

# The Disabled Sporting Body and The Media<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

After discussing the philosophical concept of othering this study will focus on the depiction of a “minority group”, namely, disabled athletes in Turkish sports media, i.e., sports pages of mainstream Turkish print media and Turkish sport newspapers. It will be argued that the discourse used by the media leads to the identification of the disabled athletes as the other — as opposed to the “normal”, “able-bodied” athletes. The analysis will focus on the depiction of disabled athletes either as inspirational figures, romantic heroes who transcend their limits, or as tragic heroes who inspire fear and pity, or even sometimes as one of the elements which add color to competitions. It will also discuss how the shock which occurs when expectations based on these stereotypes are not met is depicted in sports media, i.e., when disabled athletes get involved in a fight or a doping scandal. The use of problematic terms such as “against her normal rivals”, “even disabled athletes”, “a pleasant sight”, and “overcoming obstacles” will also be discussed.

Four mainstream newspapers (Akşam, Zaman, Radikal, Hürriyet) and one sport newspaper (Fanatik) will be utilized for this analysis. The ethical problems with the coverage of disabled athletes will also be examined.

**Keywords:** Sports, Disability, Turkish Sports Media, Medical Model, Social Model, Disabled Sports

## Engelli Sporcu Bedenler ve Medya

### Özet

Bu makalede basındaki söylemin engelli sporculara yönelik önyargıları tetiklediği ve onları ötekileştirdiği iddiasından yola çıkıldı. Bu bağlamda, 2005-2008 yılları arasında Fanatik, Akşam, Zaman, Radikal ve Hürriyet gazetelerinde engelli sporcularla ilgili çıkan haberlerin analizi yapıldı. Haber dili ve kullanılan fotoğraflar irdelendi.

Türk basınında karşımıza çıkan üç engelli sporcu stereotipine -engelleri aşan, mucizeler yaratan romantik kahramanlar, insani rekabet arındırılmış, bizde acıma ve korku duygularını uyandıran, göz yaşartıcı hikayelerin kahramanları ve müsabakalara renk ya da hoş bir görüntü katan unsurlar- dikkat çekilip, bu stereotipler etik açıdan değerlendirildi.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türk Spor Basını, Engellilik, Medikal Model, Sosyal Model, Engelli Sporcular

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## Introduction

**O**ther refers to an often inferior minority group defined by the dominant group. The members of this group, others, possess negative qualities, the qualities that are undesirable to us who assume the normate position (Schwalbe, 2000). That is to say, if we are strong, powerful, healthy, smart, heterosexual, they are weak, sick, disabled, slow, and homosexual. Others are seen as different, exotic, and in some cases, abnormal. A minority group is defined as the other by a process called othering. Othering is mostly used against ethnic and religious minorities, the poor, the disabled, and the so called third and forth gender. If we are the West the East is the other; if we are monotheistic the polytheistic is the other; if we are urban, the rural is other, if we are heterosexual, homosexual is the other, if we are able-bodied, the disabled is the other.

Since we, the dominant group, define the norms, the differentiation between 'us' and 'them' leads to a devaluation of the other (Schwalbe, 2000). As we are subjects, the other becomes the object (De Beauvoir, 1984). When we make people "other," we group them together as the objects of our experience instead of regarding them as subjects of experience with whom we might identify, and we see them primarily as symbolic of something else — usually, but not always, something we reject, pity and fear (Griffin, cited in Wendell, 1996). Kristeva claims that we project upon the other that which is undesirable in ourselves or repressed and buried in our unconscious (Kristeva, 1991). For instance, the fear of becoming homosexual may lead to seeing the homosexuals as the other. Similarly, the fear of being "bound" or "confined" to a wheelchair could result in the othering of quadriplegics. These groups become "they" as opposed to "us".

This differentiation as such creates and reproduces inequalities. The inequalities, on the other hand, are preserved by maintaining boundaries between us and the other. Most boundary maintenance is accomplished institutionally (Schwalbe, 2000). Governments, religious institutions, schools, hospitals, committees and above all, mass media contribute to the reproduction and maintenance of these boundaries, and inequalities.

