



Mixed Ability Sport:  
Building a National Model for Inclusive Sport  
**Sport Innovation Grant Report**  
**December 21, 2021**



## Executive summary

Most Canadians with disabilities are not sufficiently physically active. Additionally, Canadians with disabilities have indicated that they have an unmet need for recreation and leisure programming. As we move towards recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an opportunity to build more inclusive sport communities in Canada. The Mixed Ability Sport (MAS) model supports quality participation for persons with and without disabilities and is a promising avenue for improving engagement in physical activity and recreation pursuits while promoting additional positive outcomes for individuals of all abilities.

In January 2020, Abilities Centre was given the exclusive rights to bring MAS to the Canadian context by International Mixed Ability Sport (IMAS). In the first phase of this pilot project, training modules and resources were developed to create a foundation to support Mixed Ability Sport program implementation. Three rugby clubs were selected to pilot a season of Mixed Ability Rugby (MAR). Coaches from the clubs participated in the first MAS Coach course in Canada and became certified MAS coaches. Once certified, the clubs implemented a Mixed Ability Flag Rugby program throughout the 2021 summer season. The season culminated with 57 athletes (aged 18-67) from the 3 clubs participating in the All-In Rugby Cup in September. Impact collected throughout the season and at the event identified that athletes experienced quality participation and MAR created more sport opportunities, engaged athletes in meaningful competition, and allowed them to increase their physical activity, and improved organizations' capacity to confidently deliver inclusive sport.

This pilot season generated valuable learnings for progressing MAS in Canada and recommendations for other organizations planning to deliver similar programming. Organizations should identify the needs of their community, anchor their work with clear objectives, partner with organizations whose vision they align with, and educate all individuals involved on relevant concepts.



## **Background (why did you do this?)**

We (CDPP) partners that focused on the experiences of Canadians with disabilities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic longitudinally confirmed de Boer and colleague's (2021) inference.

The most recent COVID-19 Disability Survey report includes data up to September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021. In this report, only 32% of respondents identified that they met the World Health Organization's guideline of 150 minutes of weekly physical activity. However, 44% of respondents identified that they do not engage in any moderate to vigorous physical activity at all. Further, when evaluating the needs of Canadians with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, 66% of the respondents identified a need for recreation and leisure programs. For those respondents, 69% reported this need was met 'not at all' or 'very little'. There is a clear need for sport programming that eliminates barriers to participation and increases opportunities for Canadians with disabilities to engage in recreation and leisure activities that promote physical activity.

Within the current landscape, there exists a unique opportunity to "build back better" in communities using the MAS model. The MAS model creates opportunities for all members of the community to participate in mainstream sport programs introducing new members and therefore new revenue streams for clubs who have been negatively impacted, financially, by the pandemic. The model also allows all members of the community to come together, connect socially, and engage in physical activity.

Prior to this pilot, MAR was formally introduced to Ontario Rugby clubs in January 2020. The introduction occurred through the first Mixed Ability Rugby Try Day hosted in partnership with Rugby Ontario, Oshawa Vikings Rugby Club, and Abilities Centre. The Try Day led to a 10-week indoor flag rugby program hosted weekly through the Oshawa Vikings. The initial indoor program enabled stakeholders to consolidate learnings into best practices to share with other rugby clubs looking to join the movement and offer MAR. This initial indoor program set the stage to increase the scope of MAR by adding more clubs and have those clubs get off to successful starts with their first MAS experiences.

The pilot season supported by this grant saw three additional Rugby clubs begin delivering MAR programming. These programs are located across southern Ontario (London, Burlington, and Toronto). The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions on gathering and delivery of sport and recreation opportunities created setbacks in the project timeline. Each club received MAS Coach Certifications and programming was launched in June of 2021. The Mixed



Ability Flag Rugby program ran through the summer months of 2021 and culminated with the All-In Rugby Cup in September 2021.

## **Sample population (who were you trying to help?)**

The target population for this pilot was adults (aged 21-55) with and without developmental, physical, or intellectual disabilities. With current regulations regarding sport registration and insurance, all individuals participating in Rugby Ontario events were required to be a registered member of a club. Therefore, programming was advertised to club members to increase opportunities for sport participation for all, especially those who may be marginalized or excluded in traditional sport delivery models.

