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Negotiating Ableism and Co-Producing Fit: Neurodivergent Inclusion in Mainstream Archery

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Abstract

Participation in sport is associated with improved wellbeing, life satisfaction and social inclusion, yet neurodivergent individuals continue to encounter ableist barriers that shape their experiences of participation, belonging and wellbeing. This study examined how ableism and person–environment fit relate to neurodivergent archers' experiences of belonging and wellbeing in UK mainstream archery environments. A convergent mixed-methods, cross-sectional survey design was used involving 226 neurodivergent archers. Findings show that the structured, repetitive and autonomous nature of archery frequently aligned with neurodivergent archers' individual characteristics and preferences, contributing to person–environment fit that supported wellbeing, confidence and belonging. However, ableist norms embedded within coaching practices, competition structures, communication, sensory environments and behavioural expectations were associated with experiences of misfit, masking, exclusion and reduced wellbeing. In response, archers engaged in acts of micro-negotiation that, when supported by coaches and clubs, could develop into micro-transformations associated with improved person–environment fit and more meaningful participation. These findings suggest that inclusion and belonging are dynamic, co-produced processes rather than outcomes of access alone. Creating genuinely inclusive sporting environments requires neurodiversity-informed coaching, flexible organisational practices and collaborative adaptations that recognise neurodivergent athletes as active partners in shaping participation and wellbeing.

Keywords: neurodiversity; ableism; person–environment fit; wellbeing; inclusion; belonging; micro-negotiation; micro-transformations; archery; mixed method

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1. Introduction

Engaging in sport is associated with improved wellbeing and better quality of life [1,2], benefiting social development, social cohesion and social participation [3]. Yet, research shows that disabled people often face limited sporting opportunities shaped by the social environment rather than personal preference [4]. This is perhaps a result of sport usually taking place in distinctly ableist spaces, emphasising bodily performance and conformity to normative standards [5].

More broadly, disabled people frequently encounter systemic barriers that impede their participation in sporting activities. These barriers encompass inadequate awareness among

non-disabled stakeholders regarding inclusive practices and appropriate accommodation strategies for team integration. Additional barriers include a lack of opportunities and programmes for training and competition, physically inaccessible sporting facilities and infrastructure, and limited dissemination of information regarding available resources and support services [6,7].

Although research on disability and sport often focuses on physical impairment [8], cognitive and neurological differences also shape how people experience sporting environments. Many challenges described in the disability sport literature, such as social attitudes, inaccessible communication, and limited organisational knowledge, affect people across a wide range of impairment types. Neurodivergent individuals often face these barriers in distinct ways, which calls for focused attention within inclusion research.

Neurodiversity affects approximately 15–20% of the UK population and encompasses natural variations in brain functioning, including differences in attention, learning, social processing, and emotional regulation [9]. Neurological diversity is understood as a fundamental human characteristic rather than an anomaly [10,11]. The concept of neurodiversity and its relevance to the present study are discussed in more detail in Section 2.

Currently, there is insufficient research regarding the experiences of neurodivergent athletes in sport as well as the likelihood of them encountering challenges, barriers, lack of knowledge and/or negative attitudes regarding neurodiversity. This limited knowledge is set against the backdrop of present and foreseeable systemic challenges within grassroots sports in the UK. Empirical evidence indicates that neurodivergent children demonstrate lower rates of sport participation compared to their neurotypical peers, despite research suggesting they may derive greater benefits from athletic engagement across multiple domains, including physical health outcomes, social integration, and psychological well-being [12,13]. It is, however, promising that research also indicates that neurodivergent individuals have a greater desire to engage in sport and exercise than neurotypical individuals [2]. Eliminating barriers and constraints to access to sport is imperative.

Government response to this challenge has focused mainly on mainstreaming. This approach places responsibility for disability provision within national sport organisations, with the expectation that existing structures will ensure sport is accessible for all [14]. Unfortunately, mainstreaming is often described as rhetorical rather than transformative, with limited evidence of substantive changes in practice [15]. Moreover, scholars argue that mainstreaming is underpinned by ableist beliefs that privilege mainstream institutions as inherently superior to other settings [16]. This privileging of non-disabled sport and bodies not only devalues participation for disabled people but also risks reinforcing segregation, isolation, and policies that restrict their full inclusion in society [17]. The reality is that sport clubs frequently reinforce ableist norms by requiring disabled people to meet similar performance levels as the non-disabled, often excused by the competitive nature of sport, which limits genuine inclusion and perpetuates exclusionary practices [18]. Genuine inclusion in sport can be understood as the establishment of environments where all individuals, regardless of their background, ability, or identity, can meaningfully participate in sporting activities [19].

What is evident here is that participation alone represents an inadequate measure of inclusion, as physical presence does not ensure that individuals experience genuine inclusion within sporting contexts [7]. Understanding inclusion requires attention to what occurs after neurodivergent individuals enter mainstream sport environments, because the conditions that structure participation continue to reflect ableist norms that shape communication, sensory demands, and the broader organisation of participation. Placement within these settings does not ensure equitable involvement, and inclusion emerges only through the alignment, or misalignment, between neurodivergent profiles and the social,

cultural, and environmental conditions that structure everyday practice. Examining this interaction is essential for moving beyond models of inclusion that focus solely on access or attendance, towards approaches that address person–environment fit and the production of belonging within ableist sporting cultures. Grounded in an exploratory design and in response to this gap, the present study investigates how ableism and person–environment fit influence neurodivergent archers' experiences of belonging and wellbeing in UK club settings, asking the following:

1. How do ableism and person–environment fit shape neurodivergent archers' experiences of belonging and wellbeing in UK mainstream archery environments?
2. How do neurodivergent archers negotiate and respond to experiences of fit and misfit within these environments?

This paper further adopts identity-first language throughout, referring to "disabled archers" rather than "archers with disabilities," and "autistic" or "neurodivergent archers" rather than "archers with autism". While language preferences remain diverse across disability and neurodivergent communities, this choice reflects preferences expressed by many autistic and neurodivergent people for identity-first terminology over deficit-based, person-first framing [20]. It is also consistent with the study's broader social-model orientation, which emphasises that disability arises through social and environmental barriers rather than being located solely within the individual [21].

2. Understanding Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity, first introduced as a term in the 1990s, conceptualises the inherent variations observed within the human population, encompassing divergent patterns of brain functioning and cognition including attention, learning, social processing, and affective regulation [22,23]. Given the complex construct of the human brain, comprising approximately 100 billion neurons, neurological diversity represents a fundamental characteristic of human populations rather than an anomaly. As a result, any random sample of individuals will demonstrate natural neurodiversity, encompassing both neurodivergent individuals. Consistent with the contemporary neurodiversity literature, neurodivergent individuals may include those with neurodevelopmental conditions including autism spectrum disorder (formerly inclusive of Asperger's syndrome), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Tourette's syndrome, developmental coordination disorder (dyspraxia), learning differences (e.g., dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia), and mental health conditions (e.g., anxiety, depression, OCD, bipolar, schizophrenia, eating disorders) [23].

The adoption of neurodiversity terminology represents a significant paradigmatic shift from earlier conceptualisations of these conditions as neurodevelopmental disorders or syndromes. Within the neurodivergent community, these terms are not popular as they suggest an inherent fault with the individual. This linguistic transformation reflects concerns within neurodivergent communities regarding the pathologising implications of deficit-based terminology, which has historically contributed to stigmatisation and discriminatory practices. The neurodiversity framework challenges normative assumptions by positioning neurological variation as a natural manifestation of human diversity rather than pathological deviation. This conceptual reframing seeks to dismantle hierarchical notions of cognitive functioning by rejecting binary classifications of normal versus abnormal neurological states, instead promoting an understanding of neurological difference as value-neutral variation within the broader spectrum of human experience.

The persistence of neurotypical-centric perspectives within social structures contributes to the systematic marginalisation of neurodivergent individuals through processes of "othering" that position neurological differences as deviations from an assumed norm. This phenomenon manifests in multifaceted inequalities across educational, occupational,

domestic, and recreational domains, thereby constraining opportunities for full societal participation. Such systemic exclusion demonstrates measurable impacts on psychosocial wellbeing and overall quality-of-life outcomes among neurodivergent populations. While discriminatory practices may occasionally reflect deliberate bias, they more frequently emerge from unconscious cognitive processes and implicit assumptions that privilege neurotypical modes of functioning, reflecting broader patterns of human categorical thinking that inadvertently perpetuate exclusionary practices.

3. Theoretical Background

This study draws on two primary theoretical lenses: ableism (Section 3.1) and person–environment fit (Section 3.2). Together, they explain how disability is produced through social and organisational norms, and how individuals experience alignment or misalignment with their environment as a result. Further, this section explores three complementary concepts in order to interpret specific aspects of this misfit and its negotiation: affordances, which describe the concrete possibilities for action that person–environment fit generates within a given setting (Section 3.2); Constraints Negotiation Theory, which provides a vocabulary for classifying the barriers neurodivergent archers encountered and the ways these were managed (Section 3.3); and masking, which describes one specific, individually located response to misfit (Section 3.3). Ecological dynamics is drawn on more narrowly in the Discussion to interpret the perceptual mechanics of specific sensory adjustments, rather than as a standalone explanatory framework for the study as a whole.

