

h o o p s & w h e e l s

by ronald j. berger

With just four-and-a-half seconds to play and the score tied, the red-haired college senior caught an inbound pass. Jeremy Lade pushed his way to the top of the key, 20 feet from the hoop. Guarded by two opposing players, he tossed up a shot. The buzzer rattled the arena as the ball soared through the air, banked off the glass, and swished through the net. Pandemonium ensued. Teammates and fans rushed the floor, mobbing the game's hero.

The year was 2003, and the Rolling Warhawks of the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater (UWW) had won their fourth intercollegiate wheelchair basketball national championship.

For a moment, those of us sitting in the stands forgot we were watching a game of wheelchair basketball. It was basketball pure and simple, and there was none of the stigma or pity often associated with people in wheelchairs, those who are part of the broad category now commonly known as “people with disabilities.” When we regained our composure, many of us wondered why we hadn’t seen more of this on ESPN or other sports channels. After all, are billiards or poker or hotdog eating contests more entertaining as “sport” than wheelchair basketball?

Even basketball aficionados may not appreciate the special skills that are part of the wheelchair game, especially one played by Paralympian athletes like Lade. Imagine how difficult it is to shoot at a 10-foot basket from the three-point line, the free-throw line, or even closer, *while sitting in a chair*. Imagine moving a wheelchair with speed and agility, maintaining

your stamina for the duration of a 40- or 48-minute game. Then there’s the physical contact, with chairs banging against chairs, tipping over as players fall to the ground then pull themselves up unassisted.

Sociologically speaking, the entire scene could be viewed as a “performance region,” an event that disrupts conventional assumptions of what a disabled body can do or scrambles the categories of ability and disability in a way that potentially alters onlookers’ perceptions about people with disabilities.

The game of wheelchair basketball also raises a question sport sociologists have been asking for some time: What is “sport?” A conventional definition would require physical activity, competition, and an institutional structure in which the rules are patterned or standardized over time (within flexible parameters). The latter element also entails the emergence of regulatory bodies that oversee the sport and a cadre of experts who develop, disseminate, and teach specific training regimens that enhance participants’ skills.

Although disability sports clearly meet these criteria, their

defining feature is that they're designed for and intended to be practiced by people with disabilities. In some cases, such as wheelchair basketball or wheelchair tennis, players need adaptive equipment to participate, in other cases, such as swimming or wrestling, they don't. But because disability sport structures are segregated from able-bodied sports, they're typically relegated to second-class status, as if only "natural" bodies play natural sports and "unnatural" bodies play unnatural sports.

challenging marginalization

A number of factors, not the least of which is the historical role of sport in promoting the dominant ideal of the "athletic body," reinforce the marginalized status of disability sports. At first glance, people with disabilities appear to have bodies that contradict this aesthetic athletic ideal. To some people, in fact, the notion of an athlete in a wheelchair is an oxymoron. Also, for most of human history sports have been the province of men and associated with the dominant form of masculinity in a society. Disabled men, on the other hand, have been viewed as the antithesis of this norm—weak, vulnerable, and incomplete.

Disability scholars and activists call this phenomenon "ableism." Like racism and sexism, ableism entails discrimination on the basis of a social status, and it assumes some people (and bodies) are "normal" and superior while other people (and bodies) are "abnormal" and inferior. But people with disabilities who play sports, especially at the elite level, challenge conventional notions of physicality and expectations about

what a disabled body can do and should be. They offer not so much an alternative definition of sport but an example of how sport is a contested terrain in which different practices compete for what counts as "real" sport.

"The most important sociological issue to recognize ... is that people in particular places at particular times struggle over whose ideas about sports will count as the ideas in a group or society," sport sociologist Jay Coakley has noted. Indeed, Coakley insists there are no definitive, timeless standards about the

Wheelchair basketball disrupts conventional assumptions about what a disabled body can do.

meaning, purpose, and organization of sports. "[T]here is," he has said, "no universal agreement about who will participate in sports, about the circumstances under which participation will occur, or about who will sponsor sports or the reasons underlying sponsorship."

the origins of wheelchair basketball

Sports for people with mobility impairments developed in the aftermath of World War II, at a time when improved battlefield evacuation methods and medical technologies dramatically increased the survival rate of the wounded. These soldiers, including those with spinal-cord injuries, would have died in previous wars. Many of the disabled veterans in the United States, who were often warehoused in Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals throughout the country, had competed in sports



Photo courtesy Sports 'N' Spokes Magazine

A California team from the 1950s.



