

# Challenging the (Dis)Ability Through Grit - Life History of Elite Track and Field Para-athletes

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**Abstract** Grit is an impeccable concept which addresses the consistency of interest and perseverance of effort among non-disabled athletes in the existing literature. However, a dearth of research has scrutinised this construct among disabled athletes. The purpose of this research is to explore the challenges of the gritty para-athletes and the reasons behind their grittiness within each narrative type. Two-part life history interviews were conducted with para elite track and field athletes (n=30). The interviews were transcribed and subjected to a dialogical narrative analysis. The speculation was drawn on the stories told by the para-athletes which were based on the grounds of understanding grit and how their life experiences have shaped their grittiness. Five distinct narrative typologies were identified: staying a little longer, quit quitting, a superman story, embracing uncertainty, rising from ashes and everything to me narrative. Grit is inevitable in achieving success but there are many underlying factors which influences grit such as social support, resilience, determination etc. Hence, creating and sharing narratives of gritty para-athletes can help other para-athletes to make sense of their challenges in meaningful and diverse ways. Future implications address the need for the development of the grit-based interventions that can flourish the mental and physical well-being of para-athletes.

**Keywords** Grit, Para-Athletes, Track and Field, Life History, Dialogical Narrative Analysis

## 1. Introduction

India is one of the developing countries that touched the \$3.75 trillion mark in 2023. India is currently ranked 36th in the Paralympic medal tally [1]. Paralympic games have started getting global recognition which made the profile of disabled athletes visible [2]. The medals won by the para-athletes were not easy as most of these athletes are from rural backgrounds, yet they work hard despite fund deficits, rampant corruption, and overall apathy that outbreak the system [3].

A competitive environment, improvised versions of technology and government support have made para-sport similar to elite sport [4]. Paralympics have given opportunities to disabled athletes to make a way in sports through functional capability despite strenuous challenges [5,6]. Despite the opportunities, the present situation of para-sports in India is underdeveloped because of the non-availability of sports facilities, mismanagement of sports authorities of India, economic and social inequalities that affect the positive development of a sports culture, centralization of effective sports policy, allocation of financial resources, etc. [7,8].

According to World Health Organization, out of one billion people in the world who are disabled, 110-190 million go through numerous difficulties in their daily lives. Due to the limited distribution of disability sport opportunities, winning elite disabled athletes are restricted to a few countries including the U.S., Canada, Germany, China and Australia, who have achieved between 9% and

29% of all medals [9]. The global problems of social vulnerability (e.g., dismantling the stigma of disability), political vulnerability (e.g., organization of sports for the disabled do not fully practice the notion of “sport for all”), and economic vulnerability (e.g., lack of opportunities for training, assistive sports technology, and sponsorships) are prevalent in developing countries [10].

However, many para-athletes tend to be consistent and passionate about their goals, which prevents them from giving up. This ability to be consistent and passionate towards one’s own goals is known as grit. However, undoubtedly, gritty para-athletes are affected by negative feedback, but because grit has ameliorating effects, hence, it makes them persevere and consistent [11,12]. Grit and passion are important as they have implications in determining sports commitment, behavioral regulation and bond with others [13,14]. Additionally, grit helps the para-athletes to enhance their self-efficacy [15]. One of the intriguing types of research done by Henschen [16] encapsulated those disabled athletes who considered themselves competent, just like the non-disabled athletes. Tedesqui, [17] supplements by saying that gritty athletes are more likely to be successful. Additionally, there could be numerous factors which affects the grit such as their role engagement, behavioral involvement, and cognitive involvement [18,19]. Along with grit, social support plays an important role in alleviating stress related to injury and other challenges [20,21]. Previous studies have analyzed grit as a scoping review among non-disabled athletes and individuals, but there has been a relative dearth of research among para-athletes which is warranted [22,23].