After briefly laying out the stereotypes of disability in Turkey, this paper will focus on the portrayal of disabled athletes in Turkish sports media. It will be argued that the medical discourse used by the media leads to the identification of the disabled athletes as the other (as opposed to the "normal" athletes) and reproduces inequalities. The able-bodied athletes compete in mainstream events like the Olympic Games, the Ironman Triathlon and the World Cup. They are rewarded only when they win against their rivals. The disabled athletes, on the other hand, almost always, compete in their own 'special events' and the Paralympic Games. Unlike the able-bodied athletes they are sometimes rewarded for having participated in a sporting event. Most are considered good athletes within the boundaries of their sporting world.

These boundaries exist in sports media as well: In some sport newspapers there is a boundary between stories on able-bodied athletes and their stories. The disabled athletes get their special column. Their sporting events and success stories are described in frames preferred by the dominant (able-bodied, strong, healthy) elite. This, in return, evokes certain emotions in the reader, i.e., pity, fear, inspiration, and inequality is reproduced.

## Methodology

The study focuses on articles, news stories, columns and photos published in four mainstream daily newspapers Akşam, Zaman, Radikal, Hürriyet and one sport newspaper Fanatik. All five are national publications. Hürriyet and Akşam are mainstream daily newspapers with high circulation and represent center-right views. Radikal attracts readers with an interest in politics and culture

and represent center-left views. Zaman belongs to the conservative range. Fanatik is a sport newspaper with high circulation. Most of the reporting that is used covers the period between 2005 and 2008.

Critical content analysis focused on the 157 articles and columns published in these five daily newspapers. The texts were coded by an independent research assistant for recurring attitudes, beliefs, and the use of emotive language or symbols. The analysis broke the articles and columns down into negative, positive and neutral representation disabled athletes. The focus of the data analysis was to identify the values, attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes and ways of thinking associated with disabled athletes. The data was analyzed in terms of the types of the metaphors used, power and interpretation of the visual imagery. Findings revealed how prevalent stereotypical depictions of disabled athletes were in Turkish mainstream media and that how widely the medical model of disability was adopted.

### The Models and Stereotypes of Disability

Refusing to admit others into the sphere of the able-bodied is a practice endorsed in many societies. This arises from the adaptation of the medical model of disability. This model endorses the view that “the problems that face people with disabilities are the result of their physical and/or mental impairments and are independent of the wider sociocultural, physical, and political environments (Brittain 2004: 430). Disabilities are seen as pathological. Accordingly, if a hearing-impaired person cannot use the ATM it is because she cannot hear. The social model, on the other hand claims that if people’s attitudes change and environmental barriers are removed the problems frequently associated with disability will disappear (Morris, 1991). That is to say if ATM’s are designed to meet everyone’s needs no one feels “disabled”.

Davis (1995) claims that normal-abnormal binary is central to the problematization of disability, particularly as it has morphed into the ability-disability binary central to the invention of categorical systems institutionalized by society. The individuals who have been deemed as abnormal in our societies, who have confounded hegemonic subjects’ desires for civilization, homogeneity, normalization, have been subjected to systemic exclusion from “proper” society. This has often meant the social, material, and imagined erection of boundaries (Foucault, 1978). The disabled still go to ‘their own’ schools, pools, hospitals, parks and read their own newspapers. Sometimes, they are completely marginalized. In Turkey only 21% of the disabled people participate in the work force and illiteracy is very common (37%) among them (Tufan, Yaman, Arun, 2007: 839).

On the other hand, glorification of the able body leads to the stigmatization of the disabled not only as different but also as impaired and abnormal. Since disability is perceived as deviation from what is considered to be normal the students who go to these schools or pools are stigmatized as abnormal. In many societies, people with disabilities are generally stereotyped as weak, pitiful, dependent, passive, tragic (Gilman, 1985). They symbolize, among other things, imperfection, failure to control the body, and everyone’s vulnerability to weakness, sickness, pain, and death (Griffin, cited in Wendell, 1996). Since they are weak and passive, and most of the time dependent on family or a charity, they have to struggle immensely, sometimes perform miracles and overcome giant obstacles to succeed in life, to actualize themselves. Only if they climb mountains or run marathons can they resist isolation and confinement. That is to say, people with disabilities are only visible and worthy of respect in society if they have overcome seemingly insurmountable odds to “conquer” their disability (Schell & Duncan, 1999).

