

Challenge

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Photo courtesy of Wheelchair Sports Federation

The Game of Basketball, on Wheels

We have all seen a basketball game, either in person or on television. Whether it is the NBA or WNBA finals or March Madness, the excitement for the sport seems to swell even for the casual fan at certain times of the year. But have you ever given the sport a try yourself? Wheelchair basketball has the same level of excitement, if not more so. "It is like able-bodied basketball, except that the athletes use a wheelchair," said Jason Joines, a coach with BlazeSports America, a chapter of Disabled Sports USA based in Georgia.

Anyone with a permanent lower extremity disability that precludes them from playing stand-up basketball is eligible to play wheelchair basketball, whether or not you use a chair for everyday mobility. In addition to spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy, lower extremity amputation, leg length discrepancy, and permanent joint disorders are just a few of the disabilities that would qualify a person to play wheelchair basketball.

Paralympic Gold Medalist Matt Scott, who has played in four Paralympic Games and plays wheelchair basketball professionally in Europe, was quite unaware of the sport growing up despite being born with spina bifida. "I played basketball on the playground with my friends," Scott said. He discovered the sport of wheelchair basketball through his doctor's office, which gave him a flier about a practice that was taking place. "Until I saw it, I thought of it as less-abled ... I had a negative perception. Then I saw the toughness it took to play. After the first practice, I came back every week after that."

The Many Benefits of Basketball

It is a physical sport, which is what attracts many of the players to it. But there are many other benefits to playing wheelchair basketball. Joines said he sees his role as more than just teaching kids basketball. "It is also about being independent. It is also about being around other kids that are going through the same things they are."

For Scott, he also learned discipline, time management, and proper nutrition that is required of an elite athlete. He also likes the fact that it is a team sport. "I like the camaraderie. "You are working together towards a common goal," he said.

Two-time Paralympian and Gold Medalist Rose Hollermann, a member of the U.S. Women's National Team, agrees. "I think it's a combination of having to work with a team to be successful, along with the skill and athleticism that are necessary for you to succeed."

The Ins and Outs of the Sport

When you first come out to a wheelchair basketball program, there

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Photo courtesy of Lakeshore Foundation

is very little you need according to Lauren Perry, the Rec and Athletics Coordinator at Lakeshore Foundation, a chapter of Disabled Sports USA. Perry also coaches the prep team at the Birmingham, Alabama, location. "All you need is to bring some water and wear athletic gear," she said.

During practice, you will be fit into one of the program's sports chairs. The program chairs are adjustable and there are a number of variations and adjustments to make sure it fits just right, according to Forrest Lodge, a program manager with Sportable, a Richmond, Virginia-based chapter of Disabled Sports USA. "You want your chair to fit like a shoe," he said. If you've been in a wheelchair, then you will be used to pushing yourself around. Otherwise, that may take some practice.

Regarding the rules of the game, Lodge says there is not a lot of rule variations. For the most part, the sport follows the NCAA rule book. The court size is the same. Depending on the division, the basketball may be a smaller size, the hoop height may be lower, or the foul line closer (in the youth prep division, for example). Also, there is no double dribble in wheelchair basketball. But traveling can be called as a foul. When a player has the ball, he or she may not push their chair more than twice in succession without dribbling, passing, or shooting.

It may take some time to learn the rules of the game or develop your skill sets. Like with anything, practice makes perfect. "Don't be discouraged at how fast you think the game is or how good everyone else is," Joines said. "Be patient with yourself."

There are a number of divisions for competition, depending on either age or skill level. Youth can play in either prep or varsity

in the Junior Division. For adult men, there are Divisions I, II, and III. In general, Lodge suggests that D3 is the entry level competition team and D1 is the top level, where Paralympians, college players, and other elite athletes play. There is also a Women's Division and Intercollegiate divisions as well.

For the Junior Division, it provides an outlet for young athletes to develop their skills. "It allows youth to travel and play just like their peers," he said. You can also get kids as young as three or four pushing around on the court, but they officially start in the prep division at age six until about 14 years of age. On the flipside, you can compete in wheelchair basketball all the way into your sixties. Regardless of your age or disability, it is recommended that you play recreationally first and then move to the competitive level. Once you reach the Junior Varsity Division or adult competitive categories, individual athletes are classified based on their disability. "This ensures athletes play on an even playing field," Perry said.

