



DOMESTIC CLASSIFICATION REVIEW

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“Classification can make or break your career.”

Wheelchair Rugby Canada athlete

“Our job is upholding the rules of sport – we don’t have to like them. Whatever the rules are, it’s our job to uphold them – so if they want to change the rules, we can enforce those.”

Wheelchair Rugby Canada classifier

“Systematically, people who are on the line are being pushed out of the sport in Canada – why? That’s the question.”

Wheelchair Rugby Canada staff

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Delivering a world-leading domestic Classification strategy is a key priority in Wheelchair Rugby Canada's new strategic plan and critical to achieving the winning ambition of strengthening domestic competition. Accordingly, the greater was asked to assess the current state of Classification in Canada and make recommendations for a domestic Classification strategy. In consultation with the Canadian wheelchair rugby community and international peers, supplemented by a literature review, we are recommending developing a domestic Classification strategy around the following 8 core areas: objectives and governance, policies and procedures, creating more opportunities for Classification, classifier recruitment and training, knowledge sharing and education, safe sport, communications, and international advocacy. The first recommended next step is to convene a Classification steering committee, chaired by the incoming Head of Classification, and consisting of classifiers, coaches, athletes, staff, and PSO/clubs, to co-build the domestic Classification strategy together.

REPORT CONTENTS

1. Recommendations
2. Current state assessment
3. Peer benchmarking
4. Process overview



RECOMMENDATIONS

Wheelchair Rugby Canada develop a domestic Classification strategy with the following 8 areas:

1. Objectives and governance
2. Policies and procedures
3. Creating more opportunities for Classification
4. Classifier recruitment and training
5. Knowledge sharing and education
6. Safe sport
7. Communication
8. International advocacy

1. Objectives and governance

Classifiers and other stakeholders are not currently working towards a shared goal. Classifiers feel their job is to enforce international rules, which leads to athletes being classed high or classed out. Athletes and staff indicate growing the game should be the focus, and classification should support participation. Consultation also indicated a lack of understanding of roles and responsibilities in domestic Classification, and a desire for Wheelchair Rugby Canada to take more of an active governance and oversight role in the domestic Classification system. The roll-out of the new strategic plan is an opportunity to develop a clear objective for domestic Classification and communicate this across the system.

Recommendations:

- Create a **Classification steering committee**, chaired by the new Head of Classification, and consisting of classifiers, coaches, athletes, Wheelchair Rugby Canada staff, and PSO/club representation, to lead the development of the domestic Classification strategy. The U.S. Wheelchair Rugby Association (USWRA) does something similar, with a Classification Board, consisting of certified classifiers plus one Player Classification Board Member from each region to serve in an advisory, non-voting capacity
- Develop a clear objective for domestic Classification to support increased participation, which is aligned with Wheelchair Rugby Canada's winning ambition to strengthen domestic competition to support the overall growth and development of the sport
- Bring Classification more formally under the umbrella of Wheelchair Rugby Canada so it is staff led and administered
- Develop and document roles and responsibilities for all parties involved in Classification





2. Policies and procedures

Stakeholders indicated that Classification policies and procedures can be difficult to understand, do not provide enough guidance for community members, and result in the exclusion of many players from the game. This process has highlighted the need to ensure there are ample opportunities to review, give feedback on, and update Classification policies and procedures.

Recommendations:

- Explore creating a **pre-Classification process**, similar to what Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby (GBWR) has put in place. Classifiers review athlete's medical documentation virtually and make an initial assessment of whether they are deemed eligible for Classification. Local clubs can then assign the athlete a Temporary Classification for use during competitions until the athlete can be evaluated in-person by classifiers
- Consider more avenues for **athlete and staff involvement in Classification**, including in the **Technical Classification role** as outlined by World Wheelchair Rugby (WWR). A Technical Classifier "has extensive athletic, coaching, or other relevant background in wheelchair rugby; or a recognised and reputable academic qualification, which encompasses a requisite level of anatomical, biomechanical and sport-specific expertise, which World Wheelchair Rugby at its sole discretion deems to be acceptable." A Classification panel, while typically made up of three Classifiers, can instead include two Classifiers and one Technical Classifier World Wheelchair Rugby Classification Rules 2022
- Build a competition structure and rule set for **Rugby 5s with more flexible Classification eligibility**, similar to Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby (GBWR) and Wheelchair Rugby Australia (WRA). Rugby 5s allow for five players on the court and is open to anyone with a physical impairment and includes a 4.0 class in its eligibility. Rugby 5s provide a playing opportunity for athletes who don't meet minimum impairment for the Paralympic discipline
- Provide guidance and supporting rationale for **decision making on "cusp cases"**. E.g. for cases on the border between two classes, Canada is currently perceived to class up, but classing down would be more supportive of increasing participation
- Develop clear position and guidelines for **including 4.0 in domestic play**. Both Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby (GBWR) and Wheelchair Rugby Australia (WRA) have different tiers for domestic play and have options for 4.0 players. In GBWR, 4.0 players can play in Division 1 and Division 2, but are not able to play in the Premier League. For WRA, 4.0 class players can play in Division 2, although they play as if they had 3.5 class
- Work with community members and experts, e.g. the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, to **revise language in Trans Inclusion policy** away from using the term "cisgender identification", as transgender athletes do not have a cisgender identification
- Build in formal process for **collecting and reviewing feedback on Classification**

