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Sensing inclusion among visually impaired and guide runners

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Abstract

People with visual impairments partake in recreational running with sighted guide runners. In the Netherlands, the Running Blind foundation enables blind and visually impaired runners and their guides to experience the social and physical benefits of outdoor recreation together. While sport policies and programs in the Netherlands call for more inclusive sport practices, it is often unclear what ‘inclusion’ means for the people involved. This article explores how a sense of inclusion is constituted, experienced and reflected on within guided running. Based on three months of immersive, sensory ethnographic fieldwork in guided running, we argue that merely integrating disabled sports practitioners into mainstream, that is, ableist sporting contexts does not increase inclusion for people with different abilities. Instead, guided running ensembles challenge ‘the language of inclusion’ by showing how a sense of inclusion evolves from an empathic engagement with the environment, the people and the tethered running bodies.

Keywords

guided running, inclusion, (dis)ability, senses, ethnography, the Netherlands

Introduction

Martijn gave me a fluorescent orange cotton piece of fabric. “This is a running tether,” he explained. “As I prefer to run on your left side, you hold it in your left hand between your thumb and index finger, or your index and middle finger—whatever feels most comfortable. I’ll hold the other end of the tether. When we run, the tether will always be between us. You

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must always move your arms when you run because you guide me with that movement. By pulling it gently, you pull me in a certain direction. By pulling it firmly, you warn me, and signal us to stop” (Fieldnotes Marit Hiemstra).

Martijn was born with the progressive, degenerative eye disease *retinitis pigmentosa*. He was born with 80% of full vision, but his vision had deteriorated to 5% by his late 30s, when we met. Martijn is not able to safely run outdoors without someone who is sighted. After running for three years with several guide runners, the Dutch organization Running Blind matched Martijn with the first author of this article, Marit. Being the more experienced runner of the ensemble, Martijn explained, in this quote above, how the sighted runner guides the visually impaired runner along the route with the use of a tether.

Guided running helps visually impaired people to engage in running practices and provides an example of more inclusive physical activities. How this is set up varies per country.¹ In the Netherlands, the Running Blind foundation is the main organizer of guided running. Through partnerships with local running clubs, Running Blind matches a visually impaired runner with a sighted runner, a so-called ‘buddy’ who signs up voluntarily.² This way, the organization aims to increase interactions between disabled and non-disabled runners and increase participation for visually impaired people in running practices with the overall aim to contribute to a more inclusive society (Running Blind, 2020).

Scholarship on visually impaired running has mainly focused on the challenges and opportunities for inclusion these runners face in recreational running. For example, Fullagar et al. (2020) note the upcoming participation of visually impaired runners in a UK-based organization called parkrun. Parkrun, a community participation running event, functions as a site for ‘actions for change in relation to the challenges of engaging marginalized groups’ (Fullagar et al., 2020: 1199), like visually impaired runners. A small but growing body of work explores the relationship between runners with visual impairments and their sighted guides (most notably Hall et al., 2022; Allen-Collinson et al., 2023). However, those studies on visually impaired running and co-running experiences have not explored in-depth how a running ensemble constitutes and experiences a sense of inclusion. In this article, we explore how the sense of inclusion is constructed through running together. Liberally paraphrasing Ahmed (2007), we argue that ‘saying inclusion’ does not always translate into ‘sensing inclusion’ and eventually ‘doing inclusion’. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Netherlands, we argue that the sense of inclusion in guided running practices becomes lived and embodied through the empathic engagement with the environment, the communication and trust among runners and the experience of two bodies in one running ensemble. Before we zoom in on the empirical data and analysis, we first contextualize this study by delineating guided running practices in the Netherlands and the language of inclusion in sport and physical activity for disabled people.

Guided running in the Netherlands

During guided running, a visually impaired runner is guided by a sighted runner. The runners form an ensemble that aims to run in sync to maximize the running motion. As Martijn explains in the introductory quote, one auxiliary used to run together is a running tether, the most common mode of co-running. Other modes of co-running are running based on solely verbal cues or running with the help of a running stick, such as the ‘Co-Runner’, a 1.5-m Covid-proof carbon running stick. The mode of running depends on personal preference, the level of vision and the environment where one runs. These factors also determine how the ensemble runs: either side by side or one after another (‘trailing’ or ‘shadowing’ in guided running terminology).

In the Netherlands, guide runners and visually impaired runners meet through the Running Blind foundation. Running Blind was founded in 2007 by visually impaired runners in

Rotterdam and has 14 departments nationwide (Oogfonds, 2021). The foundation strives to provide visually impaired people with a chance to engage in running practices and prevent people from isolation and physical inactivity. In the Netherlands, around 57% of Dutch citizens practice sports on a weekly basis. However, this number is significantly lower in minoritized groups, such as disabled people (RIVM [National Institute of Public Health and Environment], 2018; van Lindert and de Jonge, 2022; VWS [Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport], 2018). Sport is deemed to play a key role in increasing public health, social cohesion and integration (Besnier et al., 2018; Parren, 2016; Shipway and Holloway, 2016; van Amsterdam, 2014; van Lindert and de Jonge, 2022), but less so for groups that are excluded from equal participation.