Societies also other people with disabilities by referring to them by their disability. Using labels like “visually impaired”, “legless”, “amputee”, “one-armed ping pong player” emphasizes the disability not the person we are talking or writing about. It also contributes to the assumption that all

the individuals with that particular disability are the same, that they have similar character traits, problems, fears and desires. Since they are not seen as individuals with names but as an interest group they are expected not to fight, not compete against each other. That is to say, even when they get involved in professional sports, they are expected to be there not to win but just to be part of a friendly game and have a good time with their fellow disabled friends.

## The Disabled Sporting Body - A Contradiction?

One of the areas in which the able body and its functioning parts is admired and praised most is definitely sports. It is designed to “revere extremes of bodily physical perfection” (Brittain, 2004: 438). The disabled body, on the hand, is perceived to be imperfect, incomplete and inadequate (Hargreaves, 2000: 185). Accordingly, people with disabilities are not expected to take part in sports. “Even when they do, it is seen more as a form of physical rehabilitation rather than something done for an ulterior reason or for its own sake” (Brittain, 2004: 438). That is why, some scholars like DePauw (1997) have argued that associating disability and sport requires us to redefine athleticism and our conception of the body, especially the “sporting body”. She also claimed that, given the stereotypes prevalent in society, sport presents a challenge for individuals with disabilities. The mass media also contributes to the construction and maintenance of negative stereotypes about disability, the sporting body and the disabled sporting body. In this section, the three prevalent sociocultural stereotypes about the disabled sporting body, namely, romantic heroes, tragic heroes and elements of color, in Turkish sports media will be demonstrated and discussed. The construction and maintenance of concepts of disability within the framework of sports activity is also discussed.

## Romantic Heroes Triumphant Over Their Disability

The disabled hero who transcends his limitations is the most prevalent stereotype about disabled athletes. This ‘supercrip’ image is pervasive in the stories on disabled mountain climbers or marathoners. We often encounter the words “obstacles”, “victory of the will”, “odds against her/him”, “miracles” and “limits” in these stories. The way in which their success is described also underlines the fact that the victory can only be seen as heroic within the boundaries of the world of the disabled athletes. For instance, when reporting on Necdet Turan, “Turkey’s first visually impaired mountain climber and marathoner” Sabah refers to him as “the mountain climber who knows no obstacles” (Sabah, 20/09/2006). His “Five Continents, Five Marathons, Five Summits” project is romanticized. Radikal, on the other hand mentions the fact that Turhan is among the nine visually impaired athletes in the world who run the marathon under four hour (Radikal, 20/09/2006). The daily implies that he is a fast runner but only in the realm of the visually impaired athletes.

Similarly, when reporting on Mark Inglis “a mountain climber from New Zealand who reached the summit of Mount Everest with two prosthetic legs” Hürriyet stresses the fact that Inglis “became the first person with two crippled legs to reach the top of Everest” (Hürriyet, 15/05/2006, my italics). The implication is that, “he has two prosthetic legs, we mean, crippled legs and he reached the top of Everest. And that is a miracle.” Radikal, on the other hand, refers to Inglis as the “legless mountain climber on the road to Everest” and includes the story of how he lost his two legs when reporting on his miraculous climb (Radikal, 26/03/2006).