## 1.2. Conceptualizing Disability Through Different Models

The social model has been one of the powerful models depicting disability as a social product. It is grounded in neo-Marxist and Gramscian understanding of the world [24]. Primarily, it focuses on the alienation and oppression which disabled people experience as well as the awareness regarding the opportunities with implementation of social inclusion agendas as opposed to the medical model which focuses on pathologizing disabled people’s lives and restricting to structural and perceptual change [25,26]. However, to deal with the critique of a social model, other models were proposed such as the “social relational model” (SRM) [27,28,29]. Another important representation of disabled athletes has been labeled as “supercrip”, however, it does not denote a conceptual model. It implies that through courage, hard work, and determination, individuals can overcome their “tragedy” of impairment [30].

To date, significant research has reflected the challenges and opportunities of disabled athletes but despite these challenges, para-athletes tend to be gritty toward their goals. However, without knowledge of what grit is, how it is facilitated, and how grit has shaped an athlete, understanding the tenacity of gritty athletes remains

unknown. Hence, it is important to witness grit among disabled athletes by filling the gap in the literature with the prevailing social and cultural context.

Narrative inquiry can be used to explore the different, idiosyncratic, and subtle lives of disabled athletes. With narrative inquiry, people narrate their stories which helps us to understand their life experiences and meaning-making [31,32]. It has also been used to understand athletic identity post-disability [33]. Day [34] in telling stories, people can reflect on their journey and the ways they have become grittier. For these reasons, narrative inquiry is considered to be a useful medium to understand athlete’s personal stories about their grittiness. Using a narrative approach, we sought to address the following objectives: (a) explore and typify the narrative types athletes with physical disabilities draw on from their journey of challenges to represent their grittiness, (b) understand the reasons behind what has made them gritty over time within each narrative type.

## 1.3. The Present Study

It was the 2021 Tokyo Paralympics when more than 50 para-athletes across India participated in the Paralympic games. For many disabled elite athletes, the use of advanced and high-specification state-of-the-art assistive technology, such as lower limb amputees competing in track and field events is required for participation. Being the world’s developing country, para-athletes have been consistent in their hard work and passion by representing their country India for four decades, owing to geographical and physical reasons and a glittering legacy that inspires these athletes to run out of poverty. Some of them were Sumit Antil, and Devendra just to name a few. However, these athletes receive attention only when medals are earned at prestigious events like the Paralympics. However, many track and field para-athletes fail to get the desired support and their voices are often overlooked. Consequently, this paper aims to approach the national and international gritty para-athletes to understand their consistency, and passion as there is limited research on the same [35].

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Narrative Inquiry

According to narrative inquiry, human beings are considered meaning-makers; they make meaning out of their lives and communicate through those meanings. Thus, the present study is rooted in ontological relativism and epistemological constructivism, where a relativist ontology approach assumes that human beings make meaning of the social world depending on their experiences [36] and the latter assumes that knowledge is constructed through interaction with others.

## 2.2. Participants and Sampling

Initially, a letter from the ethics committee was obtained. After obtaining ethics approval, the para-athletes were recruited using “maximum variation and criterion-based purposive sampling.” Maximum variation sampling allowed for the consideration of various factors which have affected the para-athletes along with their challenges despite which they have been gritty and criterion-based sampling allowed for segregating the participants which made them eligible for the study. Para-athletes were operationalized as those who had been part of elite para-sport at a competitive level instead of playing at a recreational level. Participants were recruited from Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium, Thyagaraj Stadium, and gyms.

The “Indian Paralympic Committee’s online database” provided the base for data collection. The author contacted para-athletes through their coach and emails and checked for the eligibility criteria. The para-athletes were Indian track and field athletes across Delhi-NCR. Thirty para-athletes met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate, including 12 women and the rest 18 men in the age group of 18 to 50 years. Participants were apprised of confidentiality and anonymity and given informed consent before participation. Pseudonyms helped in protecting the identity of the participants. The first four athletes were interviewed as part of the pilot study to assess the effectiveness of the interview schedule designed. None of the athletes denied participation, and only those recruited who met the inclusion criteria.