3.1. Ableism and Models of Disability

Sport is organised through expectations about how athletes should move, behave and communicate. These expectations appear neutral, yet reflect norms that privilege specific bodies and ways of being. This study examines how neurodivergent archers navigate these expectations and the assumptions that structure their participation. To analyse these processes, it is necessary to outline the concepts that explain how disability is produced and operates within sport.

Within sport, there are two dominant models that shape our understanding of disability: the medical model and the social model. The medical model is the oldest of the two and is strongly linked to the socially and culturally constructed idea of the "normal" body. Consequently, the bodies and brains of disabled people are tragically abnormal, and disability exists within the person and their individual impairment(s) [24]. Disability then is a problem for and of the individual with the impairment(s). This produces conditions that support the discrimination and exclusion of disabled people while also undermining their status and value within society [25]. Although important strides have been made to move society away from this model [26], it remains influential within sport. This is visible in the separation of the Special Olympics and Paralympics from the Olympics, which places disabled athletes outside the main institution. It is also reflected in the classification structure of the Paralympics, which measures and sorts athletes according to impairment. The influence of the medical model is also evident in the wider logic of sport, described by Fahlén and Karp [27], which relies on comparing and measuring abilities against standards set around non-disabled norms.

The social model shifts attention towards the role of the environment, expectations and relationships in shaping opportunity within sport and society [28]. This model argues that people are disabled not by impairment but by barriers in their surroundings and by the attitudes of others [29]. From this position, disability arises when social structures and institutions are organised in ways that restrict access and participation. The core assumption of the social model of disability is that disability is created through social processes rather

than through individual deficit [30]. This has influenced sport through legislation that requires society to make accommodations and through policies of mainstreaming. However, mainstreaming in sport often relies on the placement of disabled people in non-disabled settings while leaving the underlying structures, expectations and practices unchanged [18].

Both models offer important insights, yet they do not account for how dominant norms produce negative attitudes and unequal treatment. Ableism helps explain this process by offering a way to understand how ideas about ability gain authority and shape behaviour. According to Wolbring [31], "ableism describes prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviours toward persons with a disability" (p. 78). As an ideology, ableism is built on the belief that non-disabled bodies and norms hold higher value, and disability is treated as a lesser or undesirable state [16]. These beliefs set the standards of ability against which disabled people are judged and valued [32]. Ableism appears through conscious and unconscious discrimination, through negative assumptions about disabled people, and through organisational routines and environments that reflect non-disabled expectations. Ableism also functions as a research perspective that helps expose the cultural and institutional conditions that produce exclusion [33]. It provides a perspective to analyse how beliefs, knowledge systems and practices shape access and participation in sport and physical activity [4,18,33]. Using ableism in this way helps show how norms govern who is recognised as legitimate and how sport environments are designed to serve non-disabled bodies and behaviours. This study adopts this perspective to examine how these assumptions shape the experiences of neurodivergent archers.

3.2. Person–Environment Fit

While disability models and ableism explain the structural and cultural dimensions through which prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviours toward disabled people are produced, person–environment (P-E) fit focuses on how individuals experience alignment or misalignment with their surroundings. Fit is conceptualised as the discrepancy between ideal and experienced conditions [34,35]. Accordingly, it can be understood as the degree of alignment between individuals' unique characteristics, needs, values, and preferences and the conditions provided by the environment [36].

Kristof-Brown [37] distinguishes between two strands of P-E fit. One treats fit as a subjective sense of belonging or "fitting in", referred to as perceived fit. The other treats fit as the comparison between personal attributes and environmental features, either based on separate sources of information (objective fit) or on self-reports of both person and environment (subjective fit). Both strands agree that the level of fit can affect a person's motivation, behaviour, and overall mental and physical health [38]. When a person's characteristics, needs, or preferences closely match what their environment offers, whether at high or low levels, this alignment tends to produce positive outcomes (e.g., wellbeing, performance, satisfaction), whereas misalignment produces strain, dissatisfaction, and reduced performance [39–41]. However, it is important to note that fit is not a static condition but evolves dynamically as individuals and environments change [41]. This temporal framing reflects the understanding in disability studies that participation is not fixed but negotiated and context-dependent [42,43].

Within this framework, environmental features do not shape behaviour on their own. Instead, they become meaningful through the relation between an individual's abilities and a specific situation [44]. These relational possibilities for action are often referred to as affordances, defined as the opportunities for action that emerge from this interaction [44–46]. Affordances illustrate how sensory, social and material aspects of sport settings support or restrict the actions available to athletes, influencing whether the environment aligns with their needs and preferences [47–49].

Extending P-E fit to disability and neurodiversity provides a relational framework that complements structural analyses of ableism. Disability models show how environments exclude through norms, expectations and material design, while P-E fit explains how individuals encounter and interpret these conditions in everyday participation. Fit becomes a lived and negotiated experience rather than a fixed trait, shaped by communication practices, sensory conditions, routine predictability and behavioural expectations. Individuals respond by adjusting their behaviour, seeking accommodations or revising expectations, while the environment simultaneously constrains or enables these responses. Belonging is therefore understood as an emergent property of social and organisational life, formed through ongoing interactions with coaches, peers, club routines and the cultural definitions of "appropriate" or "competent" behaviour in mainstream sport.

In the present study, belonging is conceptualised as an experiential manifestation of P-E fit rather than as a synonymous construct. While P-E fit refers to the degree of alignment between individual characteristics and environmental conditions, belonging refers to the subjective experience of acceptance, value, and connection that may emerge when such alignment is achieved.

3.3. Negotiation, Masking and Transformation

Constraints Negotiation Theory offers a complementary lens through which to understand how individuals manage barriers to access within leisure and sporting environments. Originating in leisure studies, the theory identifies three categories of constraint shaping participation: intrapersonal (individual psychological or dispositional factors), interpersonal (relational and social dynamics), and structural (external, environmental or organisational barriers) [50]. Rather than treating constraints as simply preventing participation, the theory examines how constraints are negotiated and overcome, a process shown to be shaped by factors such as confidence, motivation and self-efficacy [51–53]. Negotiation, however, does not always result in sustained participation. If the constraints exceed an individual's negotiation resources, the outcome can be withdrawal from the experience rather than continued involvement [51]. This negotiation-focused perspective resonates with the concerns of the present study. Alongside ableism and P-E fit, this theory gives us a way to describe the small, everyday steps people take to keep participating despite facing constraints. While this study foregrounds ableism and P-E fit as its primary theoretical lenses, Constraints Negotiation Theory thus provides a useful complementary framework for interpreting how neurodivergent archers respond to the barriers they encounter within mainstream archery environments.

One further response to constraint, distinct from active negotiation, is masking. Masking, or camouflaging, describes the strenuous suppression of neurodivergent traits and behaviours in order to meet neurotypical social expectations. Masking has been linked to negative outcomes including exhaustion, burnout, and disconnection from one's sense of identity, with these costs frequently going unnoticed by others since the person appears to be coping, or even excelling, while masking is taking place [54,55]. As such, it is associated with negative impacts on quality of life and overall wellbeing. Through a P-E fit lens, masking can be understood as a form of forced accommodation to environmental misfit. Instead of the environment adapting to the individual, the individual absorbs the cost of alignment [54]. This positions masking and negotiation as related but distinct responses to the same underlying misfit: masking locates the burden of fit within the individual, while negotiation, in Jackson et al.'s [50] sense, involves actively managing or working around the constraint itself.

When negotiation is sustained over time, and recognised or taken up by others, it can shift from an individual response into a change in shared practice, a possibility this

study explores further as micro-transformation. Together with masking, these offer a set of related but distinct lenses for understanding how neurodivergent archers respond to, and are shaped by, the constraints of mainstream sporting environments. The following sections outline the methods used to examine these processes empirically.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Research Design

This study addressed two research questions: how ableism and P-E fit shape neurodivergent archers' experiences of belonging and wellbeing, and how neurodivergent archers negotiate and respond to experiences of misfit within these environments. A convergent mixed-methods cross-sectional survey design was used to address these at two levels: quantitative data identified broad patterns of fit, misfit and wellbeing across the sample (RQ1). On the other hand, qualitative data explored how these patterns were experienced and actively managed (RQ2). This is where the concepts of negotiation, masking, and micro-transformation introduced in Section 3.3 become relevant, describing the mechanisms through which archers actively shaped, rather than simply experienced, their fit with the sporting environment.

Although quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, greater analytical weight was afforded to the qualitative responses, reflecting the study's interest in understanding how neurodivergent archers experienced and interpreted inclusion, belonging and P-E fit and misfit within mainstream archery environments. The approach was exploratory and interpretive, aiming to identify broad patterns in respondents' experiences while preserving the accounts through which those experiences were understood and made meaningful. A mixed-methods approach was well suited to this aim because the study sought to examine both prevalence and meaning [56]. Closed-response items explored patterns relating to wellbeing, confidence, acceptance, social connection, coaching, sensory experiences, and participation within archery environments. Quantitative items were used to identify broad patterns across the sample, while open-text responses provided richer insight into how participants experienced and made sense of archery in practice. Together, these strands provided both an overview of common patterns and a more detailed understanding of how neurodivergent archers navigated mainstream archery settings.