Hürriyet also uses the miracle performing disabled athlete image when reporting to the success of the athletes at the 2008 Paralympic Games and touches on the stereotype that the disabled athletes are worthy of our respect when they overcome the obstacles; i.e. their disability:

*The spectators at the Paralympics Games in Beijing are witnessing incredible moments at every event. Some are missing a leg, some an arm but their perseverance brings amazing results. Prosthetic legs*

*jump and run. Miracles are performed in the pool with one arm. French athlete Marie-Amelie Le Fur, who was competing in the 200m final, fell meters away from the finish line. She was hurt but what made her upset was the medal she missed. All spectators take off their hats to disabled athletes' will to overcome obstacles. (Hürriyet, 10/09/2008, my italics)*

In the story on Natalia Partyka, another athlete who competed in the 2008 Paralympic Games, the miracles she performed in ping pong are defined as victories of the will. The fact that Partyka also "competed head to head against her normal rivals" (Hürriyet 12/08/2008, my italics), that she is also a hero outside the realm of her fellow disabled friends is also mentioned. Although it does not explicitly touch on normal-abnormal binary, Akşam's reportage on Natalie du Toit is very similar. The latent meaning of the text is that "she misses a leg, but competes in a mainstream event, Women's 10 km, open water swimming marathon at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, and that why our eyes are on her":

*She Misses a Leg But Competes Strongly*  
*The star of the 10k swimming marathon was not the gold medal winner but disabled athlete Natalie du Toit. he swam for 2 hours and left 9 able-bodied swimmers behind... All eyes were on Natalie du Toit, the South African amputee (one that is missing an arm, a leg, foot or hand) athlete (Akşam, 21/08/2008).*

As we have seen above, the rhetorical construction of the disabled athlete as hero, accompanied with strong romantic stereotyping, is explicit in the many of the news stories. However, the disabled athletes are not always stereotyped as super-cribs who overcome giant obstacles and perform miracles and hence win respect in society. The following part of the article will examine the stereotyping of the disabled athlete as tragic hero.

### **Fear and Pity Inspiring Tragic Heroes (Disability as an object of pity)**

It has been noted before that people with disabilities are also stereotyped as weak, pitiful, dependent, passive, tragic (Gilman, 1985). Disabled athletes are not safe from this stereotype. They may be able to run marathons, jump, swim, climb mountains and win gold medals but they can still inspire pity and fear. Some of the constructions of otherness we come across in sports columns tell a story about who we are and what we fear. They imply that even though they may compete in sporting events and may even look relatively normal, we would not like to trade places with disabled athletes, that "crossing to the other side" would be terrifying. Appeal to fear is extensively used in the stories on disabled athletes. A significant amount of them (26%) do this through including details on how the athlete got disabled. When the athlete is disabled from birth the daily mentions this fact, almost as if as an excuse for not including the story behind the disability.

*An Accident, A Death, A Gold Medal*  
*Gizem Girişmen achieved great success and became the Paralympic Champion in archery. 27 year old Gizem Girişmen who was confined to her wheelchair after the traffic accident she suffered at the age of 11 also lost her father three years later.*  
*There is a saying which sends shivers down our spine, follows us like a shadow, which we do not like to hear: "We are all potentially disabled". Yes, our country is filled with booby-traps which can change our lives forever. A tragic accident can take away a part of us. Then we cross to the other side. A new way of life awaits us. A life like Gizem Girişmen's (Fanatik, 13/9/2008, my italics).*

The sensationalist coverage of Gizem Girişmen's success at the Paralympics in the sports daily Fanatik illustrates how the sports media deliberately (or recklessly) sets out to arouse fear of disability in the able-bodied. The piece devotes only a couple of lines to Gizem Girişmen's sporting

achievement. We later find out about how she was “confined to the wheelchair”, and what other tragedies she suffered. Then the piece starts appealing to fear and tries to convince the readers that it could happen to them at any moment and that they could become one of them. The photograph accompanying the story is taken during the competition but at the press conference held in Beijing. In the photograph, Girişmen is wearing her medal and is trying to wipe her tears.

