

Disability Inclusion: Catalyzing Change Through Sport

May 5 - 7, 2025
Park City, Utah

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40 Years of Rolling Strong: Lessons from Our Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp



- Maria Besta - CTRS
- Molly McKinney – MA, CARSS II
- Mary Free Bed Wheelchair and Adaptive Sports
- Grand Rapids, MI

Introductions

- Molly McKinney | She/Her/Hers | Sports Coordinator at Mary Free Bed Wheelchair and Adaptive Sports | Long blonde hair, blue eyes, 5'3 white female
- Maria Besta | She/Her/Hers | Manager of Wheelchair and Adaptive Sports/Recreational Therapy/Music and Art Therapy | Female, 5'4 middle aged white female

Disclosures

Maria Besta, CTRS

Financial – Employed as manager, Recreational Therapy, Wheelchair and Adaptive Sports including Recreational Therapy, Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital, receives salary; has no relevant financial relationship(s) with ineligible companies to disclose.

Nonfinancial – No relevant nonfinancial relationship exists.

Molly McKinney, CARSS I, BA, BS, MA

Financial – Employed as sports coordinator, Wheelchair and Adaptive Sports, Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital, receives salary; has no relevant financial relationship(s) with ineligible companies to disclose.

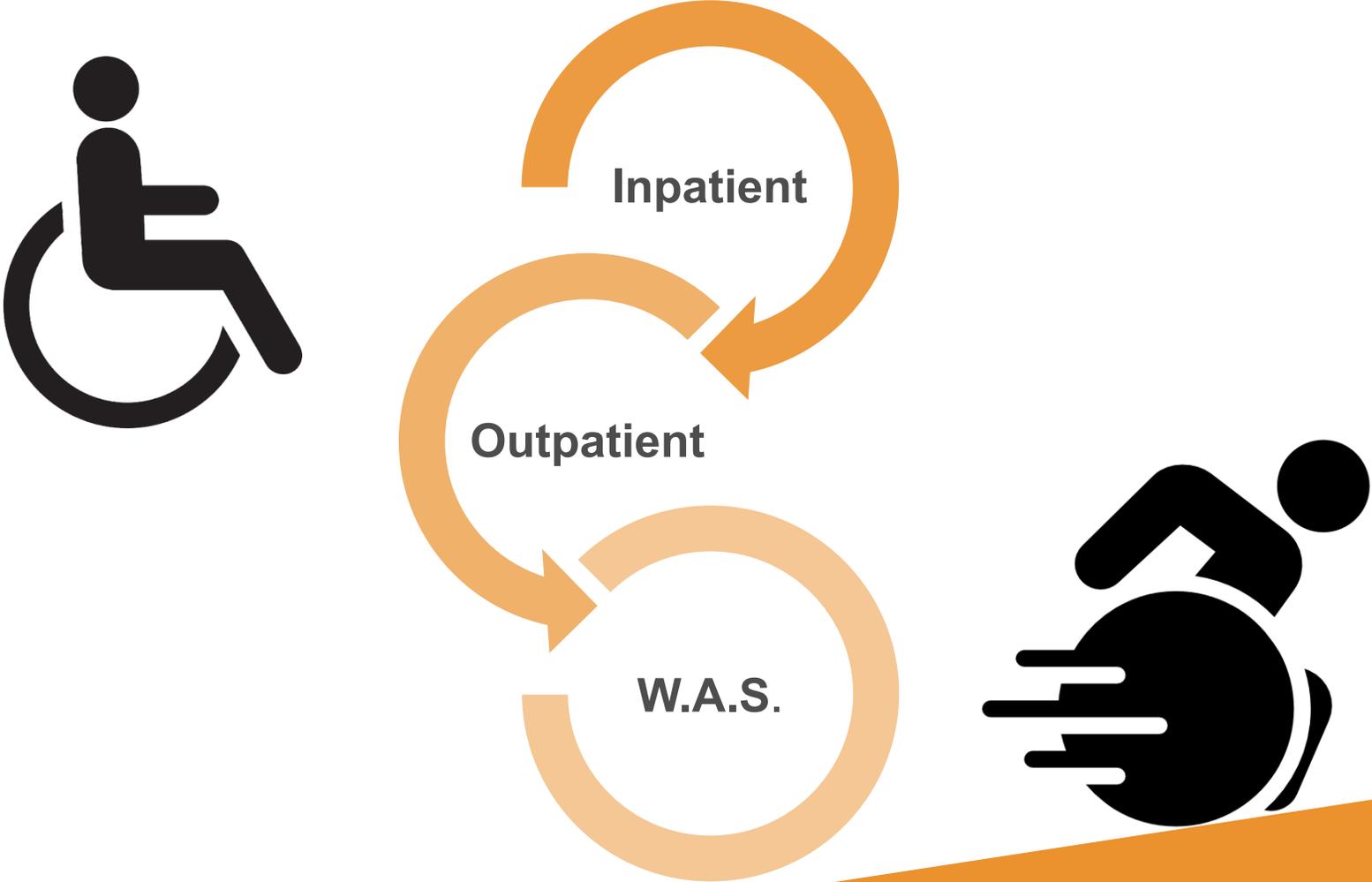
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Objectives