PNVSports 'N Spokes Photos by Curt Beamer

Drew Dokos celebrated Illinois's championship win of the 31st National Invitational Wheelchair Basketball Tournament in 2008.

and wouldn't tolerate inactivity. They started playing pool, table tennis, and catch, and then progressed to swimming, bowling, and pick-up games of water polo, softball, touch football, and basketball.

Of all the disability sports that emerged in the wake of World War II, wheelchair basketball became the most popular. In 1948 several VA teams were organized under the auspices of the Paralyzed Veterans of America, and the Birmingham Flying Wheels from California made the first of several cross-

The involvement of able-bodied people in disability sports is what scholars call "reverse integration," which some believe would undermine opportunities for people with disabilities to compete.

country tours, competing with teams around the country and spreading the word about the sport among disabled veterans and non-veterans alike.

In 1949 Tim Nugent, who developed the prototype (which was later adopted throughout the country) for disabled student services at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, organized the first National Wheelchair Basketball Tournament

in Galesburg, Ill. Following the tournament, Nugent and the participating players formed the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA), the sport's first national governing body. The NWBA's mission included standardizing rules, determining the eligibility of participating individuals and teams, conducting tournaments, and "foster[ing] the concept of the participant as an athlete in his own right, and by doing so, establish[ing] the validity of the sport as a legitimate avenue of athletic expression for all disabled individuals."

Currently, the NWBA boasts a membership of more than 2,000 players. It organizes men's, women's, juniors', and collegiate divisions and it sponsors more than 200 teams. Although the NWBA is an amateur organization, a number of its teams receive financial support from, and bear the names of, professional NBA teams. The NWBA is the official body that governs the selection, training, and fielding of U.S. teams that compete in international competitions, which include the Paralympics and the Wheelchair Basketball Championship, or Gold Cup, held every four years in the off-years between the Paralympics.

The seeds of the Paralympic movement were planted in the late 1940s under the leadership of neurosurgeon Sir Ludwig Guttmann of the National Spinal Cord Injury Center at England's Stoke Mandeville Hospital as part of the therapeutic recreation offered to disabled veterans. The first competitions, held in 1948, included just a few events such as shot put, javelin, and archery, but soon expanded to include other sports. In 1952, Guttmann invited disabled veterans from Holland to compete in the International Stoke Mandeville Games, which included 130 athletes who competed in 12 different events. During these games the Paralympics were born and the first competition was held in Italy in 1960.

The term Paralympics initially referred to the word "paraplegic" but later came to mean "parallel," as the competitions (since 1988) have been held just following and in the same venue as the regular Olympics. At the same time, the complete programmatic separation of the Paralympics from the Olympics

continues to be an obstacle to the legitimacy of wheelchair basketball as a "real" sport per se.

Advocates for the integration of wheelchair basketball (though not necessarily for all disability sports) into the Olympics have wondered why badminton, table tennis, curling, or even mountain biking or beach volleyball,

to name a few sports, are deemed more worthy of Olympic status. They wonder whether people think the inclusion of wheelchair basketball will somehow diminish the Olympic Games, and how long this "separate but (un)equal" model can be maintained.

Paralympian and other elite disabled athletes are sometimes disgruntled the public is more familiar with the Special Olympics

than the Paralympics and doesn't understand the difference or even conflates the two sports competitions.

The Special Olympics, founded by Eunice Kennedy Shriver in 1968, is better funded through charitable contributions, particularly the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation, and is designed for the cognitively disabled. Although the Special Olympics are competitive, the intensity is relatively controlled in favor of an "everyone is a winner" philosophy.

The Paralympics, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter. The athletes who participate in these games train and compete with the same level of dedication and intensity as their able-bodied Olympic counterparts. They don't want to be dismissed with a patronizing "good job, isn't it nice they can do that?" attitude. "It is not about overcoming adversity. It is not about rehabilitation," Lade (currently the team's coach) said on the eve of UWW's recent eighth national championship victory. "It is about elite athletes doing what they do best, playing basketball."

the case for integration

One significant barrier to the integration of disability sports in the Olympic movement, as well as the mainstreaming of disability sports more generally, is the exclusion in most athletic venues of able-bodied players.