All individuals engaging in MAR programming were registered with Rugby Ontario, the governing provincial sport organization. 82 total athletes with and without disabilities were registered to participate in the 12-week outdoor season, 57 of whom were members of the 3 clubs in this pilot. Athletes' ages ranged from 18 to 67. The mean and median age of pilot participants was 31 years. 2 athletes were 19 and under, 23 athletes were between 20 and 29 years of age, 27 athletes were between the ages of 30 and 39, and 5 were 40 or older.

The official language in Ontario is English, therefore that is the primary language of communication among our partner organizations for this project and the participating rugby clubs. Due to the requirement for athletes to be members of a club to take part in MAR programming, the bulk of communication was delivered through clubs. Each of the participating clubs uses English to communicate with their members. Information materials for the season and tournament included in this pilot were therefore created and delivered in English to accommodate this existing practice. Materials from Abilities Centre that promoting programming for the general public, such as the promotional materials for the Try-It days, were shared in both English and French. Samples of these items are included in Appendix A



## Methodology (what did you try?)

The pilot project was first initiated in January 2020 with a formal partnership being signed between the global leaders, International Mixed Ability Sport (IMAS) and Abilities Centre. This partnership awarded Abilities Centre the exclusive rights to grow Mixed Ability Sport across Canada and adapt the model to align within the Canadian context. IMAS has conducted years of research to support the creation of an inclusive model of sport, specifically a model that has proven to increase quality participation for athletes with disabilities their non-disabled peers. The partnership with IMAS transferred their years of knowledge from the UK to Abilities Centre, and those years of research and understanding were then applied to the Canadian context. With the funding from year 1 and through quarter 3 of the 2020 fiscal year, Abilities Centre was able to build the foundation needed to launch this innovative program, including creating training materials and building necessary partnerships. Prior to the pilot season supported by this grant, Abilities Centre introduced MAR programming in partnership with the Oshawa Vikings Rugby Club. The Club participated in a series of Try-It events followed by a 10-week indoor non-contact rugby program that was cut 2 weeks short due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Club continued to offer a MAR team in the fall of 2020, when provincial restrictions were first lifted, maintaining the team as a part of the Club's main program offerings. The Vikings also re-introduced the MAR team in the spring of 2021 when Rugby Ontario announced the safe return of rugby programming.

For this pilot project, specific Rugby clubs within Ontario were identified based on their interest in facilitating MAR programming. Rugby Ontario conducted survey of interest with Ontario Rugby Clubs, and both Muddy York RFC and London St. Georges RFC indicated that they had 3 or more club coaches or administrative staff interested in supporting the program. These individuals, or champions, are who help to make new programming successful and lead MAS initiatives in their clubs. The Burlington Centaurs RFC did not complete this initial survey of interest, but a champion for the club was identified to lead the MAS initiative and they were included in the pilot. In collaboration with Rugby Ontario, Abilities Centre designed and delivered a series of training seminars, shared educational resources, and developed a program implementation framework. With the goal in mind of increasing opportunities to meaningful engage in sport for individuals of all abilities, Abilities Centre's Inclusion in Sport team has been a part of co-developing and co-designing all resources and trainings for MAS initiatives since program development began in Canada. The individuals on the team are all Experts by Experience and provide insight into exclusionary practices in sport and how they can be overcome to build truly inclusive culture in sport environments. The resources and training seminars created in collaboration



between Abilities Centre, Rugby Ontario, and the Inclusion in Sport team were used to provide training on the MAS Model to coaches who were part of this pilot project and orient them to MAR prior to the season. This training was given to members from three selected clubs. Each of the clubs recruited interested members of their community to participate in their club's MAR program and delivered a 12-week outdoor Mixed Ability Flag Rugby season beginning in June 2021. Each of the clubs then closed the outdoor season by participating together and competing against each other at the first even Canadian Mixed Ability Rugby tournament, the All-In Rugby Cup, which took place in September of 2021. The Oshawa Vikings also continued their programming with a 12-week summer program and participated in the All-In Rugby Cup alongside the other clubs included in this pilot project.