- At the completion of this learning activity, the participant will be able to:
 - Background of Mary Free Bed Wheelchair and Adaptive Sports
 - Introduction into our Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp
 - Empowerment Through Sports
 - Recruitment for Adaptive Sports Program
 - Lessons Learned after 40 Years



CONTINUUM OF CARE



Mary Free Bed Wheelchair & Adaptive Sports

Our Teams

- Wheelchair Basketball
- Hand cycling
- Wheelchair Lacrosse
- Wheelchair Rugby
- Sled Hockey
- Wheelchair Softball
- Tennis
- Power Soccer
- Goal Ball





Mary Free Bed Wheelchair & Adaptive Sports

Our Clinics

- Archery
- Downhill Skiing
- Golf
- Kayak and Canoe
- Off-Road Handcycle
- Sailing
- Scuba Diving

Our Clinics

- Disc Golf
- Fencing
- Sit Volleyball
- Waterski
- Tennis

Our Classes

- Group Swim Lessons
- Private Swim Lessons
- Rock-climbing
- Youth Sports Sampler
- Yoga
- Functional Fitness
- Future Sled Wings
- Future Frenzy

Mary Free Bed Wheelchair & Adaptive Sports



Special Events

- Bikes for the Rest of Us
- Amway Riverbank Run
- Griffins Vs. Sled Wings
- Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp
- Wheelchair and Adaptive Sports Golf Outing (Fundraiser)

Barriers to Participation



At Mary Free Bed Wheelchair and Adaptive Sports we aim to provide:

- Equipment
- Travel and Transportation (practice, tournaments)
- Accessible Practice Facilities
- Knowledgeable trainers or volunteers

Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp

- This past summer we celebrated four decades of a camp designed for young athletes who use wheelchairs to compete in sports and recreational opportunities.
- The camp serves as a platform for empowerment, skill development, and community building among participants, helping them to excel in various sports while fostering confidence and resilience, in addition to recruitment for our wheelchair and adaptive sports program.



The History Of Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp

- 40 years ago, this camp started out as a tennis camp
- 10 campers & 4 instructors
- Supported by Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association - Nonprofit
- At Grand Valley State University – a local university in Grand Rapids, MI
- Volunteer Committee ran the camp



The History of Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp



- Nurses were added to the staff in 1999 when Maria took over as the director
- Encourage independence when registering
- In 2012, went from committee to staff led under Mary Free Bed

The History of Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp



- Cap participants between 50-55 total campers.
- Any more is hard to manage & build relationships
- Overnight campers for 45 miles one way have been part of the program for at least 30 years.