## 2.3. Data Collection

The retrospective life history interviews consisted of two independent sessions. “Life histories or the unfolding of an individual’s experiences over time” [37] pictures the stories of participants within broader perspectives such as culture, norms, and practices. These interviews lasted between 2.5 and 4 hours. The life histories spanned time-frame such as disability condition, social support, post-disability goals, interest in para-sport, grittiness despite challenges, and Paralympic ambitions [38]. Thus, these stories indicate their identity, struggles, and what they wish to become. Para-athletes were encouraged to engage in narrative reflection, which involves introspection about

memories. As connections and insights can be possible retrospectively only. Hence, this paper had the following two objectives: First, to explore the challenges of para-athletes (i.e., the “plotline”), and second, to examine the influential reasons which made the athletes gritty despite the challenges captured within each participant’s story.

The initial session involved the creation of a timeline of the interviewee that was done collaboratively by the interviewer and interviewee [39]. The questions were related to grit and their challenges (E.g., What kind of challenges did you face? What made you choose para-sport despite the difficulties? What made you consistent and passionate about your sports goals? Who all supported you despite the challenges?) (refer to the interview schedule).

The participants engaged in the discussion in the second session, which was conducted within one week, allowing participants to reflect on their timelines. The participants were asked follow-up questions to elicit rich data that opened the avenues for exploration and interpretation.

The individual semi-structured interviews (December 2022-January 2023) were conducted as part of the data collection which highlighted the grit and passion of the para-athletes and their life. The interview took place in the stadium. The experts reviewed the interview schedule. The expert panel consisted of the head of the department, an associate professor and three assistant professors. The interviews were conducted under the guidance of a professional coach who has done his doctorate in physical education and is an expert in qualitative methods. He is currently working in the JLN stadium as a coach for a 400m event. In the beginning, two pilot interviews were conducted. The interviews were audiotaped and verbatims were analysed. The interview lasted for 40- 45 minutes. Interviews were guided in person (n= 27) as well as over the phone (n=3) (see Table 1). Some non-verbal cues were absent during the online interview, whereas, the cadence of speech, and tone of the voice were ostensible. The stadiums where data collection took place were in collaboration with the Sport Authority of India. Athletes chose the location themselves that made them feel comfortable. While collecting the data, the interviewer accompanied the athlete, athletes were observed during the workout session and neglecting the indispensable non-verbal cues that played an important role in life.

**Table 1.** Participant Summary

Participants	Gender	Age	Length of time participating in Track and field event	Level achieved in Track and Field
Shreyansh	Male	20	11	International
Dolly	Female	21	6	International
Vinay	Male	22	8	International
Vijay	Male	45	6	International
Madhavi	Female	23	6	International
Yuvraj	Male	34	7	International
Rahul	Male	45	9	International
Kanishka	Female	27	5	International
Vijay	Male	23	7	International
Usha	Female	23	8	International
Anuj	Male	21	10	International
Kavita	Female	20	8	International
Shubham	Male	18	5	International
Shreyas	Male	18	4	International
Neeraj	Male	27	7	International
Amit	Male	33	8	International
Tushar	Male	32	4	International
Sahil M.	Male	20	3	International
Preeti	Female	30	6	National
Jivadaya	Female	37	3	International
Shubh	Female	43	8	International
Aarti	Female	50	5	National
Anshika	Female	39	4	International
Kajal	Female	36	6	International
Madhuri	Female	25	5	International
Arjun	Male	26	4	National
Abhinav	Male	24	3	International
Mahesh	Male	29	9	National
Rajesh	Male	29	6	International
Bobby	Male	26	7	International

As the narrative inquiry approach unfolds the experiences of the participants “is considered as a means of inquiry in disability research has been advocated”, however, this method does not imply “the royal road to understanding or has no risks attached to it” as defended by Smith & Sparkes [31]. As participants were asked to recall the significant situations of their past, the potential for emotional distress was unveiled. Therefore, safeguards were prudently established to allow participants to choose when to stop, pause or take a break during the interview

[40].