The implementation of the pilot program was monitored by Abilities Centre's MAS Canada staff through debrief exchanges with coaches, presidents, and athletes of the participating clubs. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured focus groups and thematic analysis was conducted to disseminate findings. Quality participation throughout the outdoor season was measured using the Measure of Experiential Aspects of Participation (MeEAP) from the CDPP, a measure designed in line with their Quality Participation Blueprint (Caron et al., 2019). The MeEAP has 12 items rated on a 7-point scale from Strongly disagree to strongly agree. There are two items for each of 6 experiential aspects of participation: autonomy, belongingness, challenge, engagement, mastery, and meaning. The concepts of inclusion and quality participation are both subjective and individually determined by each participant. Therefore, further measurement of the success of the pilot project was done qualitatively through the participant's sharing of their experiences. Athlete demographic information was also collected through the Abilities Centre's partnership with Rugby Ontario, through their registration process.

A limiting factor in the design of the pilot was the communication strategies that were used to recruit athletes. It required buy-in from both coaches and athletes to successfully implement MAR programming through clubs. Communication primarily came through clubs rather than directly to potential athletes. While clubs demonstrated interest ahead of the pilot and coaches were certified in MAS, club members and other potential athletes did not have direct access to information about MAR ahead of time if they were not existing members of Abilities Centre's community. Therefore, the number of athletes that participated in the pilot MAR season may have been negatively impacted. Additionally, due to the setbacks in timing that were caused by COVID-19-related restrictions on gathering, Abilities Centre was not able to offer Try-It days for the 3 pilot clubs before MAR programming was implemented. This hindered



opportunities to actively educate community members on what Mixed Ability Sport was and negatively impacted the recruitment process. Virtual education sessions were attempted, as well as a limited number of events that were permissible. Policy states that participants must be registered members of clubs with Rugby Ontario to be covered under insurance policy for activities. Therefore, new participants who have not registered are not able to take part in Rugby Ontario sanctioned events, limiting their ability to try the new activity.

The primary objective of this pilot was to create of more opportunities for persons with and without disabilities to be introduced to sport and participate in meaningful competition. This pilot was also expected to increase physical activity participation among the athletes involved and build the confidence and competence of organizations to develop inclusive programming that was high quality. The MAS model is designed for participation by anyone that is interested in engaging in sport. This model has been shown to foster quality participation in persons with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers.

## **Observations (what did you see?)**

The implementation of the pilot program highlighted that rugby, and its culture, aligns well with the MAS philosophy. This alignment was further observed when speaking to the participating coaches and athletes. Within rugby clubs there is large amount of acceptance and few barriers that prevent athletes from playing the sport. This environment of acceptance and inclusion may have contributed to the success of this pilot. Some mainstream sports are traditionally exclusive and require significant shift in attitudes and practices to adopt a MAS model and embed the philosophy into an existing club. While adjustments were made throughout this pilot, the shift in thinking may have been lesser in the rugby context. It is important to recognize that the success of this pilot and the positive outcomes that were seen may be attributed in part to the sport culture of rugby. As MAS grows and the philosophy takes root in other sport contexts, unique needs assessments will be needed to understand the exclusive practices that exist in that space and must be dismantled for successful implementation.

With the timeline setbacks and uncertainty that arose due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions on gatherings, barriers were encountered with the monitoring of results. The initial plan for evaluation involved forming connections directly with athletes to establish baseline measures and monitor changes over their time participating. Due to the changing timelines, it was not feasible to connect with the participating athletes ahead of participation in MAR activities, so establishing baseline scores was not possible. To effectively monitor results with the absence of baseline scores, retrospective feedback was gathered qualitatively



through survey questions and focus groups and the MeEAP from CDPD was used for athletes to report on the quality of their participation across the 6 experiential elements (Caron et al., 2019).

Additionally, many athletes did not provide an email address nor consent for contact when they registered for the All-In Rugby Cup; therefore, they could not be sent the survey. Also, due to the retrospective nature of the evaluation, the end of season survey was sent to participating athletes after they had finished engaging with their programs and therefore were not as responsive as anticipated. These two factors contributed to a relatively low response rate on the post-season feedback survey. A summary of the MeEAP results is included in the following section, as well as a summary of key themes gathered through the qualitative data collection strategies.