This is an entirely different matter than, say, the case of South African Paralympic runner Oscar Pistorius wanting to compete in the regular Olympics. Known as the "Blade Runner" and "the fastest man on no legs," double amputee Pistorius races with high-tech artificial legs. It also differs from the case of golfer Casey Martin, who suffers from a degenerative leg condition that prevents him from traversing a golf course without a cart. (Martin caused controversy in 2001 because he wanted to use a cart to participate in PGA Tour events. Although the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Americans with Disabilities Act required that Martin be permitted to use a cart, the PGA and the rest of the golf establishment refused to accord him social legitimacy.)

The involvement of able-bodied people in disability sports is a matter of what disability sports scholars call "reverse integration," which some believe would undermine opportunities for people with disabilities to compete. This is somewhat akin to concerns some women athletes and scholars have with regard to opening competition for traditionally female teams such as volleyball to boys and young men.

The NWBA faced a similar problem in its early years, as players with rather diverse impairments were attracted to the game and some teams started using less-disabled players to gain an advantage. Ambulatory post-polio players and amputees or those missing a foot or some toes, for example, have full use of their upper bodies and thus have an advantage over spinal-cord injured players with restricted upper-body movement. Some of these players are able to lean out of their chairs to shoot or



PN/Sports 'N Spokes Photos by Curt Beamer

During Game 20 of the 34th National Women's Wheelchair Basketball Tournament in 2008, Arizona's Nicole McDonald (30) reached for a rebound between Dallas Mavericks' Pam Fontaine (15) and Kari Miller (30). Arizona won the game 67-48.

pass, grab a rebound, receive a pass, or pick up the ball from the floor. In the 1960s the NWBA attempted to address this problem of competitive fairness by instituting a classification system whereby less-impaired players were assigned a higher number of points than more-impaired players, and teams weren't allowed to put players on the floor whose points totaled more than a certain amount at any one time.

The Canadian Wheelchair Basketball Association is one of the few organizations that allow able-bodied people, who are assigned the maximum number of points, to play in its local and national competitions. The view in Canada is that, functionally speaking, for the purpose of wheelchair basketball there's little or no difference between fully able-bodied players and the highest classification of disabled-bodied players.

"So much of the game is moving a wheelchair," Tracy Chenoweth, who coached the UWW team from 1998 to 2007, explained to me. A highly classified disabled player "can bend over and pick up every ball I can. He can use his abs, trunk, and hip flexors for stability, speed, and balance."

rethinking sport

Other sports use classifications systems—based on age, gender, weight, or Division I, II, and III status, for example—to regulate competition. Why not consider the classification system in wheelchair basketball in these terms?

Moreover, if we understand sports in terms of the contested definition, whereby different practices compete for what counts as "real" sport, we might see the game of wheelchair basketball in an entirely different light, and see the contemporary sports wheelchair—lightweight and sleek in design—as a piece of equipment anyone can use like a bicycle, bobsled, baseball glove, or hockey stick. If an able-bodied person wants to learn how to maneuver a wheelchair and shoot from a sitting position, why not let him or her play?



PMSports 'N Spokes Photos by Curt Beamer

In the championship game of the 31st National Invitational Wheelchair Basketball Tournament, Brian Bell (43), of Illinois, attempted to protect the ball from Whitewater's Matt Lesperance (33) and Joe Chambers (55). Illinois won 63-58.

Joe Johnson, a Paralympian from Canada who has played wheelchair basketball professionally in Australia and Germany, told me that when Canada first allowed able-bodied people to play, many had mixed feelings. "The common sentiment was, 'This is our sport. We can't play stand-up basketball, so why should we let them play wheelchair basketball?'" he said. But he saw the hypocrisy in this. "We want acceptance. ... We're saying 'come watch us play, but you can't play yourself.' I think if we started getting able-bodied people involved, the sport would grow and become more popular."

Revising the eligibility rules of wheelchair basketball to include able-bodied players, at least in some venues, would help accomplish what sports scholars refer to as "genuine integration," where disabled and able-bodied players compete on a truly equal playing field and players' impairments are recognized and accepted without becoming handicaps, or as kinesiologist Karen DePauw suggests, the sport is defined by the "(in)visibility of disability."