3. Creating more opportunities for Classification

An athlete's Classification affects their position on the court, their trajectory in the system, and ultimately, whether they can participate. Being classified as accurately and as early as possible is important for a wheelchair rugby athlete's career. However, National Championships is currently the only opportunity to be classified domestically in Canada. Consultation indicated strong support for increasing the number of opportunities for athletes to be classified and for classifiers to gain experience classifying.

Recommendations:

- Provide **Classification panels at tournaments**. These could be single panels to start, with one at an Eastern tournament and one in the West
- Explore **funding earmarked for PSOs and Clubs for Classification**, which could be used to fund local Classification panels and to support development of a pre-classification process (as per pre-Classification recommendation under policies and procedures above)
- Provide **sample budgets and estimates outlining Classification costs** for events, that PSOs and clubs could use for funding applications to Wheelchair Rugby Canada and external organizations



4. Classifier recruitment and training

Stakeholders throughout the system identified a lack of standardization in the recruitment and training of classifiers. Canada currently has enough classifiers for a double panel once a year at Nationals, however increasing Classification opportunities will increase the need for classifiers, and the current recruitment process is ad-hoc and difficult to scale. In addition, Classification rules can and do change frequently, so processes to update training and share training materials are important.

Recommendations:

- Develop pathways for retired athletes and personnel to become Technical Classifiers. (As per Technical Classifier recommendation under policies and procedures)
- Consider cohort model of training and certification for new classifiers. Wheelchair Rugby Australia (WRA) has recently implemented this for onboarding. The new cohort went through theoretical and practical training together to start fresh with consistent standards and expectations
- Formalize expectations for classifiers to observe at PSO or club level to increase knowledge of wheelchair rugby as a sport. Wheelchair Rugby Australia (WRA) now requires new classifiers to commit to two connection points with local clubs to observe game play
- Centralize and disseminate training materials through a Learning Management System or other right sized document management system

5. Knowledge sharing and education

Classification is a complex process, and Classifiers are qualified medical professionals who bring with them understanding of the medical knowledge required for wheelchair rugby Classification. For athletes and staff, there are gaps in knowledge and understanding of the process and policies, including what to expect during evaluation sessions and the rights and responsibilities of different roles. From the athlete's perspective, there is lack of understanding of the lived experience of navigating the Classification system, and the life-altering impacts Classification decisions can have. There is a need to increase knowledge sharing and education between all participants in the Classification process.

Recommendations:

- Provide opportunities for classifiers to learn more about wheelchair rugby as a sport by travelling to PSO and club competitions to observe game play
- Develop workshops and information for classifiers to educate on Classification:
 - Bring classifiers to camps and tournaments to provide workshops
 - Conduct mock Classification with PSOs and clubs, similar to what British Columbia is currently doing
- Develop an athlete-led perspectives on Classification workshop for classifiers
- Explore additional e-learning options for Classification education webinars
- Provide information on the pathway to Classification on website. Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby (GBWR) has a good example. GBWR Classification Process
- Centralize and disseminate training materials through a Learning Management System or other right sized document management system

6. Safe sport

Safe sport is an important and necessary element of administering a sport to ensure that all community members feel comfortable and free from harassment or abuse during participation, and NSOs have a responsibility to uphold safe sport practices and principles. Highly sensitive conversations linked to emotions and experiences make this a difficult, albeit important, conversation to have. For classifiers, who are acting in the capacity of their professional designations, issues about safe sport can negatively influence their careers, which can lead to a hesitation to participate in conversations about safe sport. Multiple stakeholders expressed concern about safe sport during the Classification process, both in Canada and Internationally, particularly in Classification of women and non-binary athletes.