The piece on runner Nurullah Kart, also includes the story of how of how he got disabled. The journalist gives a detailed account of how Kart pushed his right leg, “which was crippled from birth”, too hard during a race and suffered a serious injury, of the 6 surgeries he went through and how his “already crippled” leg was finally amputated above the knee (Akşam 28/05/07). Then he mentions Kart’s financial problems and stresses the fact that he works two jobs to finance his sporting activities. The charity discourse which depicts the disabled, even those who are involved in sports, as dependent and tragic people in need of help, objects of pity is predominant in Turkish mass media. This piece and the Fanatik piece on Gizem Girişmen both imply that the athletes could use some financial help from the privileged readers, i.e., those who have not crossed to the other side.

The othering occurs in sports columns also through mentioning the disability specifically and/or repeatedly in an attempt to assure the reader that what may not be considered a sporting success for an able-bodied athlete, like running a marathon under four hours, is a huge achievement within the word of disability sport. The athlete’s disability is almost always (82%) mentioned in the texts and sometimes also in the title as well. (42%) In 38% of the stories the athlete is simply referred to as “the disabled”. Sometimes alongside with being labeled as “disabled”, “deaf/hearing impaired”, “blind/visually impaired”, “amputee”<sup>1</sup> the athlete also gets called names. Zaman, for instance, calls Cem Cerit, the 14 year old who “despite being physically disabled from birth, set a very good example through his will to live and performance in basketball” the mascot of the national team (Zaman 04/07/2008). In 18% of the pieces the athletes are openly stigmatized as “abnormal” through references to able-bodied athletes as “normal”. I will return to this in the next section where a third prominent stereotype, namely the disabled as elements which add color to certain sporting events, will be discussed.

### Elements of Color (Disability as an object of fun)

Hürriyet refers to the disabled runners who participated in the Istanbul Eurasia Marathon as “special participants” (Hürriyet 03/10/2005). The fact that they have completed the 8K Fun Run, not the marathon is mentioned twice in the piece. It is implied that these runners were there as always, and the fact that they completed an 8K run (maybe a walk) is newsworthy because they are special. Radikal when reporting on the Boston Marathon, “one of world’s oldest and most prestigious sporting events” (Radikal 19/04/2006) mentions the fact that “the disabled were among the groups who added color to the race” (my italics). Stereotyping of disabled athletes as elements of color is predominant in some of the stories in sports columns, especially the ones on long distance running. Their participation of disabled runners is considered newsworthy in the way that the participation of other ‘fun groups’ like runners in Bugs Bunny costume or barefoot runners are.

Zaman’s reportage on the participation of disabled athletes in Kirkpınar, the 650 year old oil-wrestling festival which takes place every year in Edirne, illustrates this attitude perfectly within the context of traditional oil wrestling.

*The Disabled Competed at Kırkpınar*

*Adem Düzkes, head of the foundation for protecting and helping the disabled in Edirne, announced that from this year onward, disabled athletes will also be invited to Kırkpınar Düzkes also pointed out that they would be a more pleasant sight than sumo wrestlers (Zaman, 27/06/2005).*

Düzkeş makes this announcement in a response to the proposal made by some wrestlers who participate in the events to invite sumo wrestlers to Kırkpınar. The charity discourse is predominant even in the name of the foundation he works for. He implies that, since they would be an unpleasant sight, not inviting the sumo wrestlers was a good call. Instead the disabled athletes, who are more pleasant (at least more pleasant than sumo wrestlers) to watch will partake in the events as elements of color. Not only is he ignorant of the aesthetics of sumo wrestling but also he does not hesitate to announce that the disabled athletes were invited not because they have a capacity to be competent in oil wrestling and they should be integrated but because they would add color to the events. He knows well enough that the more colorful elements the festival has the more media coverage it will receive.

DePauw (1997: 423) claims that "the visibility of an increasing number of successful athletes with disabilities in the mainstream could be a powerful force in positively transforming negative stereotypes about disability, disabled people, and the sporting body." I think it is a valid point. However, as we have seen above, visibility by itself cannot transform the negative stereotypes. We read the stories on successful athletes but as long as they are presented as heroic athletes conquering their disability, as tragic figures or as elements of color which help increase media coverage the stereotypes will persist. They need to be visible but also depicted realistically. Only then will they gain respect and this will, intern, mean more sporting opportunities and more integration in mainstream sports.