Ameliorating effects of the interview had come to the notice as participants took part in multiple interviews. Initially, researchers were able to gather the information and follow up on several points after the first interview. This helped the researchers to engage in analytical reflection. Various themes, contradictions, and possibilities for probing other questions emerge as the researcher sat with herself with the evidence. Secondly, an interview allows rapport and trust formation between the interviewee and interviewer [41]. This has its relevance whenever anxiety-provoking situations are elucidated by the storyteller. As Hyden, [42] encapsulates, sensitive topics are often part of private and meaningful personal experiences, however the same can be based on *relational* circumstances as well. Thus, use of the multiple interviews allowed for relationships to develop over time, which also gave the sense of control and safety to the participants as to when to reveal, hold and continue with the conversation.

### 3. Data Analysis

#### Interview Schedule

1. At what age you started playing?
  - a) How long have you been participating in track and field? / Can you tell me how you got into track and field? (probing)
2. Who all supported you in the family for playing?
3. When did you play your first competition? (probing)
  - a) What was your experience at that point in time?
4. How would you define disability?
  - a) At which age disability happened?
  - b) How did/does disability make you feel (emotionally, mentally, and physiologically)?
5. How has it influenced your sports performance?
6. Despite the disability, what made you to be in sports?
7. Despite the challenges related to finance, sponsorship, equipment, prosthetics etc. what made you consistent in your game?
8. Share your experience when you lost in the competition despite the hard work you did for it. (probing)
  - c) What keeps you going on despite of a loss in the competition?

After the interviews were conducted, all the audio recordings were replayed simultaneously while transcribed verbatim. Henceforth, a “dialogical narrative analysis” (DNA) was performed. It aims to “study the mirroring between what is told in the story- the story’s content- and what happens as a result of telling that story- its effects”. Following Frank’s and Smith’s [43,44] guidelines, the analysis was conducted in the following manner. Initially, indwelling was carried out. This involves reading and re-reading the transcripts which have been noted down and simultaneously listening to the audio recordings while

making notes at the same time. The purpose is to create a “plotline” of the participant's life history to bring out the thematic foci (factors affecting the grit of the athletes and dynamics (e.g., tone which could be positive or negative, growth which could be upward or downward) along with other narrative resources. In-depth observation of the thematic foci is done by the authors to understand and reflect the patterns throughout each life history.

To focus on the structure, analytical bracketing had been utilized to bring out the essentials such as how was the narrative constructed over time, including the content which explains the material which has been elucidated by the participant. Several narrative typologies were identified which were constructed holistically based on commonalities and differences existing between the respondents. This approach enabled an in-depth examination of the meanings participants have addressed towards their para-sport goals despite challenges.

### 3.1. Methodological Rigour

In order to evaluate the research, a flexible list of criteria had been developed which was consistent with ontological relativism and epistemological constructionism [45]. There was no universal or set criteria to judge the quality of the research rather dynamic list of relevant traits was reflected. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber [46] proposed four criteria for evaluating narrative research which was the foundational base for the list: width (interview content, quality, structure etc.), coherence (story elucidated by the participant), parsimony (focusing on the concepts which may be appealing to the readers) and insightfulness (authenticity of the story as told by the story teller). Another indispensable item has been a rigoristic approach and reflexivity. In order to achieve these above-mentioned criteria, several techniques were followed such as width was achieved through two-part life history interviews. Transcripts were read by the participants in order to reflect them properly and bring out the need for collaboration and interpretation [47]. Similarly, coherence and parsimony were “achieved by organizing the narratives around thematic elements linked to existing conceptualizations.” And lastly, authors engaged in the reflexive journaling in order to prevent prior assumptions or biases which might interfere with the interpretation of the data where the second author acted as a “critical friend”- a “theoretical sounding board” during the whole process of analysis [48].

