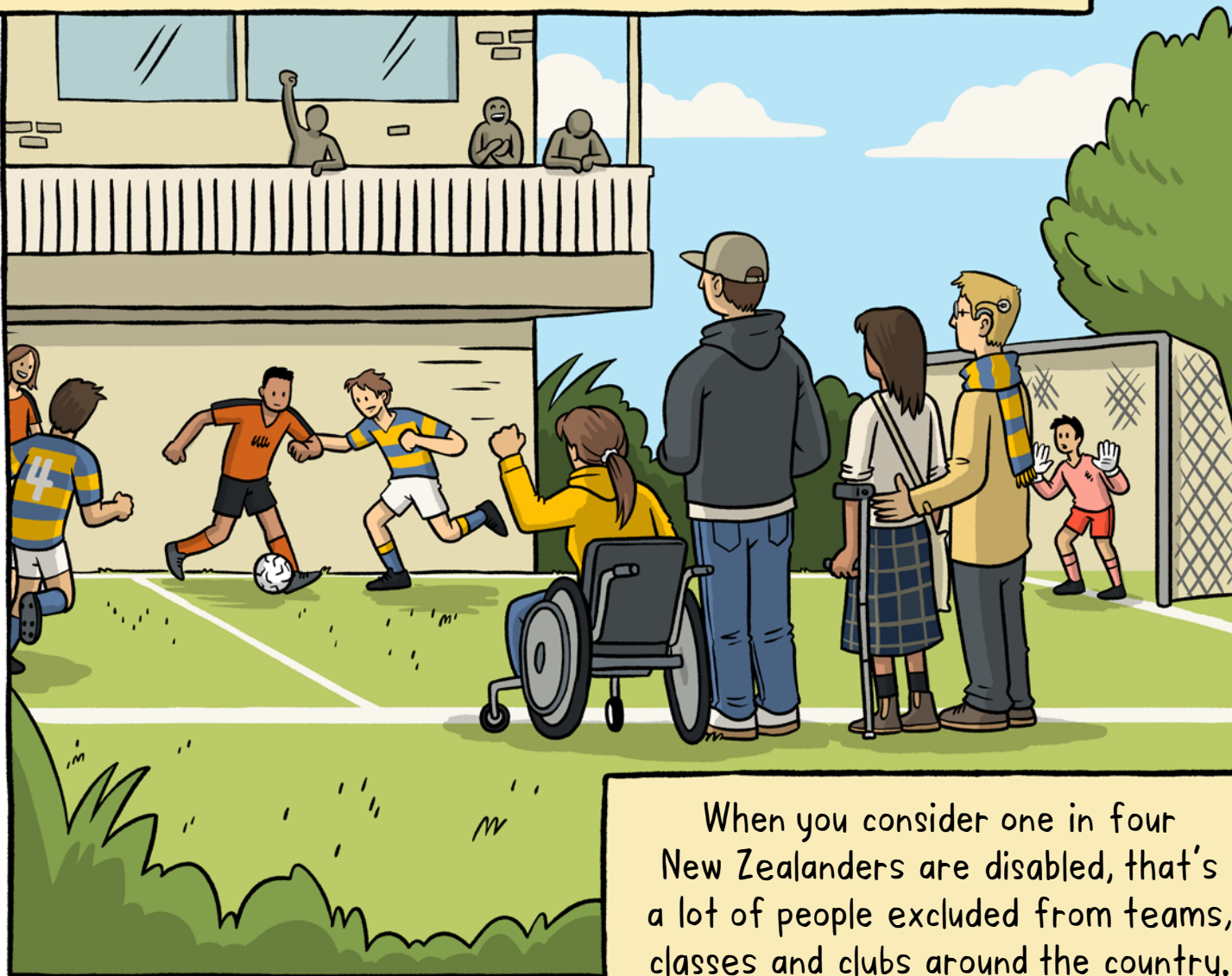


# RED CARDS FOR ABLEISM



What's stopping participation in sport and recreation for disabled people when inclusion is a fundamental human right?

New Zealanders love sport. We love to watch, we love to play. Among non-disabled people, 63% have played a team sport, and 65% participated in other physical recreation activities. But for disabled New Zealanders those numbers drop to 47% and 33%.



When you consider one in four New Zealanders are disabled, that's a lot of people excluded from teams, classes and clubs around the country.

So, what can we do? There are disability-specific sport and recreation opportunities. But what if someone wants to participate in mainstream sport or active recreation? How can we make sure these are truly inclusive and disabled people feel welcome?



There can be special teams or training sessions for people seen as 'different'. But this isn't really inclusive if our attitude is that non-disabled people are 'normal' and disabled people aren't. This is ableism.