In the Netherlands, Running Blind is a unique case as it is founded not only for, but also by blind and partially sighted runners, that through their experiential knowledge, work together with other sports organizations. Through partnerships with local road running clubs and track and field clubs, Running Blind aims to create inclusion as it fosters both recreational adaptive and integrative running practices (Oogfonds, 2021; Running Blind, 2021). It offers an adaptive practice by organizing a buddy-system for visually impaired runners, while integrating it in 'regular' sports associations. Running Blind's strategy fits in line with policies and programs of Dutch governing bodies and sports institutions over the last few decades. Their view on the integration of disabled, recreational athletes shifted from emancipation within one's own group in the 80s and 90s (Cobussen et al., 2019; Janssens and Verweel, 2014) to the creation of 'inclusive' associations in the 2020s (Van Lindert and de Jonge, 2022), aiming at facilitating exchange, negotiation and communication among athletes of various bodily capacities in sport.

Guided running and the language of inclusion

Inclusion has developed into one of the main terms in discussing and analyzing social problems in various domains of society. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s in the USA, the term 'inclusion' developed along with a movement that advocated equal rights and opportunities for all people, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, and disability (D'Eloia and Price, 2018; Hassanein, 2015). This movement ignited a shift in the conceptualization of the disabled body as 'defective' or 'inferior' towards a language of the appreciation of different bodies. The paradigmatic shift in disability debates simultaneously led to changed terminology: 'from exclusion, segregation, integration, inclusion to full inclusion' (Hassanein, 2015: 31).

Even though inclusion is the predominant term used today, it has a variety of different descriptive, analytical and moral meanings, resulting in a relatively open approach towards the conditions and systematic understandings of inclusion (Hassanein, 2015; O'Reilly, 2005). Some understandings prefigure inclusion in terms of participation, emancipation and human rights (Jaarsma et al., 2014; Jeanes et al., 2019; Mumford, 2021), while others point out appreciation and recognition of difference (D'Eloia and Price, 2018; Hassanein, 2015). The discourse of inclusion variously involves, as Rummens argues, 'the acknowledgement of the other as *other*, who is strange or alien to "us" in its difference and is permitted to remain strange or alien, if we all, in the very being of the other, acknowledge each other's equal humanness' (Rummens, 2014: 328).

The language of inclusion is salient in disability sport and particularly in sports inclusion programs. Policies and institutional endeavours are considered to be crucial for creating inclusive spaces (Fullagar et al., 2020; Peers et al., 2020; Spaaij et al., 2020; van Lindert and de Jonge, 2022). Governing bodies often assume inclusion to be the result of integrating disabled sports participants into mainstream, ableist sporting contexts but it has not become the 'bastion of inclusion that it was intended to be' (Peers et al., 2020: 112). Using the theoretical perspective of Sara Ahmed (2007), we argue that 'saying inclusion' does not always translate into 'sensing inclusion'

and 'doing inclusion' eventually. Those who study disability sport and inclusion programs show how discourses with regards to the 'normal sporting body' undergird policy. Various studies have highlighted how sport and physical activity have underlined the non-disabled body as 'normal' and the 'disabled' body as 'abnormal' (Clair, 2011; Foucault et al., 2003; Limoochi and Le Clair, 2011; Parren, 2016; van Amsterdam, 2014). Inclusion language with sport institutions is arguably shaped on normative, ableist structures, which set this specific sports context as the norm or 'ideal'. This leads to reproducing and reifying differences in bodies and their capabilities (Hiemstra et al., 2022; Mumford, 2021; Powis and Macbeth, 2020). For this reason, Smith et al. (2021) have called for 'inclusive messages' that challenge ableist language in inclusion programs.

As ableist language underpins inclusion strategies, many sports inclusion programs do not necessarily contribute nor evoke commitment to creating a space in which people learn how to 'socially negotiate in a circle of difference and diversity' (D'Eloia and Price, 2018: 100–101) and how to build reciprocal and intimate relationships. These two ingredients, reciprocity and intimate sharing, are crucial to the development of feelings of belonging, perceptions of caring, closeness and warmth, as well as 'inclusion' (D'Eloia and Price, 2018). This paradox is rather remarkable, since the word 'inclusion' calls for appreciation and recognition of differences and is about 'listening to unfamiliar voices, being open and empowering all members' (Barton, 1998: 84–85). Considering the frictional nature of sports inclusion language, we aim to explore how a sense of inclusion evolves from a physical activity that is considered to be 'inclusive': guided running, a practice in which communication, sharing sensations and the constant negotiation of space take centre stage. Visually impaired and guided running in the Netherlands serves as a case study that shows how recreational sports can be more inclusive.

