

How FMs can help make sport accessible to all

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Emma Persey, MD at [The Stair Climbing Company](#) offers her top tips for FMs looking to increase accessibility for wheelchair users to stadia and sports centres.

It's that time of year when major sports fixtures dominate the world stage - from the thrill of the recent Women's FIFA World Cup to the upcoming rugby World Cup which kicks off in Paris on 8th September.

These events attract hundreds of thousands of spectators, but for fans with mobility issues and physical disabilities, it can be difficult to enjoy them to the full.

Here are my recommendations for FMs looking to improve the visitor experience for all.

1. More than a box-ticking exercise

From car parking to seating, bathrooms to concession stands, the access requirements for someone in a wheelchair are quite different to those of an able-bodied athlete or spectator.

From door widths to steps, surfacing to seating access, there can be a huge number of barriers to wheelchair users. [Sport England](#) offers a free range of resources and advice to increase accessibility to all kinds of sports facilities, including an outline audit template to help get you started.

While statutory requirements and [Building Regulations](#) will give some guidance as to, eg, the number of wheelchair user places that should be available depending on the size of a venue, there are many other considerations to take into account and consultation with user groups can be a great way to understand how best to meet these at each individual venue.

- Stairs don't have to be a barrier to wheelchair access

Many sporting venues rely on tiered seating to give spectators the best view of the action, so of course there are going to be stairs to navigate. While new-build stadia can be designed from the outset for maximum accessibility with step-free access to all areas and disabled lifts, that isn't always feasible in older legacy buildings and temporary stands.

That's where our Stair Climber comes into its own, improving accessibility for all. These devices are battery-powered and fully mobile, that can climb up or down stairs either with a seat or as a wheelchair carrier. It's also easily portable making it ideal for use across venues to assist guests with mobility issues of various kinds.

Rugby in particular attracts a large proportion of wheelchair users, many of whom are veterans of the game whose resulting injuries have taken a toll on their bodies. I first met representatives from the RFU at a trade show at the NEC where they explained some of the challenges that they face in trying to offer the same experience to all guests.

At Twickenham, which was originally built in 1909, despite a number of more recent redevelopments, the Level 2 bars that are frequently used for events and corporate hospitality continue to have limited access via external stairs.

After several site visits and a detailed audit, we provided a number of [Stair Climbers](#). They can be used wherever they are required around the stadium but have made a noticeable difference to those attending events at the Level 2 bars and have been particularly welcomed by the RFU Injured Players Foundation.

- Changing Places can change lives

Since 2005, [Changing Places](#) have campaigned for accessible toilets to be installed in all key public spaces to provide access to their local community to all. These facilities include a hoist, an adjustable changing bench and a privacy screen so that both users and their carers have enough space.

Campaign group [Rise For Sport](#) wants to see a Changing Places toilet in every sporting venue in the UK by 2030, so that disabled fans and athletes can enjoy sports as much as their able-bodied counterparts.

Many of these spaces can be part- or wholly-funded by grants so whether you are managing a small community sports club or an arena, cost doesn't have to be a barrier.

- Clear signage and wayfinding

National charity [Activity Alliance](#) is the leading voice for disabled people in sport and activity. They have created a guide to support sports clubs in improving physical access for disabled people.

An important consideration for FMs is in the use of signage. The key principle is that it should be clear and concise, to help everyone to find their way easily and independently. This applies as much to temporary as permanent signage. For wheelchair users, consideration for the height that signs are positioned at is key.

For broader accessibility, choice of typeface, size of text, colourway and the inclusion of pictures and symbols can all improve readability. Colour-coding can be helpful in larger venues or to mark out specific zones, while the addition of tactile or embossed text can also benefit those with visual impairments.

- Don't forget the players

Lastly, it's not just spectators who may have accessibility needs – players and users of the facilities can also be made far more welcome with the inclusion of additional features.

Wider spacing within changing rooms, lower-level showers with seating and lowered counter tops and benches are some of the small adjustments that can make a world of difference.

The Stair Climbing Company also provides Stair Climbers to care homes, hotels, hospitals, visitor attractions and individuals. We offer them for hire as well as purchase, ideal for time-limited events and temporary venues. Orders can often be fulfilled in as little as 24 hours, with full training given on delivery. As well as being less intrusive and disruptive than the installation of a lift, it is also significantly more cost effective.

To find out more, visit thestairclimbingcompany.com