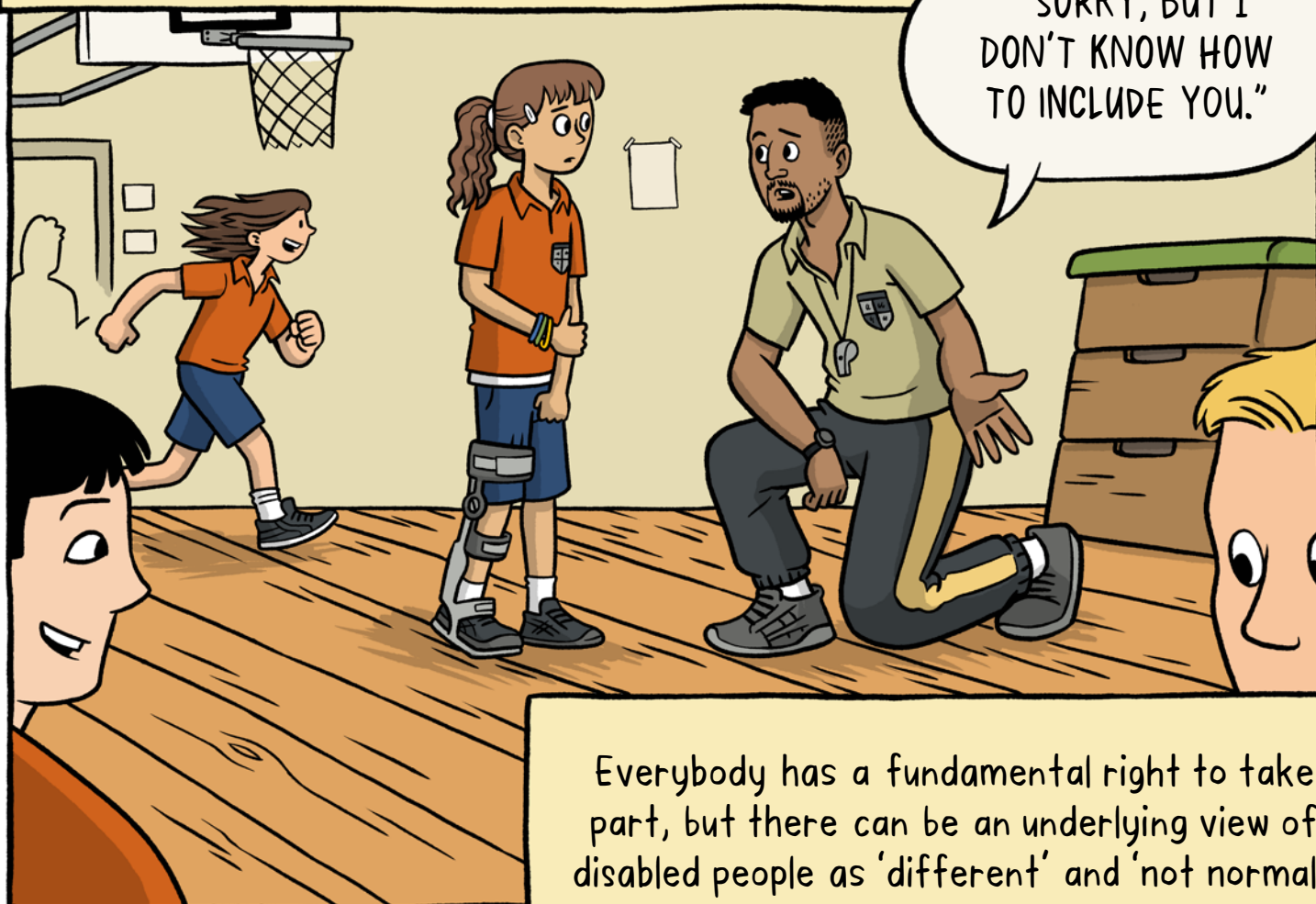
If disabled people don't apply to join a mainstream team or club, why not? Ableism sees their impairments as the 'problem' – but is the problem our exclusionary attitudes and practices?



Below are some examples of exclusion in sport, PE and active recreation to help us think about how we can tackle ableism.

## “THERE AREN'T ENOUGH RESOURCES”

We say we don't have the funding, the knowledge or resources to include disabled people. But are we just putting inclusion in the too hard basket and avoiding taking responsibility?



Everybody has a fundamental right to take part, but there can be an underlying view of disabled people as 'different' and 'not normal'.



## "IT'S TOO HARD"

There can also be an attitude that including disabled people is too hard. For instance, coaches or organisers may struggle to 'manage' neurodiverse people with variable and unpredictable behaviour in team environments.

"OH I CAN'T HANDLE THIS ANYMORE, YOU'RE WINDING ME UP"

Here the high school kid who is good at rugby wants to be on the team, but their behaviour doesn't comply with social norms. Not knowing how to support them, the coach excludes them from the team.

## LIMITING PATHWAYS

Sometimes disabled people are allowed to train with a team or be part of a squad, but not allowed to actually compete or develop to a higher level.

"YOUR TIMES ARE GOOD BUT YOU CAN'T COMPETE WITH THE NORMAL SQUAD WHEN YOU CAN'T SEE PROPERLY."