Methodology

This article draws from three months of ethnographic fieldwork in guided running practices in the outskirts of the city of Leiden, the Netherlands. Between January 2021 and March 2021,³ the usage of an immersive approach (Matthews, 2021) enabled the first author, Marit, to become deeply embedded in the experiences, thoughts and sensations of runners involved in guided running. To become immersed, Marit conducted what Howes (2019) calls 'participant sensation'. This method departs from the more conventional method of participant observation that centres ocular-centric observation. Participant sensation is a more holistic method that aims to relinquish 'the status of the observer in favor of [...] sensing—and making sense—along with others' (Howes, 2019: 18).

During and after the fieldwork period, Marit ran three days a week with Martijn, who became her main interlocutor. From the start, Martijn and Marit bonded, and they kept on running and training to participate in running contests. Through running together, Marit improved her running skills and became motivated to increase her mileage. If it was not for Martijn, she could not imagine herself running more than 10k. Besides running with Martijn, she sometimes ran with two other visually impaired runners, Joost and Ruud. The participatory fieldwork enabled the researcher to gain first-hand experience and insight into the practice of recreational running and becoming a running 'ensemble'. Attached with a tether, running in sync and navigating public space, she explored the practice together with her interlocutors.

Marit is a 25-year-old woman who had little experience in recreational running prior to January 2021. Because of her personal and academic interest in guided running, she signed up as a guide runner at the start of 2021. As a non-disabled, congenital sighted person, she became aware of her embodied, integrated ocular-centrism in her running experiences and that these differ for

visually impaired runners. As bodies are ‘bio-social material entities of inquiry and knowledge’ (Hammer, 2020: 410), this research asked for a critical reflection on what Hammer elsewhere calls the ‘multisensority of experience, perception, knowing and practice’ (2013: 6). Although she learned a lot and empathized deeply, Marit realized that for obvious reasons she could not fully immerse into the experiences of visually impaired runners.

In addition to participant sensation, three runs and conversations with Martijn were audio-recorded using a mobile phone and an external microphone. To break with the ocular-centric approach in participatory fieldwork, these naturalistic recordings opened a window to research multisensoriality in running practices. Based on these recordings, Marit and Martijn produced a podcast (in Dutch) to disseminate the research results to a broader audience.⁴ Both the naturalistic and podcast recordings were further analyzed for this paper.

In addition to the participatory fieldwork, 12 semi-structured interviews with visually impaired runners and guide runners, and three interviews with running trainers were conducted. All runners were recruited with the help of the Running Blind foundation and via a request on a Dutch online audio-magazine. The semi-structured interviews enabled flexibility as it allows room for the interviewee’s understanding and framing of issues, patterns and behaviour (Bryman, 2016). All participants consented verbally to this research and to the use of their real names in this article. They all preferred refraining from using pseudonyms, as they desire openness and honesty concerning their words and experiences. By choosing to not use pseudonyms, the authors honour the research participants’ collaboration in the process of knowledge production (Weiss and McGranahan, 2021).

To map out the context of inclusion in sports in the Netherlands, we conducted a content analysis to identify common understandings and assumptions in national and municipal sports inclusion policy. Following Bryman (2016), this enabled us to examine significant actors, key words and word combinations, subjects and themes, and core issues related to sports inclusion strategies. In attempting to interpret the various components of these texts, we were able to connect and find patterns in the language of sports inclusion and the practicalities the Dutch government envisions. The data collection involved field notes on conversations, sensations and observations during the runs, verbatim transcriptions of the interviews and notes from the content analysis. All (field) notes and transcripts were documented in Microsoft Word, after which a reflexive thematic analysis was conducted in which core themes were constructed from the data (Clark and Braun, 2019). From the data, codes were formed that were regrouped in themes and further analyzed. This was a reflexive process, meaning that we went back and forth between the data and the themes, giving this approach an iterative nature. All data were generated in Dutch and interview quotes and fieldnotes excerpts are translated into English for this article.

Findings and discussion

Through our analysis, we developed three major themes that represented how inclusion in guided running practices becomes lived and embodied: (1) *enabling an ‘inclusive’ environment*, (2) communication and trust among runners and (3) the experience of two bodies in one running ensemble. Below we show how these three elements contribute to the sense of inclusion in guided running.