## 4. Results

Five different narrative typologies were discovered, representing different challenging situations of the para-athletes while making them gritty at the same time. For every narrative, results are presented as a) demographic details of the para-athletes, b) summarised narrative, c) description of participant's grittiness despite of challenges

d) interpretation of the meanings associated with their grittiness. An overarching theme spanning these five narrative typologies is also described.

### 4.1. Staying a Little Longer

Ten of the life histories represented a narrative typology named ‘staying a little longer’. Participants who elucidated this story were suffering from upper and lower limb disabilities. The participants who told this story were predominantly men. This narrative is summarized as follows: “I am here today because of the support I got from my close and significant ones so giving up was never an option despite of hardships I saw in my athletic career.” This refers to various challenges athletes encounter in their journey that can propel them to leave professional sports. Several participants had financial constraints which revolved around this theme. They had reasons to quit because of hardships and downfalls but they didn't give up. Downfalls included lack of financial support and informational support for older athletes (i.e., ages 35-45). This is because in older times, there were no social media and internet services hence, people did not have the required informational support. It was only after the 2016 Rio Paralympics that para-athletes of India came into the limelight. The story explained by the respondents was as follows: “Initially I had to travel 30-40 km from my house to the stadium which is in Delhi, the capital of India. Taking a bus would usually take longer than taking a train but metros weren't available everywhere as all these things took time. But I still didn't back down as quitting was never the solution. Not quitting easily has made me what I am today and I have pride in it.” For example, Irfan describes his financial situation:

“When I was 18 years old, I won the nationals in 100m and 200m. I was so delighted that at least now, I would be able to help my family, however I was shocked.... For good 2 years, I got no cash reward from the government which made me disappointed.... we athletes need funds for travelling, accommodation, diet...yes diet... diet is so important, supplements cost around 15-20k per month, a protein-rich diet is so necessary in order to achieve performance... then I played my international when I was 22 yrs. old, it was overwhelming but I managed financially with the support of my coach who has always supported me. We did meet our sports minister at the PM house where I shared my issues about finance with them and they promised to deliver the needful things... I finally got my cash reward and I am thankful to the government however, if we all are supported at our grassroots level, many para-athletes can win medals for the country.”

The plotline for staying a little longer was driven along two main axes: the need to overcome downfalls (lack of financial, informational, emotional, and tangible support) and the need to achieve. There were some athletes who were born with disabilities such as Bobby, Shreyas, and Alfie. However, those who suffered from an accident were

likely to face more difficulties due to the sudden transition from able-bodied to para-athlete such as Dolly, Vinay, Anuj, Madhavi, Yuvraj, and Rahul. These athletes were living farther from their homes as they had an innate desire to achieve and succeed. Dolly, elucidated that she was only 17 yrs. old when she made the transition from an able-bodied to a para-athlete. She needed emotional support which was given by her mother, whereas financially, she struggled hard but she never wanted to give up on sports. Sports made her feel happy and lively despite the stigma attached to the disability so she continued playing and joined a professional track and field team.

Opportunities and support provided by their coach made them resilient as they didn't want to quit, as the need for excellence and achievement surpassed their challenges [49,50]. The transition from young adulthood to middle adulthood (e.g., ages-20-27) made them more resilient and mature. Consequently, they became self-reliant in making personal decisions as some para-athletes chose to get married and continue their professional sports. To exemplify, Vinay (age-39) describes his choice to be in professional sports despite the challenges he faced while balancing his personal and professional life:

“My initial challenge was to overcome the disability issues but I didn't want to give up as I didn't like being a loser... I wanted to achieve something in life...a para-athlete is similar to an able-bodied athlete as it all depends on how the body and mind are used constructively... also I chose to get married but I was able to stand on my own feet when I achieved a medal at Paralympics and government supported me financially, my family supported me emotionally, but balancing personal and professional life was never easy. I had to get up early in the morning so I could not attend late-night functions or weddings but my spouse understood my routine, it all depends on mutual understanding, and in order to achieve something, we have to lose something...”