Participation and competition are *both* part of sport. Just like their non-disabled peers, some disabled people just want to participate and have fun, but others want to compete or become elite athletes.



## “THE RULES SAY NO”

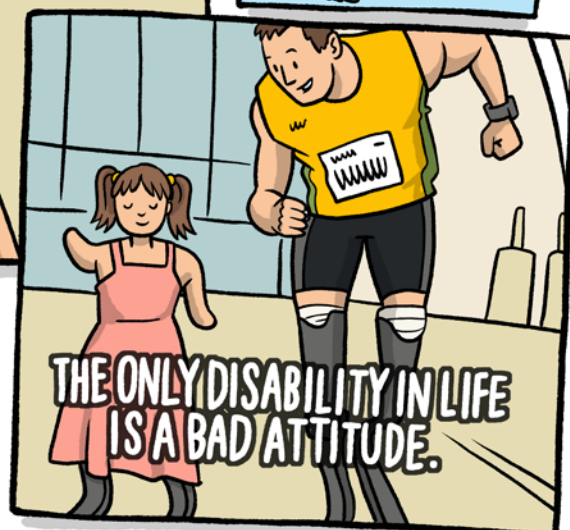
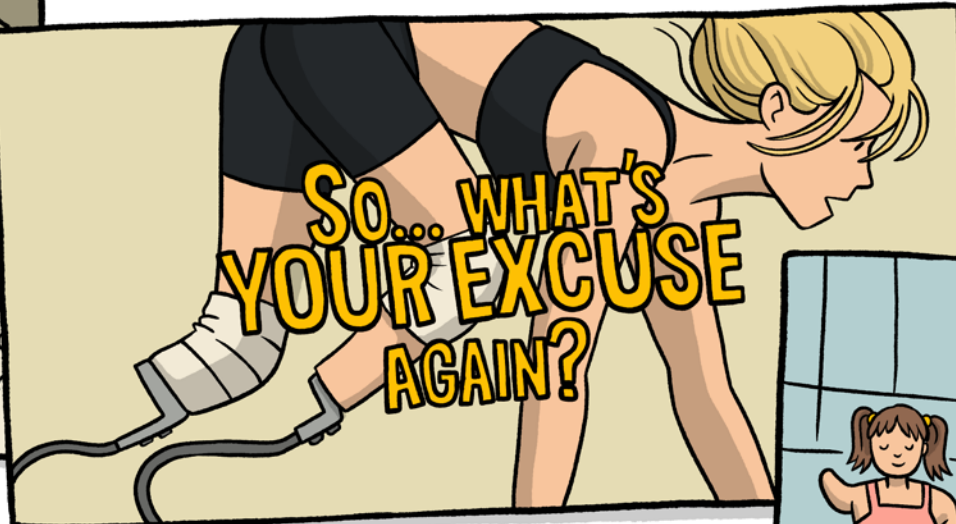
Some sports have exclusionary rules intended to be about safety: like a cycling club prohibiting tandem or three wheeled bikes from racing; or a canoe club excluding blind paddlers...

“THE RULES ARE THE RULES, THERE’S NOTHING WE CAN DO”

Rules often come from assumptions about so-called ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ bodies – that a blind person can’t safely be in a kayak, or a deaf girl be part of a dance class because “she can’t hear the music”. But they can, with a bit of creative thinking.

## ‘THEY’RE SO INSPIRING!’

There is a patronising tendency to frame successful disabled athletes as ‘inspirational’. You’ll see this in the ‘inspiring’ stories and ‘superhuman’ memes on mainstream and social media.



These reveal underlying ableist attitudes: disabled people are less capable of success, disability is to be pitied, with the ‘right attitude’ you can achieve anything...it disregards the great range of abilities and impairments that people have.



## "THAT'S JUST LIFE"

"YOU CAN'T COMPETE,  
BUT YOU CAN CHEER  
YOUR FRIENDS ON!"

And finally, we may recognise that ableism exists, but also believe that social inequities are a sad but inevitable fact of life.



We're increasingly recognising that many groups – girls, rainbow youth, disabled people, different ethnicities – are excluded. It sometimes feels impossible to accommodate everybody. But we can.

Acknowledging our underlying ableist attitudes may be confronting – and it can be hard to know how to do things differently without compromising our club, our teams...



But recognising our biases is the key first step to addressing the issues so that everyone is included.



How to include everybody can feel overwhelming. Clubs and schools are already trying to accommodate lots of different people.

"OK, HOW CAN THIS WORK FOR EVERYONE?"

It's up to us to make the changes, not the disabled person. This could be as simple as taking time to communicate with the disabled person in front of you and figuring out together how to make it work for them.

As coaches, teachers or organisers, we can model the idea that participation and inclusivity are part of being a team and reframe how we think and talk about sport, PE or active recreation.

We need to think, "how can this work for EVERYBODY?"

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**For resources on including disabled people visit Sport NZ's Inclusivity Hub**  
**([sportnz.org.nz/inclusivity-hub](https://sportnz.org.nz/inclusivity-hub))**