Enabling an ‘inclusive’ environment

While Martijn and I run down the bicycle lane, I see that we are approaching an excavator. The machine’s long arm reaches for the pond on the right side of the lane and bars our route. “What is that Marit?,” Martijn asks me in response to the loud sound of the machine. “We’re approaching an excavator and I am looking for a way to pass safely.” The cycle path is paralleled by a

4-meter-wide patch of grass in which a shell path meanders, on the left side. On the right side, there is a verge and a pond. I come to think that I have four options:

1. Stop running. Look around, scan the environment for other passers-by and obstacles. Walk on the grass towards the shell path. This path is not wide enough to walk side by side, so we have to trail. Also, this path meanders so Martijn must zigzag behind me.
2. Stop running. Look around, scan the environment for other passers-by and obstacles. Walk on the grass on the left side, pass the excavator and return to the cycle path. For visually impaired runners, it is often hard to distinguish depth and unevenness in the grass. It also snowed last week, so the grass is soaked and muddy.
3. Slow down. Look around, scan the environment for other passers-by and obstacles. Run on the right side, underneath the arm of the machine. We must duck and be careful as the arm moves abruptly and unpredictably.
4. Slow down. Look around, scan the environment for other passers-by and obstacles. Pass the machine on the left side on the 1-meter stretch of cycle path between the grass and the excavator. We have to trail to fit. Also, we must be careful as we are close to the excavator and the edge of the grass, which presents a hazard to sprain an ankle. (Fieldnotes, Marit)

As a guided running ensemble, Martijn and Marit sense the environment as they move around in it and face multiple situations to which they must attune. During a run, the environment of a particular route or 'series of social places' (Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2015: 65) is made up of both natural and social features that are given meaning by its inhabitants. Rana (2022: 293) similarly argues that 'the ways in which people move and relate to their bodies and environment are intertwined with the social structures that comprise environments and bodies'. Therefore, to explore how a guided running ensemble navigates and senses an environment, we must understand an environment as consisting of both material and social aspects.

The 'environment' of this research consists of the outskirts of cities in the Netherlands which allow ample space for various users. When Marit and Martijn go for a run, they most often run on bicycle paths along green fields of grass and small canals. Bicycle paths are the safest and easiest paths to navigate because, in the Netherlands, they tend to have smooth surfaces and to be wide enough to run side by side. However, other users of bicycle paths, such as cyclists and also occasionally runners, walkers and dog walkers, may present potential hazards. Cyclists are generally not alarmed by runners on their paths, but amicably share the space. This infrastructure enables visually impaired runners to exercise in public space. However, environments may often offer limited accessibility, as described in Marit's fieldnotes.

The excavator proved to be a serious obstacle on an otherwise smooth run. Marit's fieldnotes demonstrate how she had to translate and negotiate the situation for Martijn, and how they had to attune their bodies to changes in the environment. At the time, Marit chose option 4 which is, as Martijn explained later, not the safest way to pass the excavator. The hazard was threefold: the space between the excavator and the grass was too narrow, so they had to run with their bodies slightly twisted sideways to avoid the excavator's swing drive. For Martijn, it was difficult to assess the situation and change his body position accordingly. Also, running this close to the excavator makes the guide runner lose eye contact with the worker sitting in the cabin. Martijn emphasized the importance of the guide allowing the driver the chance to notice and comprehend that someone in their vicinity is visually impaired. Lastly, the excavator makes a loud sound during the manoeuvre which will prevent Martijn from hearing his buddy's

verbal cues. It would be the safest option to choose option 2, stop running and walk on the grass, even though the grass is muddy, uncomfortable to walk on and affects the running pace. For a guide, it is better to decide to stop running and walk, rather than risk potential injuries (RNIB, 2016). The visually impaired runner needs to be able to trust the decisions of the sighted guide runner to make the runs as accessible, smooth and uncomplicated as possible. Reflecting together on the decision-making process during and after such incidents demonstrates how this process is not unilateral.

As this instance shows, Martijn and Marit relate to the environment and the potential hazards differently, which creates different experiences of the environment and its hazards. This follows from both runners having different sense making and meaning making that shape different imaginations, interpretations, feelings and understandings of the running environment (Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2015). These sensory experiences result in them making different choices to avoid potential harm. But because guided running involves reflecting on the decision-making process, navigating the running route becomes a co-production that is both interactive and intersubjective. Put differently, the buddy and the visually impaired runner find themselves in a constant and dynamic negotiation between the various social and physical elements of the environment and both runners' sensory understanding of them, which brings their bodies into contact with 'the fold of the world's expression' (Montani, 2019: 382). In the above moment, Martijn anticipates Marit's visual sensation by commenting that Marit would lose eye contact with the driver in this manoeuvre. Based on the combination of two different ways of kinesthetic knowing (Hammer, 2020), the running ensemble attunes their bodies to the environment to foster safety and comfort during the run.

