... so I have never been comfortable and like whilst I, you know, appreciate my teammates, it still niggles me that this is the case.

Disparities between the organisation of the men's and women's formats of VI football are not lost on players, with Lyndsey resenting that, unlike men's B1 football, women's B1 football is not a preserve for 'proper blind' players. This exhibits what Powis and Macbeth (2020) refer to as the negotiation of 'social identities and hierarchies relating to VI class' (p. 589) within teams, in this case brought about

by the imposition of combined classes. Lyndsey's suggestion that partially sighted players could '*just do it with a blindfold*' also demonstrates a lack of awareness of the psycho-emotional trauma of wearing blindfolds. While other blind players expressed empathy about this, with Jenny acknowledging it must be 'terrifying because you have suddenly lost that reliance on that little bit of vision you have', there was a general perception that partially sighted players have an unfair advantage in B1 football. As Claire points out:

Partially sighted people almost always have the advantage in technical ability ... so I have less of a chance of being chosen because I don't have that technical ability. Because I am disadvantaged in the fact that I can't see how to do it. So, yes, it is not necessarily fair, that is why they split the boy's team the way they did. I think the way they are doing it, there should be a requirement to have at least one B1 on the pitch at all times. There isn't, I think there should be.

Claire's sentiments mirror those of Lyndsey, and her proposition of the need for quotas – as is the case in many disability and VI sports – derives from a concern that, under current rules, B1 players could be excluded from B1 football.

Players also referred to different experiences during training. While Jenny appreciated the use of coaching methods that challenged ocularcentrism – such as the use of tactile pitch maps<sup>5</sup> – blind players perceived coaches to default to ocularcentric methods that disadvantaged them. For example, Lyndsey perceived training sessions to be 'geared to be more visual as well, to suit the partially sighted players'. Similarly, Laura described this as an upsetting and disempowering experience:

Obviously they might see a video of how they have trained that day, I can't do that ... They are able to maybe see what is going on, I am not, and it is a little bit hard and a little bit upsetting, because it is like a realisation, 'oh my gosh, I *am* blind' ... it can be quite a lot to deal with obviously having a different range of visual impairments.

These findings provide evidence for the propositions of Mann and Ravensbergen (2018) that players with some usable vision 'may have an advantage not only in their ability to access training but also during training; for instance, when visually modelling their actions on others and when using visual feedback' (p. 2013). Here, both partially sighted players and coaches demonstrate that being able to utilise any usable vision is valued in the context of training. Conversely, Mann and Ravensbergen (2018) suggest that blind players 'could, in some cases, have an advantage ... because they may be better adapted to living and competing when fully blind' (p. 2013), and this is acknowledged by all players in our study, as Claire explains, 'a lot of the partially sighted players have really, really good technical skills, like their dribble is on point, their passing is really accurate but their orientation and their tracking and their confidence of the blindfold is the problem'. The combining of classes within this unique sporting context of women's VI football at its current stage of development, highlights the heterogeneity of VI women and the granular forms of intersectionality they experience.

A further source of tension stemmed from the treatment of partially sighted players by coaches. Attempts at inclusive coaching were exhibited with partially sighted players encouraged to remove blindfolds during training sessions to support their adjustment to wearing blindfolds. These compensations were welcomed by Sarah, who explains, 'you still have that option to take the shades off so it's not as scary ... if you feel disorientated you can just lift your shades up, there is no pressure'. But such provisions for partially sighted players fuelled resentment in some blind players:

... when they take the blindfold off they are like 'oh gosh that is so much better, I am so glad I can see now'. It is just those insensitive words like, I don't need to hear that, I take the blindfold off, and it is no different for me. But they just need to have a bit more awareness with that and you feel like that they should, coming from a VI background. (Lyndsey)

While Bolt's (2013) argument that, for VI people 'the word disabled denotes the consequence of living in an ocularcentric, ableist society' (p. 29) rings true, our analysis advances this notion by

revealing how ocularcentric practices can be disabling for some VI people and empowering for others. However, this perceived privileging of partially sighted players emerges from disabling and disempowering experiences imposed by (1) their lack of opportunity – or ‘rolelessness’ – to play women-only partially sighted football and (2) the requirement to wear a blindfold in women’s blind football. Claire succinctly captures the multiple layers of inequalities and inequities experienced by VI women footballers by declaring ‘yes, everyone is blindfolded but that doesn’t make it equal’.