4.2. Research Context and Participants

Archery offers a distinctive setting in which to examine neurodivergent inclusion in mainstream sport. For the purposes of this study, mainstream archery refers to Archery GB (AGB)[1]-affiliated clubs, coaching environments, and competitions that are open to the general archery population and are not specifically designed for neurodivergent or disabled participants. The term is used to distinguish these settings from disability- or neurodiversity-specific programmes and participation opportunities.

Unlike many team sports, archery participation centres on individual performance and technical skill development through repeated execution of a structured shot cycle involving stance, nocking the arrow, drawing, aiming, and release. Participation also occurs within club, coaching, and competition environments that involve social interaction, communication, organisational procedures, and varying sensory conditions. Together, these physical, social, and organisational features make archery a useful setting for exploring how neurodivergent participants navigate mainstream sporting environments.

Both formally diagnosed and self-identifying neurodivergent respondents were included. This decision reflected a neuro-affirming methodological position [57,58], not least because access to diagnosis is uneven and often shaped by age, gender, cost, waiting lists, local service provision, and earlier experiences of recognition or misrecognition [59–61].

Requiring formal diagnosis would have potentially reinscribed the very forms of gatekeeping that have historically excluded particular groups, notably women [59,62], racially minoritised people [63,64], and those identified later in life [65], from neurodivergence research. Self-identification was therefore treated as a legitimate basis for participation, consistent with wider calls for participatory and neuro-affirming approaches in autism and neurodivergence research. Similarly, parent- or carer-completed responses were also retained where questionnaires were completed on behalf of an archer. This decision was made to facilitate the inclusion of individuals who may have been unable or unwilling to complete the questionnaire independently and is consistent with the study's aim of capturing the experiences of a broad range of neurodivergent archers. In total, 226 valid responses were retained for analysis; detailed demographic characteristics, diagnostic status, and archery experience are reported in the Section 5.1.

4.3. Questionnaire Design and Data Collection

The questionnaire was designed following a review of the literature relating to neurodiversity, sport participation, inclusion, belonging, wellbeing, coaching, and barriers and facilitators to participation, and was co-designed in collaboration with AGB to ensure relevance to the experiences of neurodivergent archers within mainstream archery environments. As no existing instrument was identified that addressed the aims of this study, a purpose-built questionnaire was developed.

The final questionnaire comprised 26 items and combined closed-response questions, Likert-scale items, and open-ended questions. The survey was designed to capture both the conditions of participation and the meanings respondents attached to those conditions. The survey included demographic questions, questions relating to neurodivergent identity and diagnostic status, and questions about archery participation and experience. It also explored respondents' experiences of wellbeing, confidence, social interaction, sensory experience, coaching practices, competition settings, and participation within the archery community.

The questionnaire combined closed-response items with open-ended questions. Closed-response items allowed respondents to indicate levels of agreement, satisfaction, confidence, connection or difficulty in relation to specific aspects of archery participation. Open-ended questions invited respondents to describe experiences in more detail, including archery environments they found comfortable or uncomfortable, coaching approaches they found effective, barriers encountered during participation, and practical changes that could improve inclusion. This design was intended to avoid reducing inclusion to participation numbers alone, and to provide respondents with opportunities to explain how they experienced participation within mainstream archery settings.

To ensure that respondents to the archer survey identified as neurodivergent, a screening question was included at the beginning of the questionnaire. Respondents indicating that they were not neurodivergent were exited from the survey and could not proceed further. Participants were also asked whether they held a formal diagnosis or self-identified as neurodivergent.

Items were framed in accessible language and were written so as not to assume that neurodivergent archers share common needs or experiences. Given the heterogeneity of neurodivergence, the questionnaire explored a broad range of participation experiences relating to sensory environments, communication preferences, social interaction, coaching practices, competition settings, and perceived inclusion within the archery community. Where appropriate, respondents were invited to suggest practical changes that would improve their participation.

Prior to distribution, the questionnaire was reviewed and tested by the research team and representatives from AGB and Access Sport to assess clarity, accessibility, relevance and

survey functionality. Data were collected using Online Surveys between 29 January 2025, and 1 April 2025. The survey was distributed via email to AGB members and promoted in their Sport & Recreation Alliance newsletter. Participation was voluntary, and respondents received information about the study before providing informed consent.

4.4. Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, supplemented by exploratory Mann–Whitney U analyses. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to summarise respondent characteristics, diagnostic status, archery experience, and responses related to wellbeing, confidence, focus, social interaction, sensory experience and perceived inclusion. These findings were used to identify broad patterns across the sample and to contextualise the qualitative analysis. In addition, exploratory Mann–Whitney U analyses were conducted to examine whether respondents reporting particular neurodivergent characteristics (e.g., ADHD, autism, or dyspraxia) differed from respondents who did not report those characteristics on selected outcome measures. Given the substantial overlap between neurodivergent identities within the sample, these analyses were interpreted cautiously and used to identify potential trends rather than establish discrete diagnostic-group differences. Consistent with the exploratory aims of the study and the heterogeneity of neurodivergent experiences, quantitative findings were interpreted as indicators of general trends rather than measures of uniform experience.

4.5. Qualitative Analysis

Open-text responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis [66,67], conducted with an abductive sensibility [68]. Reflexive thematic analysis was appropriate because the study was theoretically informed, particularly by concepts of ableism and P-E fit, while remaining open to interpretations generated from respondents' own accounts. An abductive orientation supported iterative movement between theory and data, allowing the conceptual framework to sensitise interpretation without forcing responses into pre-determined categories. Concepts of inter-rater reliability and coding saturation, which assume a single discoverable meaning to be recovered from the data, were not pursued; the analysis instead treated interpretation as situated, partial and strengthened through dialogue [67].

Three researchers were involved in the qualitative analysis. Each first became familiar with the dataset through repeated reading of the open-text responses. Initial coding combined deductive and inductive strategies [69]. Deductive coding was informed by issues explored through the questionnaire, including inclusion and exclusion, social interaction, communication, coaching experiences, sensory experiences, and participation within archery environments. Throughout the analysis, interpretation remained sensitised by the study's theoretical framework, particularly concepts of ableism P-E fit and environmental affordances. Open-ended questions were interpreted thematically in light of the literature review. Other themes emerged inductively in the data. Inductive coding remained open to patterns emerging directly from participants' accounts, including masking relief. This refers specifically to the experience of masking's demands easing during participation, a pattern not anticipated by the study's theoretical framework, which discussed masking only in general terms; the value of quiet focus, frustration with excessive verbal instruction, uncertainty around competition routines, and the practical adjustments respondents used to sustain participation were likewise identified inductively.

Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the team used a shared codebook as an audit trail and reflexive discussion tool rather than a means of establishing coding reliability, intercoder agreement, or consensus [66]. Through iterative discussion, the

codebook was used to document evolving interpretations, analytic decisions, and points of divergence in the analysis. This enabled them to compare interpretations, examine points of divergence and reflect on areas where concepts overlapped, remained ambiguous, or required further consideration. Differences between coders were treated as opportunities for analytic dialogue rather than as technical errors to be resolved through consensus. Variation in coding was interrogated as a source of interpretive richness so that where coders read the same response differently, the team considered whether the variation reflected genuinely ambiguous data, overlapping concepts, or alternative ways of understanding participants' accounts.

The involvement of three researchers was not a mechanism for establishing inter-rater agreement, but rather functioned as a means of testing the robustness of emerging interpretations against alternative readings [66]. Regular team discussion enabled the group to develop participant themes, consider counter-interpretations, and to then examine how individual responses related to wider patterns in the data. An audit trail was maintained through the codebook, coding notes, and analytic memos, supporting transparency in the movement from initial codes to final themes. These themes were then developed by examining relationships between codes, respondent accounts, and theoretical concepts.

Particular attention was paid to how experiences of ableism and P-E fit varied across sensory, social, communicative, and organisational dimensions of archery. Variation across neurodivergent identities was considered where relevant, while the analysis avoided assuming uniformity within any group. Themes were developed by examining relationships between codes, respondent accounts, and the study's primary interpretive lenses of ableism and P-E fit. Three overarching themes are presented in the Section 5.1: experiences of fit, negotiating ableist norms, and micro-transformations. Qualitative extracts were selected to illustrate themes, clarify quantitative patterns and preserve the language through which respondents made sense of their experiences.

4.6. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through the same questionnaire and analysed concurrently to achieve a comprehensive account. Following Fetters, Curry and Creswell [56], the two strands were integrated at the level of interpretation through a process of narrative weaving, addressing RQ1 and RQ2 jointly rather than as separate analyses. For example, 94% of respondents agreed that inclusion enriches the archery community and 90% acknowledged that neurodivergent archers can perform at the same level as their neurotypical peers, indicating a strong cultural baseline of support (RQ1); qualitative accounts highlighted how this supportive climate was translated into practice, describing the negotiated adjustments this openness made possible (RQ2). Quantitative patterns identified where experiences varied across the sample, while qualitative accounts explained and extended this, capturing dimensions such as masking and negotiation that were not directly measured. Statistical findings relating to social connection, acceptance or confidence, for example, were interpreted alongside respondents' accounts of coaching style, peer interaction, sensory strain, masking, competition routines, and the affective experience of focus.