As runners incorporate a variety of sensory abilities, they provide various forms of navigating environments they inhabit (McNarry et al., 2021). This means that each guided running ensemble has specific 'ways' of navigating through space to overcome disadvantages or potential hazards. Besides running with Martijn, Marit also ran with Ruud, a runner with Usher syndrome that affects both hearing and vision. They once faced a hazardous situation, which needed immediate action, as Marit described in her fieldnotes.

I see a group of young men approaching us. One of them is swinging a leash, but I do not see a dog. I scan the environment for the dog again; dogs off-lead are often playful and can be a hazard for us. The moment I want to say: "Dog off-lead somewhere" the dog leaps out of the bushes and lands in front of us. I was too late to warn Ruud verbally. Instead, I pull the tether firmly, grab Ruud's wrist and make us stop. Prior to our run, because of Ruud's Usher syndrome, we agreed to short verbal cues and a physical warning in hazardous situations.

Even though the running ensemble ran the same paths through the outskirts of the city of Leiden, the 'environments' call for different bodily attunement because the runners have different intersecting bodies-in-space (Allen, 2004). The sensory abilities of Marit, Martijn and Ruud differ: Marit is not visually impaired, Martijn has 5% of his vision, and his hearing is not affected, and Ruud's vision and hearing have deteriorated to the point that his sight is blurry and his hearing is fragmented. As the composition of the running ensemble changes, the ways of navigating environments change. Thus, based on the runners' sensory abilities and preferences – for Martijn through verbal guidance and the tether, and for Ruud through the tether, short verbal cues and grabbing his wrist – the tethered bodies-in-space are a unique, consensual construction between the runners, and the environment that shape specific understandings of the run. Conversely, 'environments' are not unambiguous and singular (Ingold 2000), as it is always felt and dealt with by the runners that have attuned to it.

In guided running practices, the partnership between the visually impaired runner and the guide runner therefore marks a fulcrum in sensing the material and social phenomena in the environment. Various studies have highlighted the importance of relationships with the people inhabiting environments (Barnfield, 2020; D'Eloia and Price, 2018). For people to sense 'inclusion', people learn how to 'socially negotiate in a circle of difference and diversity' (D'Eloia and Price, 2018: 100–101) and how to build reciprocal and intimate relationships. During one of the interviews, runner Roy who is blind, points out how he experiences a sense of 'inclusion' during training sessions organized by Running Blind. Roy enthusiastically explains the importance of humour.

We are a very cheerful, passionate group of runners. We respect each other. We have so much fun together. We also make jokes like: “*Look over there!*” I remember an incident: a buddy and a runner in front of me stopped running, but did not warn us. Of course, I bumped into them. Then they said: “*Can’t you watch out?!*” That is how we treat each other (*Roy laughs*).

Roy highlights the importance of both the material and the social in this Running Blind environment. During training sessions, every runner is familiar with the ways of doing guided running. There is a common understanding of the environment and how to navigate it. In effect, it shapes an 'inclusive' sociality in which the runners feel welcome, understood and appreciated. As 'feeling good' is a crucial aspect of running, the sensory engagement not only with people, but with the (natural) environment is as much part of it (Jackman et al. 2022). Such an environment, as an amalgamation of appropriate material and social phenomena (Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2015; Rana 2022), opens a window for the development of a sense of inclusion among the running dyad itself. For that to grow, communication and feelings of trust within the running team is key, as this excerpt from Marit and Martijn's podcast shows.

Communication and trust among runners

Martijn: On our first run, you had to run and you had to guide me, something you did not know anything about back then. Were you nervous for our first run?

Marit: I was extremely nervous (*both laugh*). I kept on thinking: what happens if you fall or trip over because of me? What are the limits of my responsibility being your buddy? That is something I expressed to you prior to our first run.

Martijn: Yes, we talked about this. It is important for you to know what is important to me. There is a difference between blind runners and me, a partially sighted runner. We need different instructions. To guide me, you must mention bollards, curbs and running directions. You said you did not sleep well before our first run... What was your biggest fear?

Marit: I was anxious that I would cause an accident. And that you would sprain your ankle and were never able to run again (*both laugh*)! But you immediately reassured me. You said: people make mistakes, even though they do not want to.

During a conversation that was recorded for their podcast, Martijn took over the role of interviewer and asked the first author questions that demonstrate the importance of trust, respect and confidence among the runners. Running together creates strong social bonds between partner runners (Allen-Collinson, 2008), and this is especially important in guided running. For an effective running partnership to grow, it is key to have conversations about the mode of communication and the runners' feelings (which is also outlined in the organization's briefs, see Running Blind, 2021). As the above conversation shows, effective running partnerships require discussions on the ways of navigating the environment and the runners' comfort with it.