History of Wheelchair Sports Camp

- Funding for sports camp came from the committee
- Now, under Mary Free Bed, it comes from the foundation
- Transportation from Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital.



History of Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp

Committee member took photos – helps to market the program

Create a hard copy book for photos to commemorate the week

The Mary Free Bed Marketing team and their photographer created a book up until 2 years ago

Started off only outdoor



Our Camp Staff



- Mary Free Bed Staff
- Instructors - attended camp and/or have a physical disability.
- Volunteers can be able-bodied or person with physical disability
- Overnight Staff
- Nurses

Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp Schedule

- **Three Groups: Age vs. talent level**
 - Group A – Oldest Group – High School – All sports, plus kayaking
 - Group B – Middle School Age – All sports, sled hockey and kayaking
 - Group C – Youngest Group – All sports, plus sled hockey
- Family's receive schedule before camp starts, plus a reminder email after camp each evening.

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
8:00 - 8:30am Sign in & Registration	8:00 - 8:30am Sign in & registration			
8:45 - 9:40 am Ice Breakers & Mixers	8:45 - 9:40 am Pickleball	8:45 - 9:40 am Tennis	8:45 - 9:40 am Dodgeball	8:45 - 9:45 am Basketball
9:50 - 10:40 am Tennis	9:50 - 10:40 am Kayaking	9:50 - 10:40 am Cycling	9:50 - 10:40 am Cycling	9:55 - 10:55 am Tennis
10:50 - 11:45 am Cycling	10:50 - 11:45 am Kayaking	10:50 - 11:45 am Basketball	10:50 - 11:45 am Basketball	10:55 - 11:55 am Dodgeball
12:00 - 12:45 pm Lunch	12:00 - 1:30 pm Awards Luncheon			
1:00 - 1:45 pm Handball	1:00 - 1:45 pm Basketball	1:00 - 1:45 pm Lacrosse	1:00 - 1:45 pm Sled Hockey	
1:55 - 2:40 pm Lacrosse	1:55 - 2:40 pm Softball	1:55 - 2:40 pm Team Handball	1:55 - 2:45 pm Sled Hockey	
2:50 - 3:35 pm Basketball	2:50 - 3:35 pm Dodgeball	2:50 - 3:35 pm Football	3:00 - 4:00 PM Water Fight with Allendale Fire Dept & Snack time	
3:40 - 4:00 pm Snack Time	3:40 - 4:00 pm Snack Time	3:40 - 4:00 pm Snack Time	4:00 pm Home	
4:00 pm Home	4:00 Home	4:00 - 5:30 pm Dodgeball Tournament		

Wheelchair and Adaptive sports: Benefits Are Endless



- Social
- Physical
- Empowerment/ Confidence
- Self Efficacy
- Emotional
- Mentorship
- Self Awareness
- Sense Of Community
- Relationship Building
- Travel Opportunities
- Positive Body Image
- Family Support

Sports and Quality of Life

- People with disabilities report a lower quality of life than the general population.
- Able bodied people who participate in sports report a higher quality of life.
- People with disabilities who participate in adaptive sports report a higher quality of life.
- Physical activity and sports participation is beneficial for youth with disabilities to improve:
 - Self-esteem
 - Self-perceived quality of life
 - Self-efficacy
 - Body Image
 - Empowerment
 - Social well-being (friendship, loneliness)



Empowerment Through Sports

The camp provides an opportunity for young athletes to engage in sports, which enhances their physical abilities, teamwork skills, and competitive spirit. It encourages participants to see themselves not just as individuals with disabilities, but as athletes capable of achieving greatness.



Diversity Encouragement

Camp caters to a wide range of disabilities and ability levels, promoting a sense of value among all participants.

Our camp groups by age vs. talent level



Empowerment through Camp

Other than sport, camp encourages our participants strive for independence and personal growth

- Drive a car
- Play sports at a competitive level
- Personal relationships
- Have a family
- Pursue higher education



Building Community

Over the years, the camp has cultivated a strong sense of community among participants, families, and coaches.