This integrated approach was important because inclusion in sport cannot be adequately captured by numerical indicators alone. A respondent may report positive wellbeing while also describing barriers, misunderstandings or adaptations required to participate; high enjoyment or confidence may coexist with sensory discomfort, social uncertainty or inconsistent coaching support. Bringing the strands together allowed the study to examine archery as a complex environment in which fit and misfit may be experienced concurrently, and to interpret the affordances of archery in relation to the ableist norms neurodivergent

archers continue to navigate. While quantitative findings were used to identify broad patterns across the sample, including experiences of wellbeing, confidence, acceptance, social connection, and participation, the open-ended responses provided richer insight into how participants understood, negotiated, and made sense of those experiences in practice. In particular, concepts central to the study, including fit and misfit, belonging, masking, negotiation, and micro-transformation, were most fully articulated through respondents' narrative accounts. Consequently, greater analytical weight was afforded to the qualitative data when examining these processes in depth. As the Section 5 progresses, the analysis increasingly focuses on these underlying experiences and processes, which were primarily identified through the qualitative responses and therefore draw more heavily on participants' narrative accounts.

4.7. Quality, Reflexivity and Ethics

Quality and reflexivity were informed by Tracy's [70] "big-tent" framework and Braun and Clarke's [67] markers for reflexive thematic analysis. Particular attention was given to rigour, credibility, reflexivity, transparency, and meaningful coherence. Three researchers were involved in the coding and development of themes, using analytic dialogue to challenge assumptions, explore alternative interpretations, and refine emerging insights. A shared codebook and audit trail supported transparency, while participant quotations were used to ground interpretations in the data. Emerging findings and interpretations were further scrutinised and refined through critical discussion among the wider author team. Reflexivity was treated as an ongoing analytic resource throughout the research process, with researchers reflecting on how their experiences and positions in relation to neurodivergence, disability, and sport may shape interpretation [71].

The research team brought diverse disciplinary, professional, and personal perspectives to the study, alongside varying degrees of personal and professional proximity to disability and neurodivergence through lived experience, family relationships, teaching, research, and practice. Team members also brought experience of sport participation and coaching across a range of levels, which informed their understanding of sporting cultures and participation environments. These experiences informed the team's sensitivity to participants' accounts and the issues explored within the study, while also shaping aspects of interpretation. Reflexivity was therefore treated as an ongoing analytic resource throughout the research process, with regular discussion used to challenge assumptions, consider alternative interpretations, and reflect on how researchers' backgrounds and experiences may have influenced the analysis. Consistent with this position, the study adopted a neuro-affirming stance, approaching neurodivergent participants as experts in their own experiences and recognising the diversity of neurodivergent identities and needs. Consistent with this perspective, self-identification was treated as a legitimate basis for participation.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee. Given the study's focus on neurodivergent participants and their experiences in mainstream sport, particular attention was paid to accessibility, participant wellbeing, and informed consent. Participation was voluntary, respondents could withdraw at any point without explanation, information and consent materials were written in accessible language, and signposting to relevant sources of support was provided at the close of the survey. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Demographics

Of the 226 respondents, 89.4% (n = 202) completed the survey themselves, while 10.6% (n = 24) of surveys were completed by a parent or carer on behalf of another individual. Participant characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics.

Characteristic	*n*	%
Diagnostic status		
Formal diagnosis	155	68.6
Self-identified	71	31.4
Archery experience		
<1 year	43	19.0
1–2 years	54	23.9
3–5 years	49	21.7
6–10 years	35	15.5
>10 years	45	19.9
Gender		
Female	117	52.7
Male	85	38.3
Non-binary	20	9.0
Age		
Under 18 [a]	18	8.1
18–24	46	20.6
25–34	40	17.9
35–44	51	22.9
45–54	40	17.9
55–64	18	8.1
Over 65	10	4.5

[a] Reported by parent/carer. Note: Total sample N = 226. Percentages are based on valid responses for each variable. Gender responses were missing for n = 4 participants, and age responses were missing for n = 3 participants.

Autism (64%, n = 148) and ADHD (50%, n = 116) were the most prevalent conditions, both as single conditions and in combination with other neurodivergent conditions. Autism only was reported by 21.2% (n = 48), ADHD only by 14.6% (n = 33), and both together by 14.6% (n = 33). Other conditions included Dyslexia (25%, n = 56), Dyspraxia (13.7%, n = 32), Sensory Processing Differences (11.9%, n = 27), and conditions that can largely be grouped under mental health problems such as anxiety, OCD, PTSD and depression (7.5%, n = 17). Among respondents reporting autism, 38.5% (n = 57) were self-identifying rather than formally diagnosed, while the equivalent figure for ADHD was 33.6% (n = 39). Other conditions were less common in this group, possibly indicating greater standardisation of formal diagnosis pathways for those conditions. Figure 1 summarises the prevalence and intersection patterns of the seven most commonly reported neurodivergent conditions.

5.2. Experiencing Fit: When Archery Affords Cognitive and Sensory Alignment

As shown in Figure 2, respondents reported consistently positive experiences associated with archery participation. Feelings of focus, cheerfulness, relaxation, and happiness were widely reported, suggesting that many participants experienced archery as a positive and rewarding activity. However, overall satisfaction with archery was comparatively lower than these immediate participation experiences. This contrast suggests that the activity of archery affords opportunities for action that many participants experience as beneficial, while overall satisfaction with archery appears to depend on P-E fit across the broader so-

cial, organisational, and sensory environment. Participants frequently linked these positive experiences to the affordances embedded within the structure of archery itself.

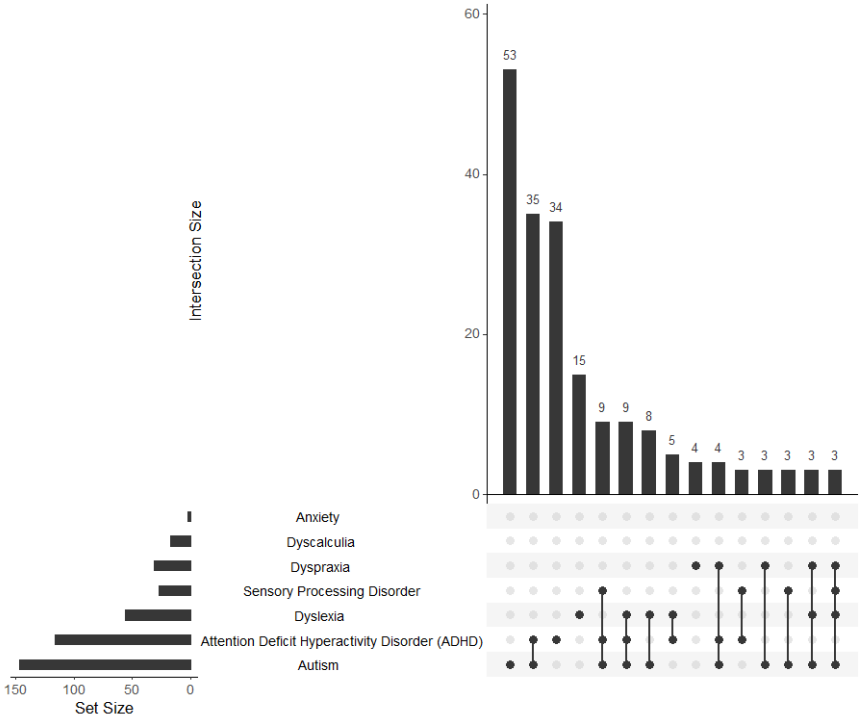


Figure 1. Overview of the seven most common conditions and their patterns of co-occurrence (N = 226), visualised using an UpSet plot. Note: UpSet plot generated in R using the UpSetR package v1.4.1 [72].

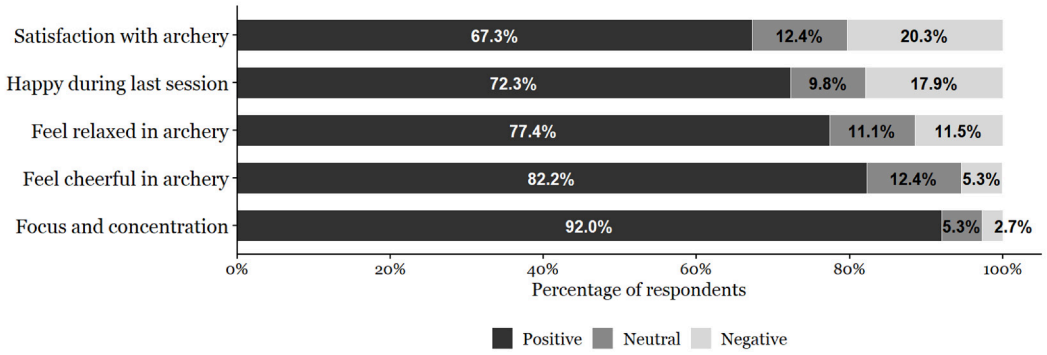


Figure 2. Wellbeing outcomes associated with archery participation (N = 226).