The communication during runs primarily involves running directions and changes in the environment, but the run is also a moment to socialize. While running together, Martijn and Marit talk about various things like plans for the day, family members, Running Blind news, last night's football match, news items, but also more in-depth topics like trust, fears and concerns. As such, guided running adds a unique social dimension to the practice of running that both runners benefit from.

In essence, the main task of the buddy is to be of assistance to the visually impaired runner. In the conversation above, Martijn calls this type of communication 'instructions' (original in Dutch: 'instructies'). The word 'instruction' might sound like something that is forced, based on unilateral decisions and going in one direction only. But it is also an interactive process that involves subtle give and take. Guiding a visually impaired runner arguably asks for some imposed directives to reassure the safety of the run, but this is always based on negotiations with the visually impaired runner. These negotiations are crucial for bodies-in-space to navigate, as bodies are 'a source of agency that appropriates the social organization of time and space within body techniques' (Allen, 2004: 723). As instructions are shaped on negotiations in guided running, instructions given by the guide do not take away all agency of the other runner. For instance, Martijn explained to Marit how guides sometimes give too detailed information about the environment or give too many directives, which can create hazardous situations. This way Martijn and Marit negotiate the instructions. When choosing the running route, Martijn and his guide are both mindful: are the paths wide enough to run side by side? Can we expect a lot of traffic that would cause hazardous situations? When the paths are too small or there is a lot of traffic that day, the guide might choose to run another route or cancel the run altogether as it jeopardizes the safety of the run. These decisions are always negotiated with the visually impaired runner.

Conveying the instructions, verbally translating the environment for the visually impaired runner and being constantly observant and alert makes guided running more energy-consuming than running individually (Running Blind, 2021). The guide observes the surroundings in front, around and behind, which means paying attention to moving objects like cars, cyclists and mopeds, and also focusing on the quality of the road surfaces, the running directions and the conversations. Consequently, the guide might not experience running as relaxing as running alone or might feel that other benefits of running individually are absent. However, running with others in general has positive impacts on the sports outcomes and practices (Franken et al., 2022; Hall et al., 2022). In guided running, the partnership enables a form of sociability with a peer that is more intimate than with other runners. Prior to the first run, the runners start with an open conversation about the runners' previous experiences, modes of communication and sensory and running abilities. Having an intimate discussion about personal needs and experiences is a way to make connections and feel a sense of belonging. This discussion is a fruitful ground to safely practice guided running (RNIB, 2016). For the visually impaired runner, this conversation is a way to get to know the buddy, their ways of speaking and their 'vibe'. Simultaneously, it is a moment for both runners to feel if there is 'chemistry', as Martijn explained to Marit. 'From the start, I liked the way you are, so that gave me confidence. I did not consider you to be insecure, maybe a bit at the beginning, but you gave me a good feeling. You also told me what *you* needed and that was nice to discuss. I felt we were on the same wavelength'.

Having an open conversation is a way for both runners to get an understanding of and learn from each other's sensed running world. For example, Marit did not feel comfortable using 'commands' during the runs. Before she became a buddy, Marit associated communication in the imperative with impolite, rude or hierarchical modes of speaking. However, communicating in commands is crucial in guided running, as Joost, a runner who is partially sighted, explained during a run. 'Talk in commands! Use short sentences' he said. 'Do not use a sentence with a beginning and an ending! Do not say: 'We are approaching ground that is uneven and a little bit bumpy'; say:

'uneven ground'. When you guide a runner with full sentences, you might be too late to anticipate the situation'.

By doing so, exploring different modes of communication opens a window to understand the world of visually (and sonically in the case of a runner with Usher- syndrome) impaired runners and their individual needs to move safely through an environment. This illuminates how space is constructed by subjective experience, and blind and sighted people differ in their relation to their environment (Allen, 2004; Saerberg, 2010). To develop a sense of trust and comfort in each other's proximity, the runners have to negotiate their (often incongruent) 'styles of perception' (Saerberg, 2010). This progresses over time, as running trainer Terry explains: 'You must learn how to give someone your trust. That comes along with running experiences you have together. This way, a runner learns how to trust you. Running with a buddy for a longer period is the basis for real trust, because you are the eyes during the run'. Or as a blind runner named Roy points out: 'I have to adjust to the verbal translation of the buddy. To me, that is blindly trusting the buddy. Trusting my buddy is pure relaxation. We trust each other'.

Roy's pure relaxation arises from mutual trust. Trusting the other runner, the mutually constructed mode of communication, and successful previous experiences form the ground of a unique running experience shaped by bodily and sensory diversity. Guided running practices show how reciprocal attunement shapes feelings of togetherness, appreciation and 'inclusion' arisen from the co-created experience of running. These feelings become embodied, as the runners' bodies evolve into one sensing ensemble.