Recommendations:

- Develop guidance on testing pectoral muscles and other potentially sensitive areas of the body including specific documentation on which exercises and activities an athlete may be expected to be asked to complete
- Develop clear guidance on clothing – and the right to not remove it if not comfortable. United States Wheelchair Rugby Association (USWRA) has sample language that can be referenced as an example Athlete Safeguarding in USQRA Classification
- Develop clear recommendations on inclusion of Athlete Representatives to attend Classification with athletes. Wheelchair Rugby Australia (WRA) have outlined the rights of athletes to have an Athlete Representative and the roles and responsibilities of all athlete support representatives, in addition to actively promoting this option to athletes World Rugby Australia Classification Rules Section 4.11
- Include safe sport training in Classifier education
- Written documentation (see Communications recommendations) on what to expect in the Classification process can proactively address safe sport
- Clarify and publicize clear process for reporting safe sport issues

7. Communications

Stakeholders indicated that communication around Classification, from being informed about process timelines and requirements to delivery of decisions, is sometimes unclear and can cause confusion, tension, or frustration. PSOs and clubs indicate they are often unsure about deadlines, and specifics of processes, such as medical documentation requirements. Due to the technical nature of Classification, individual Classifier communication styles, and time pressures at the Nationals, decisions are sometimes communicated in ways that can be perceived as insensitive by athletes. Classifiers mention receiving inappropriate comments, often out of anger and frustration, but feel they have little recourse or guidance to navigate. There is a clear opportunity to strengthen communication about the Classification process and timelines, and well as Classification decisions.

Recommendations:

- Calendarize and publicize major deadlines and milestones in Classification process (e.g. deadlines for PSOs and clubs to submit medical documentation) and a process for communicating deadline changes
- Create detailed process map for PSOs and clubs outlining roles and responsibilities at all steps in Classification
- Develop detailed “what-to-expect” document to educate athletes on what to expect during Classification. Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby has an example. GBWR What to expect in Classification
- Implement guidelines on best practices for communication of Classification decisions
- Once the domestic Classification strategy is completed, create a resource that outlines domestic Classification in Canada, and how this differs from International

8. International Advocacy

To participate in international competition, Wheelchair Rugby Canada has a responsibility to follow international guidelines for the sport, including Classification policies and rules. With the domestic system being closely tied to the international system, and with Canada’s unique position as a leader, there is an opportunity to advocate for Canada’s needs in the international Classification process. Advocacy is one of the key priorities in the new strategic plan, and stakeholders indicated a desire for Wheelchair Rugby Canada to leverage our strong international reputation to advocate in the following areas in international Classification.

Recommendations:

- Protest process. The feeling is the current process to protest a Classification is complicated and the timelines are tight. For example, documentation for a National Protest must be submitted within one hour of that outcome being published. Also, in some cases athletes must wait for extended periods for a Protest Panel to be convened, as there are so few competitions domestically, this could result in a long wait time
- Clarity from WWR on role of National Sports Organizations (NSOs) in Classification
- Support members of the Canadian Wheelchair Rugby Community in taking on senior roles at the international level



CURRENT STATE ASSESSMENT

Strengths		
Classifiers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Canadian classifiers are internationally qualified and well-respected internationally Most Canadian classifiers are very technically knowledgeable 	System capacity <p>Canada is currently fully staffed to meet current demands, with enough classifiers to run a double Classification panel at Nationals</p>	Culture & community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stakeholders are passionate about the sport and want to see Classification support and strengthen the system Classifiers, as a group, are supportive of each other, and recognize increasing support from Wheelchair Rugby Canada Stakeholders are willing to discuss how to improve Classification
Areas for Improvement		
Classification process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perception that Canadian classifiers are stricter about rules than other countries Many athletes being classed out under current application of World Wheelchair Rugby Classification standards Limited opportunities for athletes to be classified and Classifiers to classify Including Classification at different events is very resource-heavy (financial, volunteer time) Different classifiers may approach assessments differently, creating inconsistent experiences and processes 	Knowledge & education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classification is highly medical, and information can be hard to understand for non-classifiers Process and policies around Classification are not well understood or communicated to athletes, clubs, or PSOs Information on recruitment and training is mostly ad hoc and run by a volunteer role 	Culture & community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of alignment on goal of Classification, with classifiers focused on enforcing international rules, and others thinking about enabling play Athletes and admin cite a lack of “human touch” and empathy in communicating decisions Inherent power imbalance between classifiers and athletes that creates tension around Classification Different provinces have started to try expanding eligibility, leaving the feeling of negating Classifier’s work