## **Actual results/findings/analysis (what did you learn?)**

The MeEAP was used to understand athletes' experiences of quality participation with MAR. A summary of responses can be found in Table 1. More than 90% of respondents indicated that they fully experienced each of the experiential elements through the MAR season, and 100% of survey respondents experienced belongingness. More than 50% of respondents experienced each of autonomy, belongingness, and meaning to the fullest extent (a score of 7/7).

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups and thematic analysis was conducted to disseminate findings. Four focus groups were completed, with a total of 22 participants. Two raters reviewed and coded the transcripts until agreement on the coding scheme was met. From our findings, pilot participants' experiences can be grouped into four key themes: creation of sport opportunities, meaningful competition, increased physical activity participation, and improved confidence and competence in organizational delivery of MAS.

### ***Creation of opportunities for people with and without disabilities to be introduced to sport***

Multiple athletes identified that they were participating in MAR specifically because within this model they were not required to have previous sport experience. Typically, in sport, few clubs accept adult members without prior sport history because it requires more resources to train a player. The MAS Model can accommodate this barrier to participation which made MAR more accessible. MAR was also used as a post-rehabilitation sport to integrate some physical activity back into the lives of individuals who had been injured. MAR has:





*"become a gateway where if you're looking for community, if you're looking to learn a sport, if you're learning to learn specifically rugby, this program can take you where you are at and accelerate you into the community wherever you can play in a competitive way, and I think that's what's really compelling, is that it remains competitive" (Club president and coach).*

MAR is not only a great introductory sport for those looking to begin participating but it also meets the needs of athletes looking to return to sport or develop their skills and competence.

### ***MAR created opportunities for people with and without disabilities to engage in meaningful competition***

It was evident that many participants resonated with the idea that athletes were able to be athletes and were treated as such, regardless of skill level or ability. Importantly, MAR did not hinder the competitive nature of sport, thus participants felt like they had real, meaningful competition through teamwork, goal setting and mastery.

Further, the MAS Model had several benefits that contributed to experiences of meaningful competition. One of these benefits included creating social inclusion through fostering a sense of belonging and a positive inclusive environment. MAR was described as a warm and inviting sport, where participation could occur between genders, ages, and ability levels, all of which lent to the sport's described inclusiveness. MAR was also identified as having a unique culture where team camaraderie was at the sport's core. Further, MAR was discussed as going past borders and boundaries and that members could be accepted in rugby clubs across the globe.

*"You could go call up your local Rugby Club and say, I'm here. I want I'm from Canada and I'm from this Rugby Club and I just want to check out your rugby club and they'll go 'okay, come on over. Do you need a place to stay?'"  
- (Athlete)*

It was evident from our findings that players were not the only stakeholders who gained from participating in MAR. This positive and accepting culture was also experienced by officials, club presidents, organizers, and spectators who experienced tangible joy witnessing and being a part of the first ever MAR tournament in Canada.

The MAS Model also fostered confidence in oneself, motivation to participate, and health rivalry amongst players. Specifically, participants were able to translate practice to competition, which contributed to feelings of competence on



the field.

Interestingly, athletes played for intrinsic reasons. Rather than solely playing to win, athletes played to have the opportunity to compete against other teams and were happy to pursue participation in sport in an inclusive and accessible environment. In fact, officials reported not hearing complaining or griping typically noticed in sport settings.

### ***Increase in overall participation in physical activity by participants***

MAR provided participants with an opportunity to be physically active rather than sedentary. Participants expressed excitement and intrigue with this new model of sport participation. Importantly, the low barrier entry into MAR resulted in a significant increase in sport participation. This increase in participation is quite impactful given Canadians with disabilities identified rates of low physical activity and sport participation. As evidenced by the president of Muddy York RFC,

*"it trickled itself into more than just being an abilities program, but a way of life for training at the club. And we saw revolutionary numbers. The recruitment went from, we had a like, for the two years that I was there, we had maybe 10 members who couldn't field our own team to having upwards of 70 members."*

Ultimately, the MAS model allowed for opportunity of a new demographic of athletes to be involved in sport, which included both people with disabilities and the LGBTQ+ community. This rise in participation has also started to result in a cultural shift in some of the rugby sport club's perceptions of athletics.