Two bodies as one running ensemble

At first, I was very aware of our separate bodies; mine as separate from Martijn's. I was very much focused on my own body in our being together: how I held the tether; how I moved my left arm; how I saw the world and most importantly, how I translated that visual world for him. By focusing on my own running practice and sensations of the environment, I felt like we, as tethered bodies, were mostly attuned to that running environment. During the time of running with Martijn, our sensing, running bodies gradually transformed into one sensing, attuned, running synthesis. Even though we both have our sensory organs, our own perceptions, and our own awareness of the environment and ourselves, our sensations come together in a sensing ensemble. It is like we sense together; understand together. It is not that our sensations and understanding are 'the sum of its parts,' but it is 'a whole'. (Fieldnotes Marit)

The moment Martijn and Marit run holding the tether, their two separate bodies evolve into a newly developed entity in which the two bodies become attuned in the practice of running, which can be understood as a 'socio-technical assemblage' (Middleton, 2010: 576). This attunement is the foundation for an embodied, lived sense of inclusion. To understand how the sense of inclusion is constructed, it is important to understand how sensory understandings, the intimate relationship between the runners and the environment play a role in the development of two runners as a sensory ensemble.

In common western discourses that centralize an 'ideal abled body', humans have five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch), but in recent decades it has been recognized that humans also possess a proprioceptive awareness of their own body (Classen, 1993: 2; Romdenh-Romluc, 2011: 68). Proprioception entails the internal sense of the body and its position in space; our sensation of the body as our body: 'the internal sense we have of the position of our limbs relative to one another, and so on' (Romdenh-Romluc 2011: 68). The proprioceptive systems also provide information on bodily movements. Proprioception goes hand in hand with the sensory organs. You are aware of your moving arm while running and you feel the tether in your hand. These

are not two different sensations; it is one holistic sensation of being tethered to another runner. Based on an ensemble of sensory and proprioceptive perceptions, we come to understand our bodies and ourselves as living beings in the world. Running makes us understand our environment, our bodies and ourselves (Carter, 2018). Even though both runners have their own sensory organs, proprioceptive awareness and embodied knowledge of how to navigate an environment, in the practice of guided running, their different sensations transform into a synthesis that shapes a shared understanding of the run as one running ensemble.

The tether or running stick is critical to the development of this ensemble. As Romdenh-Romluc (2011) explains, a person does not consciously think about the tool or the piece of equipment while using it to carry out a task. Put differently, a person becomes unaware of the instrument as a separate thing since it acts as an extension of the body. In the practice of guided running, the tether or running stick functions as an extension of the body and becomes incorporated and part of the proprioceptive awareness of the body (De Preester and Tsakiris, 2009). The running ensemble uses the tools to sense the environment and thus comes to understand it through the incorporation of these tools. For visually impaired people, tools, like a stick to navigate, shape sensations as they are incorporated (Romdenh-Romluc, 2011, 2016). The sensation of the stick, through touch, translates the sensation of the hand and leads to knowledge about the environment. Likewise, the degree of intensity in pulling the tether attunes the ensemble to its environment. Consequently, the tether shapes the ensemble's understanding of how to navigate through the environment. The tether is therefore not separate from the body or simply a tool; it functions as an inherent part of the ensemble that shares a sensorium.

Social distance rules during the Covid-pandemic revealed the importance of the tether in this shared sensorium. While the Co-Runner stick enabled running in pairs while maintaining 1.5-m distance, it made a different running practice that took time for both runners to get used to. The Co-Runner changed the position of both runners. Running side by side with a 1.5-m stick took up too much space on most sidewalks and cycle paths, which meant the runners now had to run one after another. The use of the Co-runner thus asked for new forms of attunement, new ways of moving and new techniques to gradually incorporate the stick as part of the ensemble. As a runner named Roy explains, 'I started to experiment with the Co-Runner. The first time, I ran in front and my buddy had to guide me from behind. At some point, we swapped positions and we found that was easier! For me, it is easier to maneuver with the Co-Runner, but it is difficult to attune the arm movements with the buddy'.

In other words, Roy envisioned attuning the running ensemble to new social distancing regulations through the Co-Runner. It takes time to incorporate a tool and to feel comfortable with it. Some runners experienced struggles with the Co-Runner, as explained by a running trainer named Louis:

The runners ran with the Co-runner, but that was a fiasco. It was very unnatural, and the stick was too fragile. The runners did not feel safe. Then both trainers and runners decided: we will never do this again. After the lockdown, the runners were allowed to run with the tether again and all runners went back to using the tether. That is because runners prefer close contact with their buddy, and it is easier to communicate.