Opportunities	
Culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A willingness of stakeholders to share and discuss, and desire to have cross-functional conversations, gives opportunity for co-creation of policies and practices • There is a blank slate of Canada-specific information to start providing guidance from Wheelchair Rugby Canada • Opportunity to leverage new International Paralympic Committee (IPC) Classification Code with increased emphasis on athlete well-being 	Leadership & influence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a world leader in wheelchair rugby, Canada is highly respected in the sport and specifically in Classification • Wheelchair Rugby Canada (WRC) has the mandate and opportunity to test, develop, and advocate for system changes
Threats	
System pressures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convening Classification panels is expensive • Classification depends on volunteers, with risk of burn-out or attrition • There could be pushback on big changes, especially around eligibility, due to history of wheelchair rugby 	Culture & community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power imbalances, poor communications, and lack of transparency have the potential to lead to unsafe environments • Classifiers feeling disrespected which may lead to attrition of their participation in domestic Classification



PEER BENCHMARKING

GREAT BRITAIN WHEELCHAIR RUGBY

Key Learnings	Details
Structure & Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GBWR has integrated a pre-Classification process as the demand was too high it was hard to see everyone in the 2-3 events a year that have Classification panels. Prospective players submit medical documentation and information and are determined to be eligible or not. Local clubs provide provisional classes until full Classification can be conducted. GBWR clearly communicates that provisional class is temporary and may change upon full assessment Having a staff-lead for Classification operations helps create a healthy distance between classifiers and the system GBWR also has a Pathway Manager staff role to manage the delivery of a systematic, evidence-based and Athlete Identification & Development Performance Pathway
Classifiers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GBWR currently only has three classifiers for entire country, only enough for one full panel Burnout in health system makes recruiting medical professionals harder GBWR shared difficulty in recruiting non-medical technical classifiers, ensuring that retired athletes understand that being a technical classifier is not about their personal experiences
Eligibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.0 players can play in the domestic league except at the “premier league” level. GBWR has an established Rugby 5s culture that has an expanded eligibility, and players classed above 3.5 are encouraged to explore Rugby 5s opportunities Both these “exit routes” were developed out of a need to boost participation and gameplay
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The integration of pre-Classification was part of an open discussion about the need to boost numbers and alleviate system pressure. There has been some pushback, but through trialing a new process, and showing the benefits of it, have been able to demonstrate the benefits Important to give all community members as much information as possible and have them feel that they know the whole picture



WHEELCHAIR RUGBY AUSTRALIA

Topic	Details
Structure & Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WRA's manual intentionally highlights options for athletes to have an athlete representative, done in consultation with the National Paralympic Committee who sets standards and guidelines • WRA emphasizes the rights and responsibilities of all groups and roles from the beginning
Classifiers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WRA recently onboarded five new classifiers through a cohort model. The new cohort went through theoretical and practical training together to start fresh with consistent standards and expectations • Classifiers will be expected to commit to two opportunities where they connect with local clubs and players to create transparency
Eligibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WRA allows 4.0 players to play domestically, except in Division 1. 4.0 players still count for 3.5 to ensure gameplay remains accessible for other players • WRA has a developing Rugby 5s discipline
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process for setting up WRA, including Classification approach, was highly consultative and included voices from athletes, classifiers, officials, and volunteers • Having early conversations about safe sport and mental health and want to include classifiers to be part of the conversations instead of a top-down approach • With new set of classifiers, WRA is hoping to reset and prove viability of a healthy domestic classification system. • Change to include 4.0 players in domestic play has been generally well-received and has boosted participation and competition

UNITED STATES WHEELCHAIR RUGBY ASSOCIATION

Topic	Details
Structure & Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USWRA convenes a Classification Board to oversee protests, develop training and certification process, and ensure three certified classifiers at each regional competition • Certified classifiers are part of the Classification Board, and each region also selects one Player Classification Board Members to serve in an advisory, non-voting capacity
Eligibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USWRA guidelines have stackable class adjustments based for female players, players 16 years old and younger, and players 45+ and 65+ • The guidelines clearly state these adjustments are to encourage participation
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides guidance document on safeguarding considerations and implications in Classification policies that details interpretations of policy from a safeguarding lens



PROCESS OVERVIEW

INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION	EXTERNAL REVIEW AND PEER BENCHMARKING
<p>Six discussions (and one written submission) with 20 Canadian athletes, classifiers, national and provincial administrators, and system leaders to discuss:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• their experiences with Classification• how Classification affects the Canadian system• ways that Wheelchair Rugby Canada can improve the system and address concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reviewed 40+ organizational and academic documents including international and national Classification manuals, policies, academic research, and news articles• Examined three international peer organizations as identified by Wheelchair Rugby Canada<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby (GBWR)◦ Wheelchair Ruby Australia (WRA)◦ U.S. Wheelchair Rugby Association (USWRA)• Conducted interviews with:<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby (GBWR). Workforce Development Officer and Head Classifier◦ Wheelchair Ruby Australia (WRA). CEO and Manager of Operations• After repeated attempts we were unable to reach anyone at USWRA, we conducted a document review





Canada

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