### ***Improved confidence and competence of local organizations to deliver quality, inclusive programming***

Significant planning and organization allowed the Mixed Ability Rugby tournament to run smoothly for all stakeholders involved and contributed to positive experiences on the day of the tournament. The organization was possible due to commitment from all partners and other members of the community. The participating clubs as well as Abilities Centre's 'Inclusion in Sport' team were involved in decision-making to ensure the best possible experience for all, and members of the sport governing body provided logistical support. By calling on the strengths of each of the partners committed to this initiative, the tournament exemplified the Mixed Ability Sport philosophy and created quality participation for all members of the community that were involved in the day.

Many of the club level benefits come from the adopting the MAS Model across



as aspects of the club. Coaches from each participating club completed the MAS Coaching Certification with Abilities Centre prior to the pilot's launch. By embedding the MAS Model throughout the club, it shifted from having Mixed Ability athletes, coaches, and program to all athletes, coaches, and programs being Mixed Ability. This shift helped break down some of the walls between programs and allowed all athletes within the club to be supported in finding the program they would be most successful in.

By instituting the MAS Model throughout their clubs, organizations were able to capitalize on existing expertise among their members and coaches. Those experts were given new avenues for sharing knowledge and mentoring their peers within programming. These avenues contributed to stronger sense of community through mentorship and role model relationships. By taking this approach within the clubs and throughout the season, grouping and labeling of players is not necessary or used, eliminating practices that contribute to instances of tokenism.

## **External recommendations (what do you suggest?)**

The pilot MAR season generated many learnings both from its implementation and from the specific context for the COVID-19 pandemic. We have some recommendations for organizations designing and delivering sport programming that is inclusive for individuals of all abilities and is respectful of all participants' intersectional identities to help them set up a successful experience:

- Begin the planning stages by connecting with organizations or other stakeholders within the sector you wish to target with your programming. The scope of program delivery can then be aligned with the needs of the specific community and meaningfully fill gaps without creating temporary or tokenistic fixes.
- Create flexibility within timelines and plans. Begin with a plan of what the core objectives are and what the intended outcomes should be. This allows for the specific details of the implementation to be changed in response to circumstances, with the core objectives still being achieved.
- When forming partnerships to support programming, begin with partner organizations whose mission aligns with your own organization, and vice versa. Further, keep strong lines of communication with all partners to capitalize on the strengths of all collaborators.
- Challenging traditional sport models and beliefs requires changing some perceptions and outlining boundaries that support complete participation for



all involved. To effectively support those initiatives, existing participants of clubs that have not yet adopted the Model being introduced need to be introduced to key concepts that are aligned with your program's vision. Community leaders, including administrative staff and coaches or facilitators, should undergo training around these core concepts to build the capacity for delivering programming with your vision. Expectations for individuals of all abilities to be able to determine their own participation limits should be set as well.

- We also recognize that the success of this pilot was in part attributed to the pre-existing sport culture of rugby. Future organizations must do a needs assessment to identify barriers that may hinder sport participation both to participants and given the historically exclusive nature of sport settings.
- Programs should prioritize incorporating an evaluation component to gain participant feedback as well as stakeholder feedback to monitor achievement of intended outcomes and aid in continuous development.

## **How will the organization proceed (what will you do now?)**

As MAS, specifically Mixed Ability Rugby, continues to grow across the country, a fulsome strategic plan needs to be developed to ensure the sustainability of education, implementation, and alignment with the MAS guiding principles. Areas for future consideration and discussion include:

- As addressed in the recommendations, leaders in the delivery of programming should undergo training in key concepts of the model. To support growth, rugby match officials will be included in training and education around MAS Model.
- On-going professional development opportunities for coaches that consider the diverse and intersecting identities of the community and rugby club members that ensure a continued commitment to creating a safe and welcoming environment for all
- Collaboration between Abilities Centre, Rugby Canada and the respective Provincial and Territorial Rugby organizations to co-deliver components of the MAS certification ensuring that the technical and tactical sport-specific elements of training are being delivered by experts in the sport
- A formal partnership has been established between Abilities Centre and Rugby Ontario to create alignment in the delivery of MAR and a dedicated strategy for growth through 2022 and beyond.