The runner and guide experience their 'enssembled' bodies through the proprioceptive awareness of the two attached bodies as one holistic sensing and sense-making being. The 'synchrony' of running together (Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2017) is crucial in a successful running ensemble. The specific form of 'togetherness' in visually impaired guided running, as Hall, Allen-Collinson and Jackson (2022) phrased it, is easier to obtain with a tether than a stick. It is through their

close sensing that the ensemble creates proprioceptive understandings of themselves as one unit with an enlarged and altered sense of the surrounding environment. This sensibility evolves from the attunement to the environment and a meaningful, intimate relationship developed between the runners. Consequently, this experience of two bodies in one ensemble with a shared sensorium gives rise to a sense of inclusion that is embodied and lived through the running experiences.

Conclusion

Based on immersive, sensory ethnography with visually impaired runners, buddies and trainers, we have shown how the sense of inclusion evolves from the practice of guided running. The initiative of Running Blind offers an adaptive practice within existing 'regular' sport associations, which provides an extraordinary form of shared sport participation. The practice is adapted to the needs of the visually impaired runner, in a way that acknowledges the characteristics of both individual beings. Guided running is a recreational practice for both runners in which movement, outdoor recreation and valuable sociability are forged and sustained.

This research corresponds with existing scholarship on disability and sports that centres the experiences of (recreational) athletes in integrative and adaptive sports (Clair, 2011; D'Eloia and Price, 2018; Hammond et al., 2022; Kiuppis, 2018). It builds upon existing scholarship on the experiences of visually impaired athletes that suggest that guided running creates positive feelings and increases physical activity among visually impaired runners (Hall et al., 2022; Jaarsma et al., 2014), and aligns with research on organized runs for visually impaired runners and their guides as part of inclusive strategies (Fullagar et al., 2020). In addition to these studies, our research shows how visually impaired runners and their guides construct a sense of inclusion from the empathic engagement with the social and material environment and the meaningful, intimate human relationship. As such, the two tethered running bodies become one running ensemble that actively shape and sense inclusion.

Our data reveals the importance of honest and open communication, navigating the environment together, building mutual trust, and an appreciation of differences as key aspects in the development of a sense of inclusion in guided running. We have pitched this idea of inclusion as lived, felt, sensed and shifting through a running partnership against the idea of inclusion as integrating disabled sports practitioners in 'regular' sports clubs. We argued that the language of inclusion does not explicitly evoke a commitment to action or to challenge inequalities. Nor does it explicitly challenge power relations and the political landscape of who gets to decide who 'is to be included' and whether someone or something is 'inclusive' (Hammond et al., 2022; Hassanein, 2015). By doing so, our study offers insight into the lived experience of inclusion which is different than how sports inclusion is typically constructed and framed.

This research is a case study of one initiative, in one sport, in one country, but it offers insight into the sense of inclusion that reaches beyond the world of guided running. It teaches us that sports inclusion policies and practices aiming at integrating disabled sports participants in mainstream, 'ableist' sports contexts (Hammond et al., 2022; Peers et al., 2020), do not necessarily contribute to a space in which people learn how to 'socially negotiate in a circle of difference and diversity' (D'Eloia and Price, 2018: 100–101), and how to build reciprocal and intimate relationships. Guided running shows how communication, reciprocity and intimate sharing are crucial to the development of feelings of belonging, perceptions of caring, closeness and warmth in sports.

By focusing on a practice within a scheme organized by a sports club or organization, we can conclude that we should drift from the premise that 'inclusion' is one size fits all. Instead, we have to highlight and cherish the fact that inclusion is contextual, situational and highly dependent on the negotiations with the social and material environment, and the people inhabiting it. For that reason,

we highlight the importance of documenting, analyzing and sharing experiences of the sense of inclusion in particular. If sports institutions want to tackle exclusionary practices and welcome a wider array of athletes, we advocate for an embodied understanding of participation which should open a way to celebrate diverse bodies and lived senses of inclusion.


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Notes

1. In the UK, for example, national governing bodies develop training courses, races and workshops for sighted and visually impaired runners to improve running participation among visually impaired people (British Blind Sport, 2022).
2. The English word ‘buddy’ is used in the Dutch language in other forms of voluntary work, such as in projects centring language, integration, debt counselling and loneliness.
3. The Netherlands, like many other countries, experienced several Covid19-lockdowns, both during and after the fieldwork period. Because many sports clubs and fitness gyms were closed during the lockdowns, more people began to participate in outdoor sports such as running (Pulles et al., 2022). The national government encouraged citizens to do so while maintaining a 1.5-m social distance with not more than two persons. Visually impaired people were allowed to have a guide within 1.5 m, which made guided running with a tether still possible.
4. In the podcast, Martijn takes the role of interviewer and asks Marit questions about their running practices, having each other as ‘running buddies’, the feelings of ‘inclusion’ and Martijn’s visual impairment. The podcast is in Dutch and is available via Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/user-860053289/podcast-buddys>

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