These affordances were particularly evident in the shot cycle, a predictable and repeating sequence of stance, nock, draw, aim, and release. The data suggest that these characteristics of archery may support sensory regulation and help reduce cognitive load. Respondents described this consistently across the qualitative data, using terms such as "calms the mind", "quietens brain noise", and "mental escape". For example, one respondent commented:

> *"It helps me switch off my brain like nothing else can—I have to focus on me, the bow, the arrow. There is no space for anything else."*

Others described the sport as affording relief from the demands of masking, which can otherwise have a particularly negative impact on quality of life and overall wellbeing [23]. One respondent commented:

"You get a break from masking when you're on the line. I find the need to focus on the shot sequence means I don't get a chance to be overly concerned with my social interactions."

Respondents also emphasised the value of archery's predictability, routine, and opportunities for sustained attention, particularly its reliance on short periods of focused attention. For many, these features created a sense of immersion that was difficult to find elsewhere. The technical complexity of the sport provided an enduring source of interest and engagement, while the individual nature of performance afforded a degree of autonomy and control over participation. As one respondent explained:

"Archery gives me the opportunity to obsess over it and completely lose myself in it—my ten-different-thoughts-at-a-time work really well in analysing archery."

While these affordances were widely valued, they were not experienced uniformly. Respondents frequently described archery as supporting focus, enjoyment, and emotional regulation, yet many also identified challenges associated with communication, social interaction, sensory demands, and broader participation environments. Exploratory Mann–Whitney analyses also suggested that experiences may vary across neurodivergent characteristics. For example, some respondents identifying with ADHD reported particularly positive experiences of engagement, social connection, and inclusion, whereas autistic respondents more frequently described challenges associated with the social dimensions of participation despite valuing the predictability and structure of the sport. Respondents with dyspraxia also tended to report less positive experiences overall. Given the substantial overlap between neurodivergent identities, however, these patterns are interpreted cautiously and are presented here as indicative rather than definitive group differences. This variation suggests that fit is therefore relational, contingent, and context-dependent.

These findings align with broader evidence that sport participation can support wellbeing among neurodivergent individuals [1,2]. However, consistent with person–environment fit theory [36–38] and broader critiques of ableist assumptions about participation and inclusion [17], the positive outcomes described here appear to emerge not from participation per se, but from the alignment between individual characteristics and the opportunities afforded by the archery environment. The wellbeing benefits associated with archery should therefore be understood as contingent upon P-E fit rather than as an automatic consequence of participation. The following section explores how ableist norms and participation environments can complicate or constrain these experiences of fit.

5.3. Negotiating Ableist Norms in Mainstream Archery

Although archery is often viewed as an individualised and inclusive sport, many neurodivergent athletes describe navigating environments shaped by implicit neurotypical norms, particularly around communication, behaviour, sensory tolerance, and learning. These norms reflect broader societal assumptions about what constitutes "appropriate" sociability, emotional regulation, focus, and bodily conduct. Research on neurodivergent athletes similarly shows that exclusion often emerges not from explicit hostility but from structural and cultural expectations embedded in sport [73]. Within archery, these expectations shape the unwritten rules around social conduct on the shooting line, coaching styles during training, and the sensory and procedural setup of competitions. Such norms align closely with longstanding deficit-oriented assumptions about autistic or otherwise neurodivergent communication and behaviour—assumptions critiqued in contemporary neurodiversity-affirming research that highlights misstatements between neurotypes, rather than deficiencies within neurodivergent people themselves [74,75].

This section explores how neurodivergent archers identify these ableist expectations, how they experience and interpret their effects, and the everyday forms of negotiation and adaptation they employ to continue participating in the sport.

5.3.1. Interpreting Norms of Communication and Sociability

Many neurodivergent archers described encountering implicit expectations about how sociable, communicative, and emotionally consistent they should be within club environments. These expectations often mirror wider neurotypical communication norms, such as comfort with small talk, rapid conversational turn-taking, and intuitive understanding of implied meaning [73]. When neurodivergent archers did not meet these unspoken standards, they were frequently misinterpreted as distant, unfriendly, or deliberately disengaged. Several archers noted that they were routinely misread as aloof, unfriendly, or "cold" when they struggled to engage in casual interaction, with one participant reporting that, "I worry people think I'm snobby when I'm just nervous and don't know what to say". Others expressed feeling routinely excluded from social events or club-based interactions: "People generally don't accept me and the way I think. . . I never feel included".

This pattern is consistent with wider research showing difficulties in autistic–non-autistic communication, emerging from mutual misunderstandings [74,76]. As such, neurodivergent archers' experiences of being misread or socially excluded reflect broader interactional norms that privilege neurotypical styles of expression.

Several participants described feeling excluded from social aspects of archery clubs, including informal gatherings or between-end conversations. This aligns with research indicating that autistic adults frequently navigate environments where typical social reciprocity and signalling are assumed, often resulting in their communication being judged negatively [75]. Some archers reported worries that their silence or nervousness would be interpreted as arrogance, highlighting the emotional toll of these misunderstandings.

Coaching interactions also reproduced these normative assumptions. Many archers noted that coaches often relied on indirect phrasing, hints, or implied meaning, communication strategies that can be difficult for neurodivergent individuals who benefit from explicit, unambiguous instruction. As one participant explained, "I take things literally and miss implied meaning. . . coaches hint rather than say it straight".

To navigate these pressures, archers adopted a range of adaptive strategies. Some limited their engagement to predictable or structured exchanges on the shooting line, while others avoided high-social-contact sessions altogether. These practices mirror coping strategies observed across neurodivergent communities, where individuals actively shape their environments to minimise miscommunication and emotional strain [74].

Such adaptations represent not disengagement but micro-negotiations, everyday acts through which neurodivergent archers carve out socially manageable ways to participate within environments that implicitly privilege neurotypical sociability.

5.3.2. Norms of Attention, Stillness, and Behaviour

Archery culture places strong emphasis on stillness, emotional composure, and tightly controlled bodily movement. While these expectations are understood as markers of discipline or good technique, they reflect deeper cultural norms about what an "appropriate" or "competent" sporting body should look like. Neurodivergent archers reported that these assumptions often failed to account for diverse attentional patterns, sensory regulation needs, and forms of self-stimulation or movement that support their concentration and comfort.

Research across neurodiversity studies has highlighted how neurotypical behavioural norms, including expectations of stillness and controlled affect, frequently marginalise neurodivergent forms of embodiment by framing them as disruptions or behavioural issues rather than legitimate modes of regulation [73]. This broader critique aligns with findings that autistic individuals may rely on movement, sensory input, or repetitive behaviours to maintain cognitive focus or regulate emotional states [77]. Thus, the incompatibility emerges not because neurodivergent bodies are "undisciplined" but because the sport's

norms presume a singular way of attending, listening, and holding the body. As one archer explained, "Coaches expect me to obey the instruction immediately, but my body doesn't do that". This dynamic exposes how sporting environments often interpret neurodivergent embodiment through the lens of behavioural deficiency rather than neurological difference.

Many archers in the dataset described struggling with instructions to "stand still", "stay calm", or "listen quietly", demands that often conflicted with their sensory or cognitive needs. Some reported being reprimanded for repetitive movements or stimming behaviours on the shooting line. Contemporary research reframes stimming not as a distraction but as an intrinsic part of adaptive functioning, supporting self-regulation and cognitive processing [78]. This suggests that suppressing such behaviours may not only increase discomfort but can also impede learning and performance.

Similarly, expectations of immediate compliance with coaching instructions created challenges for archers who required additional processing time. Studies in social cognition emphasise that neurodivergent individuals often employ different processing pathways, making rapid verbal compliance an unfair marker of attentiveness or motivation [76]. When coaches interpret delayed responses as disobedience or lack of effort, neurodivergent athletes may be wrongly characterised as resistant or inattentive.

To navigate these behavioural norms, participants developed personalised routines involving ritualised pre-shot sequences, controlled forms of movement, and sensory tools such as headphones or ear defenders. External research supports the importance of such personalised sensory-motor strategies; for example, the STAR Institute emphasises how sensory-based differences shape emotional regulation, motor planning, and attentional control [79]. Some archers preferred shooting outdoors where bodily movement felt less visible or policed, allowing them to stim, pace, or self-regulate, as shared by one participant: "Outdoors alone I can move and stim freely".

These adaptive practices constitute important forms of everyday negotiation, enabling neurodivergent archers to remain in the sport despite behavioural norms that were not designed with them in mind. Their strategies reveal both the rigidity of sporting expectations and the persistence of athletes who must continually reinterpret and modify these norms to make participation accessible.

5.3.3. Sensory and Environmental Barriers

Although archery is widely perceived as a calm and sensory-controlled sport, many participants described significant sensory challenges, particularly in indoor environments. Indoor competitions often involve echoing acoustics, crowded shooting lines, bright lighting, timing buzzers, and unpredictable noise, all of which can overwhelm neurodivergent athletes. One archer described indoor competition as "claustrophobic, loud, overstimulating. . . I get panic attacks", while another cited "timing buzzers, loud music, cramped lines, bright lighting" as overwhelming triggers. This aligns with broader findings that sensory processing differences profoundly shape how neurodivergent individuals experience sporting and learning environments [79].

Several archers reported indoor competitions as "claustrophobic" or "overstimulating", describing panic attacks, sensory overload, or shutdowns triggered by noise, fluorescent lights, or crowd proximity. These experiences reflect what Wood et al. [73] describe as feelings of being "overwhelmed and overloaded" among neurodivergent athletes, particularly in environments with intense sensory and social demands. Such environments are typically designed around neurotypical sensory thresholds, rendering neurodivergent sensory profiles invisible in planning, layout, and procedural design.

