

June 01, 2007

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Recommended Citation

Northeastern University - Center for the Study of Sport in Society, "Oscar Pistorius statement" (2007). *CSSS Research Articles and Reports*. Paper 7. <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d10009437>

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OSCAR PISTORIUS STATEMENT

On May 15th, the New York Times published an article entitled “An amputee sprinter: Is he disabled or too-abled?” that has sparked an intense debate about Paralympic sprinter Oscar Pistorius and the International Association of Athletics Federations’ (IAAF) ban of springs, wheels and other devices that may give the user an unfair advantage over another athlete. Pistorius, a 20-year-old bilateral amputee from South Africa has clocked record performances in the 100 meters, 200 meters, and 400 meters, nearing the Olympic qualifying times. At the South African national championships in March, Oscar placed second in the 400 against the country’s top able-bodied athletes. Yet critics have denounced these achievements as a direct result of his two carbon fiber prosthetic legs known as the Cheetahs. Some have regarded his success against able-bodied sprinters as an unfair advantage because he has the ability to modify his legs to improve efficiency. Ossur, the prosthetic company who currently sponsors Pistorius, has publicly stated that the blade-like legs are, in fact, passive devices that do not generate any powered movement, only returning a percentage of kinetic energy put into them.

In response to the disabled community’s distress over the IAAF Rule 144.2 on use of “technical aids” during competition, Robert Hersh, a member of the IAAF Council appeared on May 31st on an NPR program entitled “Prosthetics in sport: Disability or advantage?” He explained that the ban of springs and wheels was intended to formalize the pre-existing principle of fair play, in which athletes should not use devices that may give them a skewed advantage in competition. The IAAF has not banned prosthetic legs for athletic events. Hersh maintained that should Oscar Pistorius wish to submit an application to authorize the use of Cheetah legs in international competition, the IAAF would conduct the “necessary biomechanical investigation to determine whether his particular prosthesis does or does not convey an unfair advantage.” Additionally, Hersh suggested a need for regulation within the prosthetic community to ensure a level playing field within the Paralympic community. In response, Brian Frasure, a Team Ossur Paralympic athlete disclosed that his sprint times before and after his amputation have not significantly altered, endorsing Pistorius’ unique athletic talent.

The contention between the right to compete and the right to fair play has made the overlap between able-bodied and disabled sport explicit. It raises issues of inclusion and progressive integration of athletes without discrimination. The Center for the Study of Sport in Society believes a ban that segregates athletes based on accessibility differences is not in the spirit of Olympism. While the IAAF has yet to formally exclude Oscar Pistorius from the event, we maintain that he should not be dismissed on pure technicality, but rather he should be embraced as a unique athletic individual. It is our recommendation to consider the validity of “technical aids” on a case-by-case basis, determined through sufficient biomechanical studies. Every athlete should have the right

to excel to higher levels of competition regardless of age, race, gender, religion or disability. We extend our firm support to Oscar and his unprecedented achievements. It is our hope that Oscar may serve as a mentor and pioneer for other disabled athletes aspiring to reach high athletic competition within the Olympic arena.