The challenges which para-athletes went through could hinder their participation in elite parasport but their mental strength, and will to succeed surpassed these difficulties. The need for mastery and achievement was introduced in this narrative. Such initiatives of these athletes also motivated budding athletes to make the best of their presence by challenging the obstacles through grit and passion.

#### 4.2. Quit Quitting

It is another narrative type where the five respondents elucidated how they didn't quit despite the insurmountable difficulties. The participants were predominantly men and women suffering from physical disabilities acquired during adolescence or early adulthood (i.e., ages 15-25). This narrative is summarized as follows: “I don't think I differ from an able-bodied athlete, I am competing with other athletes at an elite level, getting cash reward, media is

capturing me, where is the difference?” It is driven by the “original restitution narrative by Frank [51], Sepasi, et al. [52]. It is congruent with the performance narrative [53] which means respondents hold on to their identities as elite athlete despite debilitating injury as their lives revolved around winning, competition, and discovering their identity. They came across different types of injury but didn't choose to back down as quitting was never their choice. To exemplify, Dolly describes her return to sport post-injury:

“Initially, I was taken aback while playing because the injury can ruin an athlete's career. However, I didn't want to leave sports as para-athletes are advised to go into sports as per the doctor's recommendation. I was disturbed when the injury happened. But reading inspirational songs, and watching movies inspired me. I realized if they could, how I cannot... also doctor told me that some sort of physical activity is demanded in my case so I thought why not professional sports...My mother supported me a lot.....”

It is well ostensible that participants in the ‘quit quitting’ narrative are highly motivated and have an innate desire to achieve despite setbacks. They craved the physical challenge and chose to continue by being gritty and passionate towards their goals. Each of these athletes sustained an injury creating common crises of continuing or leaving the sport (ages 15-25). They began to participate in the sport post eight months after complete recovery. Rehabilitation took place where some athletes managed to work on their mood, mind state, and anxiety related to bouncing back into sports, Deepak stated, “I ate right, drank a lot of fluids, watched sports documentaries, so introduction of all these things made me resilient and helped me in my idle time...” These athletes create their own space for *mastery* (i.e., enhanced confidence) and *a sense of pride* (faith in oneself) while bouncing back from the injury. For example,

“I think I can do this because the environment of the stadium where other para-athletes were competing and suffered from injury but then also they didn't give up made me realize the sense of confidence I should possess...With confidence and faith in oneself, I could overcome the odds by being patient.”

However, the path to mastery and a sense of pride was non-linear. It was topsy-turvy related to surgeries, and prosthetics about training. But these participants considered para-sport as their route to recovery. They were hungry to prove their strengths in society and prove everyone who stigmatized and discriminated against them.

#### 4.3. A Superman Story

Seven of the life histories drew on a narrative type described as ‘a Superman story’. The participants who told this story were men and women who had impairments acquired early in life (i.e., before the age of 15). They described their story through a “performance narrative”. Ideally, the latter constitutes of self-orientated focus which

is on winning, competing, gaining social esteem, and enhanced self-concept. This narrative is closely aligned with the “super cripp” narrative [54]. The theory of performance narrative is based on self-determination [55]. They explained it as: “I played initially as I loved playing, but I continued because I used to feel on the top of the world as people praised me, they started recognizing me, I felt like a superhero so I continued playing and it became my passion.” To exemplify, Preeti, Dolly and others describe her experience as follows:

“Back in high school, I used to live in a hostel among other kids... we had no social media, phones, television access but only those shiny magazines which had top sportspersons on the front page such as ‘Milkha Singh’ and ‘PT. Usha’. It was appealing to me, as they used to be the centre of attention, they looked like some sort of hero in my eyes at least and I exactly wanted to be like them... I asked a sports coach in our school about them...to which he told me the power of hard work, and thriving in oneself... so there is no looking back since the day I had not practiced...I was so determined to reach somewhere and when I started getting medals, I can’t even explain how I felt, I felt noticed like a superhero and things changed since then as didn’t want to stop.”