## The Disabled Fight — Another Contradiction?

As I have briefly mentioned in above one of the predominant stereotypes of disability is that all the disabled people of brothers; that they never fight, never compete against each other. That is why we often read about friendship matches, races or tournaments disabled athletes participate in where there are no winners or everyone is a winner. Radikal, when reporting on such a race, mentions the fact that all the participants were given medals twice, once in the title, once in the text.

*All the Competitors Received Medals*

*210 disabled athletes took part in the swimming race organized by the Istanbul Municipality. Medals were given to all participants (Radikal, 28/02/2006).*

Sports journalists know well enough that the desire to win and competition are among the major components of sportsmanship. That is why they do not experience a shock when they observe athletes demonstrate poor sportsmanship in loss. They may write disapprovingly about athletes who argue, get into verbal and physical fights with their rivals but they do not report on these incidents as very rare and unexpected occurrences. However, when it comes to reporting on disabled athletes different standards seem to apply. Journalists seem to experience a shock when the expectations based on their stereotypes on disability (i.e. that all the disabled people, including biggest rivals in sports, are brothers, and hence they never fight) are not met by disabled athletes. The experience of shock can be seen in their reportage of these incidents.

*The Disabled Athletes Too Got Involved In a Fight*

*The final of the Turkish Wheelchair Basketball League between Beşiktaş and İzmir Municipality witnessed ugly incidents (Zaman, 20/06/06).*

*Disabled Fight at the Playoffs*

*Everything started out fine but the end was an embarrassment (Akşam, 20/06/06).*

The implication in both these news stories is that the disabled basketball players shocked us by getting into a fight with their rivals. The fact that they are all in wheelchairs should have sufficed to guarantee a peaceful coexistence at the Playoffs. Not only are disabled athletes not expected to fight but also not to get involved in any doping scandal.

Hürriyet's story on the use of performance enhancing drugs at the Paralympics reflects on this expectation. The reporter claims that "professionalism and money began to stain even the Paralympics, formerly a symbol of fair play" (Hürriyet, 23/09/08). The piece is on the use of performance enhancing drugs at the Beijing Paralympic Games. The athletes however, are not blamed for testing positive. It is the trainers who are taking "unimaginable measures to enhance the performances of disabled athletes". The disabled athletes, who are stereotyped as passive and dependent subjects in this story, are "being forced to compete". It is implied that if it were not for the trainers none of these athletes would be taking these drugs.

This and similar reportage in sports columns suggest that serious and competitive sport which may include fighting and, sometimes even, doping is not for disabled athletes. I agree with Howard & Nixon (2007) that these stereotypes and limited images are not very helpful in trying to conceptualize how athletes with disabilities might become involved and integrated in mainstream sport. The coverage of the disabled athletes in sports columns should change before we can expect to see any change in how they are constructed socially.

## Conclusion

The negative and stereotypical perceptions of disability, which are embedded in the medical model are prevalent in Turkish sports media. Haralambos and Holborn (2000) claim that the lack of understanding and awareness is due to the fact that people with disabilities are highly under-represented in the media. Rather, these organizations are mostly dominated by able-bodied, middle-class men. This is certainly true of Turkish media. This fact leads to the incomplete and stereotypical depictions of the disabled athletes and unexamined assumptions about disability culture. The lack of media coverage, on the other hand, is a symptom of lack of recognition and awareness. If the amount of coverage increases and the content is improved negative perceptions of disability can disappear. Media coverage which reinforces the social model can help eliminate the boundaries as well as the stereotypes and misconceptions often found in society at large.

It can be observed that most sports writers are unaware of mass media's possible role in such social change, the role of mass media in the construction of the disabled identity and also of the experience of disablement. The coverage and depiction of the disabled athletes can be improved by developing an awareness of disability and disability sport in these reporters' and writers' minds. This can be done through including courses on the construction of normalcy and disability in the media studies curriculum and through offering awareness developing programs for journalists. Training programs for disabled people in broadcasting careers can also bring about changes in perceptions of disability among both disabled and able-bodied athletes.



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