

reflections

Overcoming disability

By Rasa Kabaila

When I was 13 years old, our primary school was lucky enough to be taken to the Paralympic Games. The most mesmerising event at the games for me was 'Goalball'. This sport was invented in 1946 in an effort to help in the rehabilitation of blind war veterans. In Goalball, participants compete in teams of three, and try to throw a ball that has bells embedded in it into the opponent's goal. Teams alternate throwing or rolling the ball from one end of the playing area to the other, and players remain in the area of their own goal in both defence and attack. Players must use the sound of the bell to judge the position and movement of the ball. Blindfolds allow partially sighted players to compete on an equal footing with blind players. I could never imagine trying to do anything blindfolded, so watching this game captivated me. After my exposure to the Paralympic Games, I took a huge interest in and developed an admiration for seeing the achievements of people who live with a disability. As a nurse, every day I see people with disabilities making the most of what they have, including a blind patient who plays the piano beautifully, and a paraplegic man who can move himself around the room on his own with the use of his superior upper body strength.

As an 'able bodied person' I have been playing basketball for many years and have always enjoyed watching wheelchair basketball. I remember seeing a poster at the basketball stadium asking if able bodied people would like to have a go at playing wheelchair basketball. I was interested in playing, but the opportunity never really arose. Years later, a friend of mine came to watch one of my basketball games, however he got the time wrong and arrived after my game had finished. I suggested we should casually shoot some hoops but there were no courts available.

Whilst searching for a court we came on some people playing wheelchair basketball and decided to watch. I soon discovered the manager of the wheelchair basketball team, Jez, used to be my basketball manager in a previous team and he invited us to join the wheelchair basketball game. I felt pretty nervous, for a few reasons. Firstly, I was afraid to embarrass myself. I was also afraid that Ed and I were at an advantage because we had complete use of our legs and I was concerned that this could possibly make the game unfair. I was also fearful that because I was 'able bodied', it could be seen as an insult to the players who had lower bodied disabilities. Regardless, we were encouraged to play, so we did. My preconception that I may have been at an 'advantage' because of being able bodied was quickly dismissed. The technique and coordination involved in wheelchair basketball was certainly not reflected in my many years of playing able bodied basketball. Everything about it was a mixture of excitement and difficulty. The amount of times that I had the urge to leap out the chair and shoot were endless and my upper body strength was really being pushed. I had the ball intercepted from me numerous times as it was taking me too long to figure out how to dribble the ball and move at the same time. It was like mimicking the movement of patting your head with one hand and rubbing your stomach with the other. By the time I managed to get myself to one end of the court, it had been a turnover and I was puffed. Not to mention that I never realised how inconvenient it is when the ball heads out of the court when you have to try and chase it in a wheelchair!

Clearly struggling, a nice woman approached us, as well as Jez, and taught us the difference in ball skills in a wheelchair compared to playing able bodied basketball. I asked this woman how she was involved in wheelchair basketball. She explained to me that her son, limbless from the thigh down, loved playing. They were from the country town of Cooma and drove to the Canberra basketball stadium every Tuesday so that he



could play. Currently, they are hoping to get a team together so they can play in a tournament in Sydney.

I spoke to another young woman on the court, a happy go lucky girl who plays wheelchair basketball; she has spina bifida. Michaela is studying at Merici College and is also a representative wheelchair athlete in track and field. Michaela was explaining to me how happy the other players were to have people participating in wheelchair basketball, regardless if they were able bodied or not. She further explained that the people playing wheelchair basketball were just keen to play; they didn't want to be treated differently from anyone else. Michaela told me, that for people who have disabilities, being able to play sport helped them to feel more 'normal'.

For a few days after the game, I felt a lot of pain in my hands and arms, in places where I never thought I had muscles. Ed had black marks and cuts on his hands caused by turning the wheels which also lasted for days. Emotionally and physically, wheelchair basketball was a fantastic and insightful out of body experience and I would recommend it to anyone. Email: canberrachargers@gmail.com

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