- A long-term plan for involvement in future International Mixed Ability Rugby Tournaments which creates equitable access for any team looking to represent Canada in international events, ideally looking at a national event for any (or all) Mixed Ability Rugby teams (following the MAS guiding principles) interested in participating.

With the upcoming International Mixed Ability Rugby Tournament (IMART) scheduled for June 5-12 in Cork, Ireland, we have a unique opportunity to enter a team into the competition. This opportunity would mark the first time that Canada has participated in such an event, creating opportunities to learn about the game and share best practices with partners from around the world.

To successfully prepare a Canadian Team for competition, a strategy to introduce the next phase of program development, the introduction to full contact rugby, will need to be developed. Multiple indicators will be assessed to ensure readiness to proceed:

- Interest and support from the existing MAR club
- Interest from individuals with disabilities to participate in full contact rugby
- Access to training spaces for individuals to practice as a team and to introduce tackle skills safely and effectively.
- The opportunity for organized scrimmages/games to introduce game play, ensuring all athletes are comfortable with the rules, regulations and flow of the game prior to travelling for competition.

Next steps will involve working alongside a rugby club's administration, coaches and athletes to pilot the introduction of contact rugby in a similar fashion to the introduction of the flag game. With that, a collaborative effort lead by Rugby Canada and Rugby Ontario will introduce contact training to be shared with future MAR coaches with feedback from Abilities Centre and the piloting club that speak to inclusive practices and practical application that is feasible from a grassroots perspective. The pilot will be held in Winter of 2022 to prepare the team for competition in Ireland. Once completed, the learnings from the pilot will be consolidated and disseminated amongst MAR clubs to share best practices in introducing full contact rugby within the MAR environment.

The impact of this pilot has also been recognized across multiple sports and with organizations outside of the province. Based on the learnings from this pilot project, the MAS Canada team has initiated conversations with 4 new Provincial and National Sport Organizations clubs (Floor Curl/Curling Canada, Ringette Canada, Field Hockey Ontario, and Pickleball Ontario) that are looking to follow in



Rugby Ontario's footsteps in 2022 with a pilot season with 4 to 6. In addition, 4 local sports clubs (artistic swim, archery, boxing, and cheer) have already adopted the MAS Model into their operations.

## **Conclusions (what do you think?)**

Based on the results of this pilot we can confidently say that the MAS Model was able to be successfully implemented in practice and led to a cascade of benefits experienced by athletes. These benefits include a significant increase in sport participation, a sense of belonging and acceptance, and opportunity to engage in meaningful competition. The Mixed Ability Model led to a new demographic being able to experience the benefits of sport physically, mentally, and psychosocially. Importantly, the competitiveness of sport (Mixed Ability Rugby) was not lost with this model.

Given the success of this model and the rapidly growing interest of MAS, sport clubs should consider receiving MAS training at all levels- from club presidents to coaches and officials to ensure effective knowledge translation and dissemination of the MAS Model. Given the pre-existing inclusive culture of rugby, rugby was an excellent sport to pilot and future clubs should learn from the success mixed ability sport has had with rugby.

Most important, initial capacity building of a club through MAS certifications and the commitment to adopting the model throughout practice yields continuous benefits over many seasons directly for the athletes and for the club. In sum, MAS helps organizations to meet the unmet needs identified from the COVID-19 Disability Survey report in sport and recreation. This pilot is promising in fostering quality of life and health and wellbeing in participants and as mixed ability sport continues to evolve and grow, we expect these benefits to continue.

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## **Appendices (visuals, tables, charts, and other data collected)**

*Appendix A: Promotional material samples*

*Appendix B: Table 1*



*Summary of MAR athlete MeEAP responses (N=16)*

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Mode</b>
<b>Autonomy</b>	6.3	6.5	7
<b>Belongingness</b>	6.4	6.5	7
<b>Challenge</b>	6.0	6.0	7
<b>Engaging</b>	6.1	6.0	7
<b>Mastery</b>	6.1	6	6
<b>Meaning</b>	6.4	7	7

Note: Mean is the sum of all responses divided by the number of total responses, median is the middle value in a list ordered from smallest to largest, and mode is the most frequently appearing value.