In this narrative of “a superhero story”, parents, and the school environment play an extraordinary role in shaping children’s interests and liking for any field. Children have the sense to belong and participate so they can be accepted and approved. The experiences of challenge and mastery are easily met through sports. Access to new challenges and opportunities made these athletes persevere and sustain longer for their goals. Support from the Sports Authority of India, and recognition from the government made them feel elite and a “superhero”.

#### 4.4. Embracing Uncertainty

“Embracing change” is another narrative drawn based on athletes’ responses where five life histories were part of it. A total of three men and one woman told this story who acquired the disability in their early adulthood (e.g., ages 18-30), primarily spinal cord injuries. Two narratives revolve around this typology: discovery and quest. In the former one, para-athletes are discovering their categories as parasport involves category categorization which will give them allowance to play in their chosen sport. There is a great deal of uncertainty regarding the category which causes distress to the athletes [56]. “Embracing change” is elucidated as follows: “learning to deal with uncertainty and maintaining perseverance despite unpredictable challenges.”, Jivadaya exemplifies it:

“I had to travel abroad to get my classification done as then only I can play that event in parasport. Unfortunately, in my category, which is t-35, one of my events got removed but I didn’t back down, I had kept two events in my category to deal with the uncertainty therefore I was

determined and passionate about achieving a medal at an international event. These things are part of life... they shouldn’t stop anyone from achieving their dreams... one door shuts, another door opens... that is how I solve problems... but backing down is never an option... I also got a medal that too gold in my event and I was very happy about it... every decision, and hard work, everything paid off. Also, other things which made me stay in sports were involvement with other athletes, traveling was fun and recognition made me feel good.”

These participants had to go through their category classification before they could head towards their international events. But the support of others such as close ones and the *need for belongingness* with others were facilitators which made them motivated. The downside of category classification is losing an event which an athlete prepares for. Preparation takes years and it takes seconds to log out of an event which can be distressing for a para-athlete. But the combination of factors promoted grit in para-athletes such as *mastery*, which points to the need to excel and attain the level of achieving success post winning the medal. Secondly, *engagement* in competition acted as a healing for them. Engagement was mental, physical and social. Socially, as human beings are social animals, participants when interacting with other athletes, enjoyed and felt happy. This helped them to move forward despite uncertainties.

#### 4.5. Rising from Ashes

Three of the life histories fit in the narrative which is ‘rising from ashes.’ This narrative includes three men who had suffered physical disabilities in their 40s. This narrative is summarized as follows: “I broke down ...this slump had me feel like a failure but then I got to know about psychological services... they made me where I am today...I am so contented... To exemplify, Anuj describes the situation as:

“I was broken and shattered, I had lost myself, all of me especially my identity... my self-esteem but when I was told to meet a sports psychologist by my family members, I was initially reluctant but I went to them.... And I learned to accept myself without placing conditions of worth on my identity. I mean I have a life besides my profession, and this goes for everyone, I understood the importance of being compassionate and empathetic towards on own self as even after some point in time, sports leave you .... you retire... then what? Then I got to pass on my knowledge and wisdom to the budding athletes therefore, there was no point being hard on myself...I let go of all of the grudges and I have never felt so contented as I felt on the day of my sessions with my therapist.”

Anuj was not into sports before his injury and doctors suggested that post-disability, physical movement is important, therefore he discovered para-sport but before joining sports, he discovered himself and rose from the

ashes. His spinal cord injury made him feel restless, angry, and agitated. But he gave a second chance to himself. The injury occurred in his late 30s when he had a family who supported him.

Post his injury, he was devastated and to accept his disability, he met a sports psychologist who gave him sessions and helped him in overcoming the stigma related to disability [57]. As people with disability are discriminated against, therefore, he didn't want to go through all of that so he chose to join sports for enhanced self-esteem and self-concept. Although many athletes in developing countries are skeptical to take help from a psychologist as there are several factors associated with the same such as lack of knowledge about their services, costly services, the stigma associated with it and just to name a few [58]. But, according to him, the psychologist provided him with unconditional positive regard and acceptance [59]. Also, it helped him in his mental preparation which made him resilient and gritty towards his goals for the Paralympics. He qualified for the nationals and was preparing for Asian trials which reflected his self-determination and willpower despite of unpredicted accident which resulted in disability.