Creates lasting friendships and support networks, helping to reduce feelings of isolation that some young

Participants foster connections, creating supportive networks through shared experiences



Advocacy and Leadership



- Programs encourage participants to become ambassadors for inclusion, influencing change in their own communities
- We encourage self care needs
- How to be a good team player – develop leadership skills
- Support others in the group

Skill Development & Player Recruitment

Camps provide safe environments for individuals to try out their sports skills and confidence with trained coaches.

At the end of the week, campers are encouraged to sign up for the sports they enjoyed the most



Pathways to Competition



- Many athletes progress to higher-level competitions, increasing the visibility of wheelchair sports
- Play on our sports teams
- Lead to college scholarships
- Feed into our program or other adaptive sports programs in the Midwest.



- Wheelchair sports camps serve as a powerful model for disability inclusion, demonstrating how sports can drive personal growth and societal change.
- We believe continued investment in these opportunities will help create a more inclusive world for athletes of all abilities

40 Years - Lessons Learn – Families



- No parents or family members allowed at camp
- No volunteers as family members
- Sign In / Sign Out
- Family Day Friday
 - Invite family to watch
 - Awards celebration
 - Lunch for all

40 Years – Lessons Learned - Staff

- Recently added job titles to define roles:
 - Mary Free Bed Staff
 - Instructors - primarily use wheelchairs – paid
 - Nurses are paid
 - Overnight Supervisor, including nurses, are paid
 - Volunteers are majority are able-bodied with some spots reserved for former campers.



40 Years - Lessons Learn – The Schedule

- Variety of sport offerings
 - Follow up surveys allow for participants to suggest next summer's offerings
- Student run activity & icebreakers – dodgeball tournament on Wednesday
- Removal of swimming
- The dance, golf, disc golf



40 Years - Lessons Learn – Transportation

Transportation was removed for a variety of reasons 12 years ago

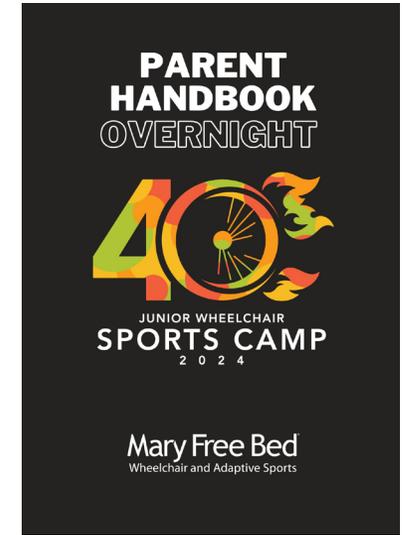
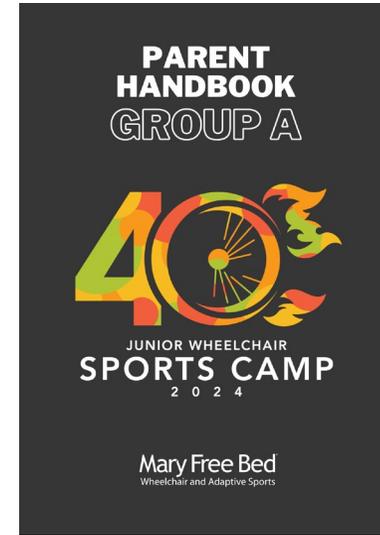
- We did not see a loss in participation

Campers can stay overnight if they live 45 miles or more away



40 Years - Lessons Learn - Communication

- Parent booklet shared prior to the start of camp
- Recently added daily email communication – reminders and to share photos
- Photos from the week are made available to families to download each day



40 Years - Lessons Learned - Misc.



- Mary Free Bed Rehab Hospital vs. Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports
 - More resources
 - More red tape

40 Years Video



Questions

Please reach out to sports@maryfreebed.com