To be sure, some people have questioned, and will continue to question, whether people with disabilities actually benefit from "able-bodied achievement values" (whether in integrated or segregated settings), and whether the competitive athletic model is an appropriate one for them to emulate. But what we should be working toward is the development of differentiated sports structures for people with disabilities, or what Howard

Nixon calls a "continuum of options ... ranging from relatively uncompetitive recreational sports where 'everyone is a winner' to highly competitive elite sports where only a very talented few are selected or earn the right to compete." This is the approach taken in able-bodied sports, and in spite of the stress of elite

Disability sports can help move us beyond narrow conceptions of physical "normality" and reframe what appears to be lacking as something replete with possibility.

competition, there's no reason to expect or desire disabled athletes to forgo comparable opportunities to excel.

More generally, a major impediment to the legitimacy of wheelchair basketball as a mainstream sport is the public and media perception of it in terms of a "human interest" news story—a story about people overcoming adversity or "supercrips" who accomplish amazing feats, but not a story about legitimate athletes.

Mike Frogley, a former Paralympian player and coach from Canada who now coaches the University of Illinois wheelchair basketball team, told me the key will be getting the public and news media to recognize players of differing abilities, as they do in other sports.

“So they can say, wow, [that player] is a phenomenal athlete. He’s just spectacular. Or [that player], he’s pretty good. He can play with some of the better players, but he’s not one of them. He just doesn’t have the athleticism,” Frogley said.

People will also need to recognize all the training and hard work that goes into becoming an elite athlete. It’s lifting weights, running drills, scrimmaging—nearly every day. And from a coaching point of view, it’s scouting, recruiting, watching video tape, developing strategy, and making game plans.

Wheelchair basketball deserves a wider audience. In countries outside the United States, where there’s less competition for the public’s attention and sports dollar, elite athletes are paid and play before larger crowds than in the United States. Frogley and the other coaches and players I’ve talked to think the NWBA needs to reconsider its exclusively “old school” amateur-recreational approach and become more media savvy about promoting the sport.

“If you promote it right, people will come out to support it. After all, it’s a good product. It’s not like people who come to the game say, ‘What the heck is this?’ People really find it entertaining. They say, ‘That’s awesome! When do you guys play again? I’m coming. I’m bringing my friends,’” Johnson said.

What’s at stake here is about much more than marketing or money—it’s our understandings of both sport and disability. With more attention, the disabled body engaged in athletic endeavors can be transformed from being a body that’s somehow deficient or abnormal to a body that has something to teach about how social identities are intertwined with physicality and about how

restrictive cultural conceptions of the body can be challenged and changed. Disability sports can help move us beyond narrow conceptions of physical “normality” and reframe what appears to be lacking as something replete with possibility.

recommended resources

Jay Coakley. “The Sociology of Sport: What Is It and Why Study It?” in *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies*, 10th ed. (McGraw Hill, 2009). An essential text that raises definitional issues and delineates the field of the sociology of sports.

Karen P. DePauw and Susan G. Gavron. *Disability and Sport*, 2nd ed. (Human Kinetics, 2005). A comprehensive overview of disability sports.

P. David Howe. *The Cultural Politics of the Paralympic Movement: Through the Anthropological Lens* (Routledge, 2008). A recent book-length treatment with sociological sensibilities.

Mary A. Hums, Anita M. Moorman, and Eli A. Wolf. “The Inclusion of the Paralympics in the Olympic and Amateur Sports Act: Legal and Policy Implications for Integration of Athletes with Disabilities into the United States Olympic Committee and National Governing Bodies,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (2003) 27: 261–275. Provides background on the legal and policy issues relevant to the interface between disabled and non-disabled sports governing bodies.

Howard L. Nixon II. “Constructing Diverse Sports Opportunities for People with Disabilities,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (2009) 31: 417–433. Offers different models for developing sports opportunities for people with disabilities.

Ronald J. Berger is in the department of sociology, anthropology, and criminal justice at the University of Wisconsin–Whitewater. He is the author of *Hoop Dreams on Wheels: Disability and the Competitive Wheelchair Athlete*.

AD