Beyond sensory input, uncertainties around competition procedures were also associated with increased anxiety. Some participants noted that judges and organisers often failed

to announce restart times or breaks clearly, which was particularly challenging for those experiencing time-blindness or heightened need for predictability. As one participant noted, "No idea when breaks end. . . they don't give times, which is stressful when you're time blind". This echoes research describing how disruptions to expected routines or unclear temporal structures disproportionately affect autistic individuals who rely on predictable sequencing to orient attention and regulate stress [76].

To manage these environmental barriers, archers reported arriving early to map venue layouts, choosing positions near exits, using ear defenders or sensory-modulating earplugs, or avoiding the indoor season entirely. These adaptations align with recommendations from sensory-based occupational therapy frameworks, which emphasise altering environments or using sensory supports to reduce overload and improve functional participation [79]. They also reflect the responses described in the neurodiversity-in-sport literature, where athletes enact micro strategies to reclaim autonomy within spaces not designed for their sensory needs [80].

These sensory and procedural barriers highlight how indoor archery spaces, ranging from lighting and acoustics to organisational routines, can reinforce ableist assumptions about whose bodies and sensory systems the sport is built to accommodate. Yet the strategies developed by neurodivergent archers demonstrate agency, adaptability, and negotiation, revealing how athletes reconfigure inaccessible spaces to support their continued participation.

5.3.4. Coaching as a Site of Ableist Assumptions

Coaching emerged as one of the most significant areas where neurodivergent archers felt the impact of ableist assumptions. Importantly, the accounts discussed here reflect athletes' lived experiences rather than evaluations of coaches' intentions or professional competence. Many participants described coaching environments built around a single, standardised model of learning, one that is typically fast-paced, verbal, and reliant on implicit interpretation. Such models align with conventional coaching frameworks that prioritise rapid processing, dense instruction, and immediate behavioural compliance, which can marginalise neurodivergent communication and learning styles [81].

Archers frequently reported receiving too many instructions at once or being expected to infer meaning rather than being given explicit, step-by-step guidance. As stated by an archer, there were "Too many instructions at once". These experiences mirror findings in the broader sport psychology literature, which show that neurodivergent athletes often require clarity, structure, and predictable sequencing, which are needs that are often overlooked in coaching designed for neurotypical learners [73]. Some participants also described discomfort with unsolicited physical touch used for technique correction—"They touched me without asking"—consistent with research demonstrating that autistic individuals may process touch differently and can experience unexpected contact as overwhelming or disorienting [82].

At a structural level, mainstream coaching frameworks often assume homogenous learning profiles, privileging auditory processing, rapid cognitive shifts, and implicit social cues. The inclusive coaching literature emphasises that such assumptions can unintentionally reproduce ableist expectations by overlooking alternative sensory, cognitive, or communicative needs [83,84]. This is particularly apparent in group-based coaching where pacing, noise, and social density can heighten sensory and cognitive load.

At the same time, participants emphasised that supportive coaching, characterised by clarity, patience, and consent-based communication, improved their experience. These positive examples align with recent work in neuroinclusive coaching, which advocates adapting communication medium, pacing, and structure based on the client's preferences [85]. For

example, archers described appreciating when a coach, as stated by an archer, "asks permission before touching", broke instructions into smaller steps, or explained the reasoning behind technique changes. Another archer noted that "explaining why helps me apply the logic to other problems". Such relational adjustments, although small, function as important anti-ableist practices that create psychological safety and support athlete autonomy.

Overall, the coaching landscape described by participants demonstrates how ableist assumptions are embedded not in individual prejudice but in longstanding norms governing communication, learning, and technique. Neurodivergent archers' accounts reveal the significant impact that coaching styles, pacing, and interpersonal dynamics have on their capacity to participate fully and comfortably.

5.3.5. Negotiating Constraints and Belonging

Having identified the communication, behavioural, sensory, and coaching constraints embedded within mainstream archery environments, the data also revealed the various ways neurodivergent archers negotiated these barriers in order to sustain participation. Consistent with Constraints Negotiation Theory, participation was not determined solely by the presence of constraints but by participants' ability to develop strategies that reduced their impact and enabled continued involvement [50–53].

Across the dataset, neurodivergent archers demonstrated considerable agency in negotiating intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints. Rather than withdrawing from archery or attempting to conform uncritically to inaccessible environments, participants developed personalised approaches that enabled participation while protecting wellbeing, autonomy, and enjoyment. These findings position neurodivergent athletes as active agents in shaping their own participation rather than passive recipients of inaccessible sporting environments. These practices echo research on neurodiversity in sport, showing that neurodivergent athletes frequently develop personalised systems for managing overwhelm, protecting autonomy, and preserving enjoyment in sport [73].

Participants described a range of negotiation strategies. These included attending quieter or low-pressure sessions, choosing outdoor instead of indoor ranges, shooting alone or in very small groups, using sensory supports such as ear defenders, and limiting social engagement to predictable interactions. Although these strategies did not remove the underlying barriers, they enabled athletes to continue participating by adapting the environment to better meet their needs. This is consistent with research on neuroinclusive sport and sensory processing, which suggests that modifying environments, routines, and participation conditions is often essential for supporting sustained engagement among neurodivergent athletes [79,80].

Participants also negotiated constraints by redefining what meaningful participation and membership looked like. Several archers distinguished between the physical act of shooting and the wider social culture of the club. Statements such as "I shoot alone but feel part of the club" or "I avoid the social parts and just do the archery" illustrate how participants maintained a sense of belonging without conforming to dominant expectations of sociability. These accounts demonstrate that participation does not require full adherence to prevailing social norms; rather, athletes actively shaped the terms of their involvement in ways that aligned with their needs and preferences. In doing so, they challenged assumptions that there is a single "correct" way to participate in archery socially, behaviourally, or sensorily, demonstrating that meaningful participation can take diverse forms. This interpretation is consistent with scholarship that frames neurodivergent adaptation as intentional self-advocacy and boundary setting rather than withdrawal [74].

5.4. Micro-Transformations: Neurodivergent Archers as Architects of Fit

The previous section demonstrated how neurodivergent archers negotiated constraints to sustain participation within mainstream archery environments. However, the data suggest that negotiation was not always limited to managing constraints. In some instances, these negotiations contributed to broader changes in the relationships between athletes, coaches, clubs, and participation environments. We conceptualise these processes as micro-transformations.

We define micro-transformation as a small-scale but lasting change to coaching or club practice that begins with an individual archer's negotiated adjustment (for example, a sensory aid, a change in coaching communication style, or a revised approach to introducing new members). A micro-transformation occurs when that adjustment is taken up by others and becomes part of ordinary practice, rather than remaining a one-off accommodation for the individual who first raised it. This distinguishes micro-transformation from accommodation, which typically resolves misfit for the individual concerned without altering the wider environment. As the following sections show, this shift from individual negotiation to shared practice was more evident within coaching and club settings than within competitive environments, where its effectiveness diminished markedly.

We describe neurodivergent archers who initiate micro-transformations as architects of fit. Rather than simply seeking to adapt to existing environments, architects of fit actively shape the conditions of participation through acts of negotiation, self-advocacy, and experimentation. When individual adjustments become embedded within everyday practice, these athletes contribute to the ongoing construction of P-E fit for themselves and others.

Where Constraints Negotiation Theory explains how individuals maintain participation despite barriers, micro-transformations highlight how participation can also reshape the conditions in which it occurs. Rather than simply adapting to existing environments, neurodivergent archers contributed to changes in everyday practices, routines, and expectations. Although these changes were often small and localised, they altered the degree of P-E fit available within archery settings.

This perspective challenges traditional approaches to disability sport inclusion, which often positions inclusion as a static outcome characterised by a set of environmental adaptations delivered by organisations to a passive disabled athlete [18]. Such approaches often prioritise the removal of physical barriers and initial access while overlooking the attitudinal, social, and experiential conditions required for meaningful participation [7]. In contrast, our findings suggest that inclusion is a more dynamic and relational process. Rather than being passive recipients of inclusion, neurodivergent archers actively contributed to shaping the conditions under which participation occurred. Through ongoing interactions with coaches, peers, and clubs, athletes negotiated not only their own involvement but also the social and material conditions of participation itself.

This interpretation aligns with P-E fit theory, which conceptualises fit as a dynamic and evolving relationship rather than a fixed state [41]. From an ecological perspective, fit is not just an interaction between an individual and a fixed environment but instead should be considered as part of one interconnected system [86]. Cognitive processes, physical actions and behaviours are therefore understood as emerging through coordination between the athlete, their body, and the environment [87].

Consequently, when neurodivergent archers in our study negotiated sensory adjustments, such as "quiet time at the range" or "visual instructions", these requests represented more than strategies for managing constraints. They also represent attempts to actively reconfigure the performer–environment system in ways that created new affordances for participation [44,47]. In this sense, participation and adaptation were co-produced through ongoing interactions rather than pre-existing and externally imposed [88]. Neurodivergent

archers therefore acted as active agents in shaping the conditions of participation, contributing to changes in practice that supported more meaningful and inclusive engagement.