#### 4.6. Meta-theme: Everything to me Narrative

Athletic career and identity meant everything to the para-athletes and this theme was common amongst all. They all were national and international level players who had built a strong athletic identity. To exemplify, Devendra, expressed his emotions while he was suffering from a debilitating injury: "This sport has given me everything, I don't want to quit and I will not quit...even though I had an injury, I still went to the stadium every day so I can my track as it is my shrine." Ayush, a Paralympian athlete explains it: "Whenever my body is not recovered or I don't feel like playing, I go to the ground, I sit there and visualize so I can see myself on the podium, but I don't feel like sitting at home and do nothing.... ground heals me, it has given everything to me... how can I get bored with it when I am here today because of it...These athletes have a strong sense of willpower and determination to achieve their dreams and get laurels for the country. This would not be possible without their grittiness which has landed them here where they wanted to be. Despite the challenges they have encountered in their journey, they still aspire, ascend and wish to achieve as they feel happy, motivated, and contented [60].

## 5. Discussion

This rigorous research aims to study the challenges that para-athletes face despite which they continue to maintain perseverance and consistency of efforts which makes them grittier. From analyzing life story interviews of 30 para-athletes, the authors discovered six narrative typologies:

Staying a little longer, quit quitting, a Superman story, embracing uncertainty, rising from ashes, and everything to me. Novel insights were provided about the way athletes underwent the challenges that shaped their athletic careers despite injuries and setbacks. It was also supplemented with their approach of seeking help from professionals such as sports psychologists to overcome barriers that had come up in their journey of sports. It is well documented in the literature [61] the intricate and difficult issues that para-athletes have to go through. Despite this wealth of literature, the grittiness of the athletes is well reflected through their stories of courage, willpower, and self-determination. Results from the present study suggest that grit helps an athlete to be consistent despite challenges. Most of the athletes reported their participation in para-sports as they wanted to challenge their disability by demonstrating their ability to achieve a target in sports. Whereas, some athletes were fervent to push themselves despite the injury and stigma related to disability [62,63,64,65].

This study elucidated those participants in retrospect had faced challenges related to the classification of their categories, yet they acknowledged the future possibilities of achieving growth, identity, fame, etc. This also reflected the narrative of embracing uncertainty [66].

Although the grittiness of the participants is well reflected, it is also important to recognize that this grittiness did not come easily without going through insurmountable challenges. Injury and lack of social support were evident in three of the interviews as described by them. On the other hand, despite all this, they still maintain consistency and perseverance towards their long-term goals which highlighted their will to succeed and determination and not just through prohibited substances as the former has been substantiated by other researchers in the past among disabled athletes [67]. Yet these challenges and ongoing hardships highlight that grit can be learned through a growth mindset and these certain barriers should not be ignored. The more athlete perseveres the better and stronger they become mentally.

By storying the grittiness of the para-athletes, we have created a new perspective of grittiness among athletes which helps them to be consistent despite challenges. Practitioners can use these narratives as educational 'tools' to help create knowledge regarding the usefulness of grit as this construct is a non-cognitive trait that is not inherited but can be built with a growth mindset. These narratives hold pedagogic potential by offering dialogical encounters of learning and transformation. By extending this research, future researchers can bring new conceptual life into narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is criticized for its lack of focus on the non-human world but at the same time, it extensively focuses on the meaning-making of humans which helps in understanding humans' perceptions and behaviour in-depth. To address this critique, Smith and Monforte, advocated the involvement of new materialism which will give the material world the same ontological status. Therefore, this approach of Smith and Monforte



opens an avenue for future research in this field which has the potential to lead to a more transdisciplinary rather than multi-interdisciplinary discourse.

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The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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