## Conclusion

Rooted in the historic neglect of women throughout the development of disability football, VI women have been consigned to intersectional invisibility. Recently, there have been undeniable efforts to grow women’s blind football globally – which we suspect have been triggered in part by an attempt to preserve the status of men’s blind football in the Paralympics – yet this study has exposed certain aspects of these developments as problematic. By analysing intra-categorical complexities, we have revealed that VI women footballers currently experience inequities and tensions brought about by the combination of B1–B3 classes and the rule that partially sighted players must wear blindfolds, an issue unique to the women’s game. This latter requirement contravenes expert opinion on best practices in VI sport (Runswick et al., 2021) and disregards the potential consequences for this heterogeneous group of VI women.

Significantly, we contend that the participants in this study not only possess ‘multiple subordinate-group identities’ (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008, p. 377) – being female, disabled and VI – but that these identities either privilege or disadvantage them in fluctuating and situationally-dependent ways. A prominent and perhaps surprising finding is that, in addition to ocularcentrism being perpetuated by the ‘sighted’ majority, VI people themselves can get embroiled in and reproduce ocularcentric practices which privilege some VI people over others.

As pioneers, this current crop of players enjoys opportunities denied to previous generations of VI women, juxtaposed with the negotiation of inequities and tensions derived from the current organisation of women’s VI football. In terms of the future, our participants revealed a preference for separate blind and partially sighted formats for women, mirroring the structure for men. Yet this is dependent on attracting more VI women and girls and the extent to which the current organisation of women’s VI football, and associated inequities revealed in this paper, act as a deterrent to prospective players, is currently unknown and a worthy area for future research.

We acknowledge that by prioritising the intersections of gender, disability and visual impairment, other collective ‘categories’ have not featured in this paper. However, this reflects authentic discussions in which the impact of wider identity markers was not raised by participants. It may be that our sample represents the privileged few of a marginalised group and we are acutely aware that other VI women may face more complex barriers to accessing sport and football. As is often the case in research focusing on the lived experiences of those who *do* participate in sport, the oppression experienced by those who *do not*, can go uncaptured. Accordingly, we propose the need for further research with larger and diverse samples of female VI sportswomen (including footballers) across different nations, and VI women who do not engage in sport, to better understand their intersectional identities and experiences.

Overall, this study makes a significant and original contribution to knowledge by applying an intra-categorical complexity approach to expose the deep layers of granular intersectionality experienced by a previously neglected group in disability sport. We contest that further intersectional research such as this, exploring the complex lived realities of disabled participants, should be fundamental to informing decision-making and policy. This research has international significance beyond VI football, for any disability sport stakeholders attempting to redress similar gender imbalances rooted in historical marginalisation. It is imperative that opinions and experiences of women and girls are actively sought, valued, and centralised by relevant stakeholders to

ensure that opportunities are developed in a manner that minimises inequities and facilitates empowering outcomes.

## Notes

1. While 'blindfolds' is the official term used in the IBSA rulebook (IBSA, n.d.), players often refer to blindfolds using other terms such as shades, eye shades and goggles.
2. More information on blind and partially sighted football is available at <https://blindfootball.sport/about-football/> and explained in Runswick et al. (2021).
3. We use 'VI football' as an umbrella term for the two distinct formats of blind football and partially sighted football.
4. The PSFL is an independent league for male and female partially sighted players. In the 2023–2024 season four teams competed in the Super League and four teams in the Championship. Fixtures take place monthly from October to March. The NBFL, with FA support, comprised of three teams competing in monthly league fixtures from November to April during the 2023–24 season.
5. The tactile pitch map described by Jenny was made by coaching staff using embossing film and a ballpoint pen. It provides a tactile map of areas of the pitch which are named (e.g. L1, L2 and L3 on the left or R1, R2, R3 on the right). Using the map as a coaching tool helps players orientate and position themselves on the pitch when they receive verbal instructions during training and games.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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