Micro-transformations thus illustrate how neurodivergent archers can actively project, promote and initialise change in the environment in which they operate. To convey this, we adopt the expression architects of fit, through which we emphasise everyday acts of self-advocacy and negotiation to reshape participation environments. Neurodivergent athletes are therefore not only negotiators of constraint but contributors to the ongoing production of fit.

5.4.1. Micro-Transformations in Coaching Practice

In our study, these micro-transformations were most visible in the athlete–coaching relationship. The traditional command-driven models that heavily rely on verbal guidance are frequently ill-suited for neurodivergent archers [89]. Indeed, data from this study shows that 79% (n = 42) of coaches have not attended neurodiversity training, and 60% (n = 136) of neurodivergent archers have not experienced suitable coaching approaches. These limitations became particularly visible in the organisation and delivery of coaching practice. Participants described environments characterised by dense and rapid verbal instruction that were often experienced as overwhelming or difficult to process. For example, participants described these instructions as a "splurge of verbal instruction" that assumed information "will all be remembered" and involved "lots of instructions given all at once". This is difficult for neurodivergent archers who noted that verbal instructions are easily "misconstrued or misunderstood" while others noted that their "mind wanders if too much talking", both resulting in neurodivergent archers being unable to "retain the detail to put into practice". These patterns demonstrate how misfit is produced, not through individual deficit, but through the structure, pacing and modality of communication itself.

Critically, these moments also act as points from which micro-transformations emerge, with neurodivergent archers acting as architects of fit by shaping coaching practices through ongoing dialogue, feedback, and self-advocacy. Participants identified instances where coaching practices shifted in response to athlete needs, resulting in more accessible and effective interactions. These adjustments were typically small in scale but significant in impact, with transformations in style, pace and scope of delivery. For example, neurodivergent archers described both experiencing and valuing a visual-first coaching style, noting that "teaching visually works better than long explanations", as well as the importance of pacing instructions, such as "clear instructions given in smaller chunks [followed by] positive praise". Such practices were associated with reduced misalignment between coaching environments and athletes' sensory, cognitive, and communicative preferences. Rather than requiring athletes to continually adjust to established coaching norms, aspects of the coaching environment itself became more responsive to individual differences. Furthermore, by broadening the ways in which coaching information was communicated and understood, these practices expanded the range of affordances available to athletes and challenged assumptions that there is a single optimal approach to instruction, communication, or skill development [83,85].

Neurodivergent archers emphasised that these changes were underpinned by a shift away from a "fix the person" mindset to one of partnership and co-creation. This means that for micro-transformation to take place, coaches need to "talk with the archer, not at them" and "listen to the athlete about what they need", emphasising that "patience, repetition and understanding go a long way". Within this context, micro-transformations can be understood as a situated, practice-based response to misfit, emerging through relational co-creation, enabling coaches to bypass gaps in formal expertise [81].

5.4.2. Co-Producing Fit Within Club Ecologies

Beyond the athlete–coaching relationship, micro-transformations were also evident within the broader club ecology. Our findings indicate that neurodivergent archers actively negotiated sensory, social and environmental constraints to provide a better "fit" for their individual action capabilities. Participants emphasised that misfit often emerges from structural club constraints such as noise, challenging social settings, and spatial factors including clutter and overcrowding. For instance, archers noted that "sometimes my club's sessions are too loud. . . there's 20 people talking at the same time and also sometimes music playing". The "background chatter" and "loud music in the shooting venue" were often experienced as overwhelming, identifying an auditory overload that hampers the ability to focus, an issue recognised more broadly [90]. From an ecological dynamics perspective, noise represents non-functional information that competes with task-relevant affordances (such as the rhythmic timing of a shot) and acts as an environmental constraint that can overwhelm a performer's ability to maintain functional sensorimotor control. The negotiation for the acceptance of headphones or ear defenders represents an attempt to redefine club practices and dominant standards of normalcy, expanding the conditions under which P-E fit can be achieved. As one participant explained, these tools "should be a lot more accepted" because they allow archers to manage the specific affordances of the range by regulating their sensory environment, either by reducing unwanted noise through "that extra bit of quiet (ear defenders)" or by introducing controlled stimulation through music. For some, this meant avoiding distressing sounds, as "releasing the string could be a bad noise". For others, music provided a focal anchor "giving me something to focus on other than the noise of people talking" and helping them "focus a lot more than if I shot without it". Here, we see neurodivergent archers acting as architects of fit, actively reorganising the performer–environment system to filter out distracting stimuli, thereby creating a secure learning ecosystem that allows for meaningful and inclusive participation.

In addition to auditory factors, the spatial layout of the range can serve as a critical constraint on participation. Our findings suggest that overcrowding, such as having "too many people on a boss", "busy ranges" or "when there are archers standing close to me on the shooting line", can create a sensory density that becomes cognitively overwhelming. This overload appeared to narrow the range of perceived action possibilities, effectively collapsing their landscape of affordances [90,91]. Consequently, when archers negotiate for a "separate section that's wider spaced, away from the main group", they are performing an essential act of environmental design [92], responding not only to close interpersonal proximity and noise but also to limited and cluttered space, reflected in concerns such as "I worry about falling over bows". By increasing the physical distance between themselves and others, they reduce the cognitive burden associated with coordinating action in a densely populated and constrained space, which in turn allows them to detect and act upon relevant affordances within the performance landscape [88].

These spatial and sensory adjustments are further supported by shifts in the club's social interactional practices. Participants reported that "walking into a large group inside the club" can be an intimidating barrier to engagement. To mitigate this, clubs have adopted practices of pedagogical scaffolding [90], such as introducing athletes "to other club members in small groups" and arranging "a quiet chat away from the club". This represents a micro-transformation away from a one-size-fits-all approach towards creating a supportive environment tailored to each athlete's comfort level, allowing them to remain engaged and respond to relevant affordances.

5.4.3. The Limits of Micro-Transformation: Competitive Misfit and Structural Change

Despite these examples of successful micro-transformations, their effectiveness diminished markedly within competitive environments. While clubs appear increasingly receptive to micro-transformations that contribute to P-E fit, such as wearing headphones and ear defenders to support sensory regulation, competitive settings often remain governed by entrenched ableist norms and standards that resist these alignment processes. Consequently, adaptations are often viewed as deviations from tradition rather than essential tools for enabling meaningful participation [93]. In this sense, inclusion becomes largely illusory; while competitive contexts may appear inclusive on paper, as they allow the participation of neurodivergent athletes, this has appeared to have done little to challenge the ableist structures and the entrenched standards of normalcy that underpin them [18,94].

This misalignment is further exacerbated by the inherently intense nature of competitive environments, which are typically busier, louder, and more crowded than everyday club settings. As one participant explained, "Some indoor tournaments are too noisy and crowded, I can get sensory overload, and I find them overwhelming". When athletes encounter this heightened and inflexible environment, the result can be an overwhelming experience, producing a severe P-E misfit that can exceed individual coping capabilities. One participant explained, "I now avoid indoor comps because I can't use auditory tools, despite them not being a safety concern". In this context, the refusal to permit sensory adaptations acts as an environmental constraint that forces the athlete to compete in a state of auditory overload, contributing to P-E misfit. Such institutional inflexibility was, in some cases, associated with self-exclusion. As another participant described, they "ended up dropping out of that particular comp because I was in tears from being overwhelmed". In Constraints Negotiation Theory terms, this represents a failure of negotiation as the structural constraints [50], in this case the refusal to permit auditory adaptations, exceed the athlete's available coping resources. The outcome is not adjustment but withdrawal.

Importantly, misfit is not confined solely to competitive contexts. When it emerges in either club or competition settings, it can have significant consequences for participation. At its most acute, misfit can become overwhelming and distressing, prompting athletes to withdraw partially or entirely. One participant illustrated this vividly: "The indoor season. . . is a highly claustrophobic, loud, overstimulating environment. . . [where] I get severe panic attacks due to the intensity of the environment". This aligns with broader evidence indicating that crowded, noisy, and unpredictable environments can trigger sensory overload, particularly among neurodivergent individuals, resulting in heightened anxiety, distress, and a need to escape or disengage [95,96]. Here, negotiation is foreclosed entirely rather than simply unsuccessful as the intensity of the environment leaves no room for adjustment. In turn, it prompts disengagement as the only available response. These experiences highlight how participation is shaped not simply by individual capacity, but by the design and demands of the environment itself.

Our findings suggest that P-E fit in archery is not a static outcome of policy, but a relational achievement facilitated by the cultural openness of the sporting community. As Christiaens and Brittain [18] posit, true inclusion is a multi-faceted and difficult process that requires negotiating a mutual space of participation between the athlete and the club. Our findings add to this that when a community is underpinned by an ethos of acceptance, this negotiation becomes a shared, co-creative endeavour that, through micro transformations, can contribute to more inclusive spaces. The capacity for these micro-transformations to take root is inextricably linked to the inclusive attitudes within the archery field. Our data indicate a significant cultural baseline of support, with 94% of respondents agreeing that inclusion enriches the archery community and 90% acknowledging that neurodivergent archers can perform at the same level as their neurotypical peers. This "openness" serves as

the essential catalyst for the reorganisation of the performer–environment system. Because the social environment is receptive to the archer's agency, neurodivergent archers become active architects of their experience, identifying and negotiating the misalignments they encounter in everyday practice. As one participant observed, "most ND people know what works for them", and when the club environment is flexible, they can successfully advocate for the spatial and sensory conditions required. This in turn contributes to a shift toward a partnership model of coaching. Participants noted that the most effective coaches were those who were "incredibly patient", willing to "ask permission", and confident enough to make "manual adjustments" based on the athlete's immediate feedback.