Equipment and Adaptations

Sports chairs are highly recommended for those who want to play wheelchair basketball. Rob Welty, a Recreation and Athletic Specialist at Lakeshore who also serves as a team coach, points out that the wheels on these chairs have camber, or a slanted angle. "This helps with stability and allows the individual to turn the chair quicker." Most chairs also have back casters, or smaller wheels, that prevents the chair from flipping over easily.

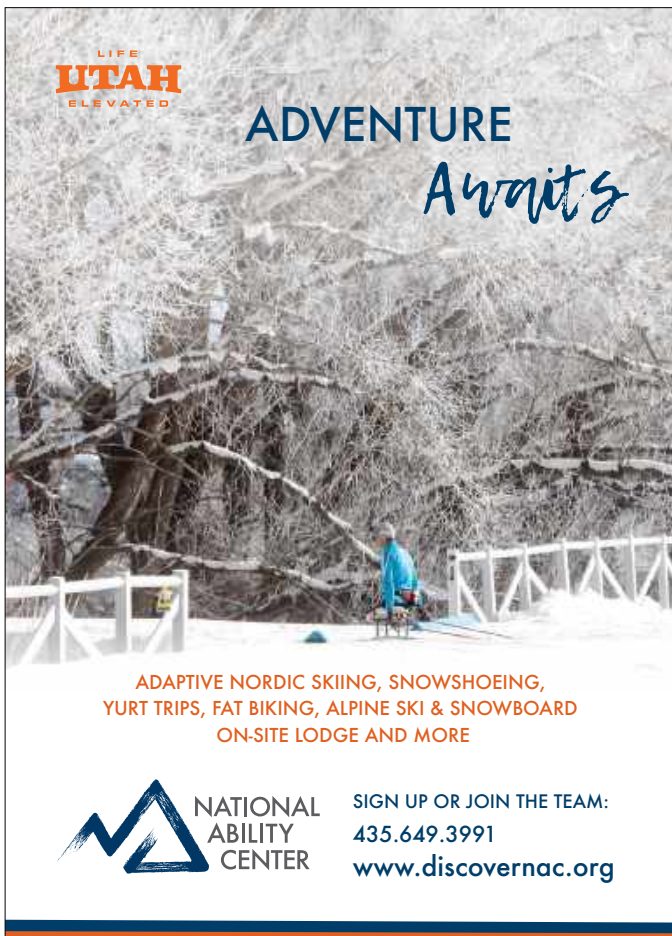
Chairs can be equipped with straps or bars in front so athletes don't flop over. The straps also help with trunk control for individuals who may have a spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, or a related disability. The lower back part of the chair gives the player a false trunk. "Amputees can often control their trunk more," said Perry. New devices are also coming online for individuals who can only use one side of their body and helps push the athlete in a straight line or avoid going in circles.

You can use a program chair until you get serious about the sport. "Having your own chair doesn't really become important until you get to the varsity level," Joines said. "When you decide this is something you love and want to continue to do, that is when you look into getting your own sports chair." At that time, the chairs are built to the individual's specifications and there are a variety of manufacturers available to choose from.

Join a Team

So, other than the wheelchair being your source of mobility, you have the opportunity to play a sport you love and be competitive in wheelchair basketball. "What is nice is when you get on the court and look back at the sidelines and all the assistive devices (chairs, prosthetics, crutches, etc.) are left behind," Lodge said.

Over 40 chapters of Disabled Sports USA offers either a recreational or competitive (or both) wheelchair basketball program. You can check out those locations at <https://www.disabledsportsusa.org/chapters/location-map/>. Additional programs can be found through the National Wheelchair Basketball Association at <https://www.nwba.org/findateam>. Regardless, Scott suggests "Give it a try ... jump in a chair ... come to a game. The feeling I get when I'm on the court is indescribable."



The advertisement features a background image of a snowy mountain landscape with a person in a blue jacket on a wheelchair. Text elements include the Utah logo, the title 'ADVENTURE Awaits', a list of activities, and contact information for the National Ability Center.

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