



Shelley Dowling-Holroyd: Accessibility Specialist

My journey as an accessibility specialist began on the athletics track and was shaped by both triumph and adversity. As an international athlete for 17 years, competing at the highest levels including the Olympic Games, World Championships, and Commonwealth Games, I understood that the power of sport can transform lives. Injury forced my retirement from competition in 2006, and I discovered my true calling: ensuring that barriers never prevent others from reaching their potential.

The dedication and determination that carried me through nearly two decades of elite competition became the foundation for my work in accessibility and inclusion. My personal experience of having my athletic career altered by circumstances beyond my control gave me unique insight into the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and the critical importance of creating inclusive environments.

This personal understanding, combined with my athletic expertise, led me to specialise in accessibility within the sports world and beyond. I recognised that the same principles that helped me overcome boundaries as an athlete could be applied to breaking down the barriers that prevent others from participating fully in sport and their everyday life.

Pioneering Inclusive Sport Development

My accessibility expertise truly flourished during my time with England Athletics, where I spent four years leading the Playground to Podium programme across Northern England. This government-funded initiative focused on encouraging disabled children to participate in athletics, but more importantly, it challenged me to reimagine what inclusive sport could look like. I didn't just work with para-athletes – I transformed entire systems, coaching coaches to become more inclusive and encouraging athletics clubs to break down the stigma surrounding para-sport.

As Event Lead for British Athletics, I expanded this work across the UK and Northern Ireland, developing comprehensive support networks for para-athletes while simultaneously working with organisations to make their events and structures more accessible. My role as a UKA Classifier provided deep technical knowledge of different disability categories, while my work with County Sports Partnerships and National Disability Sports Organisations gave me a broad understanding of systemic accessibility challenges.



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Innovation in Accessibility

2014: Parallel Success Academy

Created a groundbreaking programme that supported entire ecosystems, including coaches, parents, structures, tracks and support networks.

ParaHADO Development

As National Sports Development Manager with HADO, created the world's first para-development in this emerging sport.

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Military PRU in Preston

Created and led initiatives to support wounded, injured, and sick soldiers transitioning into athletics, contributing to the development of the Invictus Games.

My most significant contribution to accessibility came through creating the Parallel Success Academy in 2014. This groundbreaking programme didn't just support up-and-coming athletes – it recognised that true accessibility requires supporting entire ecosystems, including coaches, parents, structures, tracks and support networks. The Academy became a model for how to create truly inclusive pathways that remove barriers at every level.

My work with the Military PRU in Preston further developed my accessibility expertise, as I created and led initiatives to support wounded, injured, and sick soldiers transitioning into athletics. This work, which contributed to the development of the Invictus Games, demonstrated how accessibility principles could be applied to help individuals rebuild their lives after trauma.

Revolutionary Accessibility Innovation

Most recently, as National Sports Development Manager with HADO, I leveraged my disability expertise to create ParaHADO – the world's first para-development in this emerging sport. This innovation represents the culmination of my accessibility journey: rather than retrofitting accessibility into existing structures, I built inclusion into the foundation of something entirely new, revolutionising how we think about accessible sport development.

Why I Am an Accessibility Specialist

Elite Athletic Experience

17 years as an international athlete competing at Olympic Games, World & European Championships, and Commonwealth Games provides unique insight into the mindset required for excellence.

Personal Adversity

Career-ending injury in 2006 gave me firsthand understanding of the importance of accessible alternatives and inclusive environments.

Systems Thinking

Work across multiple organisations and with diverse populations has taught me how to create systemic change in accessibility.

My expertise as an accessibility specialist stems from the unique combination of lived experience, technical knowledge, and systems-thinking that my journey has provided. Having competed at the highest levels, I understand the mindset required for excellence. Having faced career-ending injury, I understand the importance of accessible alternatives and inclusive environments. Having worked across multiple organisations and with diverse populations, I understand how to create systemic change.

My 17 years as an international athlete taught me that every single day is a challenge that must be met head-on to succeed. I apply this same determination to ensuring that barriers are not just removed, but that inclusive systems are built from the ground up. My mission is to transform lives, enhance minds, and develop people in ways that push them beyond any boundaries – whether those boundaries are physical, systemic, or societal.

I became an accessibility specialist because I believe that the dedication and determination that sport instils should be available to everyone, regardless of ability, background, or circumstance. My work is about creating a world where potential is never limited by accessibility barriers, and where inclusion is not an afterthought, but the foundation upon which we build.