However, it is important to recognise the limits of relying on micro-transformations, which are often necessarily grounded in trial-and-error, in isolation. In the absence of inclusive policy and adequate coach education, such approaches may be shaped by taken-for-granted assumptions about ability, leading coaches to unknowingly reproduce ableist norms in their everyday practice [94]. Crucially, these dynamics do not only affect coaches; over time, they may also be internalised by athletes reinforcing perceptions of limitation, difference, or conditional belonging [18]. Inclusion in sport is shaped through the interaction of structure and practice. As such, a clear policy framework and appropriate coach education remain essential, operating in parallel with an open environment that enables micro-transformations based on individual needs. As one respondent insightfully captured: "when you have met one neurodivergent athlete, you have met ONE neurodivergent athlete! All too often we speak of neurodivergent people as if they are all the same, which is completely wrong. All need to be treated completely differently, as their needs are extremely diverse".

5.5. Limitations

Several limitations should be considered. Recruitment relied on self-selection through Archery GB's communication channels, so respondents were already engaged with the sport and may have differed from non-respondents in their level of involvement, interest, or willingness to discuss their experiences. Consequently, the findings do not capture neurodivergent individuals who have disengaged from or never attempted archery. Diagnostic status was self-reported, and 31.4% of the sample self-identified as neurodivergent without formal diagnosis (rising to 38.5% among those reporting autism); combined with substantial diagnostic overlap, this means subgroup comparisons should be read as exploratory rather than established differences between neurodivergent groups. The study did not include a neurotypical comparison group, so findings describe neurodivergent archers' experiences but cannot establish whether these patterns are unique to this population. The cross-sectional design captures a single point in time and cannot establish causal relationships or change over the course of involvement in the sport. A further 10.6% of responses (n = 24) were completed by a parent or carer rather than the archer directly; these may reflect an observer's interpretation rather than a first-person account, which should be considered when interpreting the findings. Experiences may also have been shaped by differences between clubs, including variations in club culture, coaching practices, facilities, membership composition, and approaches to inclusion; however, the study was not designed to examine club-level variation and therefore could not systematically assess these influences. Finally, the study was conducted within UK, Archery GB-affiliated mainstream clubs specifically, and findings may not transfer to other sporting contexts, to disability- or neurodivergence-specific programmes, or archery settings in other national contexts.

6. Conclusions

This exploratory study investigates the experiences of neurodivergent athletes in UK mainstream archery clubs. It highlights their sense of belonging and wellbeing and the way they negotiate these against the environment, practices and norms in which they operate. The findings show that for most respondents, archery's structural characteristics—such as its reliance on individual performance, predictable routines, and autonomy—align closely with the preferences and needs of neurodivergent participants. Participants reported that these features not only support skill acquisition and confidence but also provide opportunities for social connection and belonging, which are often limited in other sporting contexts. Exploratory analyses suggested this alignment may be less consistent for respondents with dyspraxia, though given the sample's diagnostic overlap, this pattern should be treated as indicative rather than established, and warrants further research attention. While these positive results suggest a notable "Person–Environment fit", our data also reveal areas of "misfit" [34,35,39], reflecting tensions in the way neurodivergent archers experience the sport and its environment. Importantly, these experiences were not uniform across the sample. Exploratory subgroup analyses suggested some variation across neurodivergent profiles, with respondents reporting dyspraxia tending to report less positive experiences overall. While these observations should be interpreted cautiously given the exploratory nature of the analyses and the substantial overlap between neurodivergent identities, they highlight potentially important variations in experience and identify an area warranting further investigation.

In line with the neurodiversity framework [23], we endeavoured to approach neurodivergence not as a pathological deviation but rather as an unbiased variation within the human body's broad range of capabilities. At the same time, we looked at the environment not per se but in terms of affordances [47–49]—material, relational assemblages, networks of elements of the physical environment and individuals operating therewith. Ostensibly, our data hint at processes of "othering" that reveal a normalisation of sporting rules, environments and behaviours around neurotypical bodies and assumptions, while positioning neurological differences as deviations. Othering emerged in several instances in the qualitative comments, suggesting that not only are the physical sporting environments created with ableist assumptions in mind, but sports-related norms and social expectations are as well. While the social model advocates the placement of disabled people in non-disabled settings, our findings are consistent with one of the main critiques of this framework: the fact that the underlying structures, norms and expectations remain unchanged.

Notably, our study revealed the way such norms are negotiated by neurodivergent athletes. In line with Constraints Negotiation theory [50], we were able to identify acts of bodily micro-negotiation, activated by the athletes as a response mechanism to environmental barriers. While on the surface this reveals a sense of adaptability of neurodivergent athletes, it also highlights a discrepancy (misfit) between personal attitudes and the environment. While micro-negotiations are adaptations that athletes in our sample pro-actively adopted or demanded and that are in line with their neurodivergence traits, our study also detected instances of "masking" in which neurodivergent athletes suppressed their neurodivergent traits to fit with the environment. Our data therefore highlight a degree of P-E misfit which suggests that sporting norms, being conceived with neurotypical bodies in mind, fail to accommodate alternative versions of athletic movement and tactics, therefore creating tensions in neurodivergent athletes' experience between their natural mode of regulation and the rigid expectations imposed by the sporting system.

Not only do athletes have to cope with sporting norms but also with specific socio- behavioural expectations (such as engaging in small talk or understanding implicit meaning) within sporting settings, which further adds to the argument that sporting environments are

dominated by normative assumptions around the way athletes should behave. Coaching also emerges as a site of ableist assumptions, with several athletes denouncing approaches revolving around a single learning style, typically fast-paced, verbal, and reliant on implicit interpretation, which sit uncomfortably with archers with neurodivergence. Acts of micro-negotiation reveal a degree of disabled athletes' agency (as opposed to subjection) against an ableist system and translate at times into micro-transformations—for example, the instances in which the neurodivergent archers in our study request sensory adjustments, such as "quiet time at the range" or "visual instructions". In these instances, neurodivergent athletes act as architects of fit, actively shaping the conditions of participation rather than merely adapting to them. The accommodation of these needs should not be regarded as making concessions—rather as active decisions to engage in collaborative efforts towards a reshaping of the system to ensure everyone can meaningfully participate.

The archery environment in the UK emerges as a site in which micro-negotiations give rise to micro-transformations, revealing alternative modes of regulation, athletic tactics and behaviour that destabilise the dominant way archery as a sport is understood, practised and organised, and de-centre neurotypical norms and ableist ways of thinking. Future research should explore how neurodivergent athletes negotiate P-E fit across different sporting contexts and consider whether some of these practices may be conceptualised as forms of resistance in the Foucauldian sense. Such work could investigate how everyday acts of self-advocacy, negotiation, and micro-transformation interact with broader power relations embedded within sporting environments. Moreover, future research could adopt an explanatory approach and look at the causal relationship between variables identified by the present study. Sport clubs, coaches, and facilities can use these findings to implement material and social interventions that make archery—and sports more broadly—more accessible and welcoming. A key insight is the importance of proactively co-creating micro-interventions with athletes, ensuring that adaptations are collaborative, responsive, and tailored to individual needs. By recognising neurodivergent athletes as architects of fit, coaches and clubs can move beyond delivering accommodation towards collaboratively negotiating the conditions of participation and shaping environments that support meaningful inclusion. The key theoretical, managerial, and policy contributions and recommendations emerging from this study are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Contributions and Recommendations.

Contribution	Focus	Key Target Audience	Insights and Recommendations
Theoretical	Power dynamics in sporting normative production	Academic Researchers, Sporting institutions	Decentres sporting norms and assumptions, highlighting how neurodivergent athletes negotiate P-E fit and contribute to micro-transformations in sporting practice. Invites a widening of the scope to investigate how discourses around sporting norms are destabilised by neurodivergent understandings and modus operandi across different sports.
Managerial	Environmental implementation and coaching	Sports communities, coaches	Promote pro-active co-creation of tailored micro-interventions, recognising neurodivergent athletes as active contributors to the negotiation of P-E fit. Coaching training should be structured in a way to educate about bias and guide a transition towards coaching styles open to a broad range of athletic regulation. Training environments should allow for a dynamic, flexible and adaptive response to different athletic styles.

Table 2. *Cont.*

Contribution	Focus	Key Target Audience	Insights and Recommendations
Policy	Governance interventions	Sporting institutions, National governing bodies, facilities suppliers	Sporting guidelines should support the co-creation of participation environments that accommodate diverse sensory, social, and communicative needs. Introduce mandatory neurodivergence training for certified coaches. Neurodivergence representation should be included in governance and guideline design.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AGB	Archery Great Britain
ND	Neurodiverse
P-E	Person–Environment
UK	United Kingdom

Notes

[1] Archery GB is the national governing body for the sport of archery in the UK.

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