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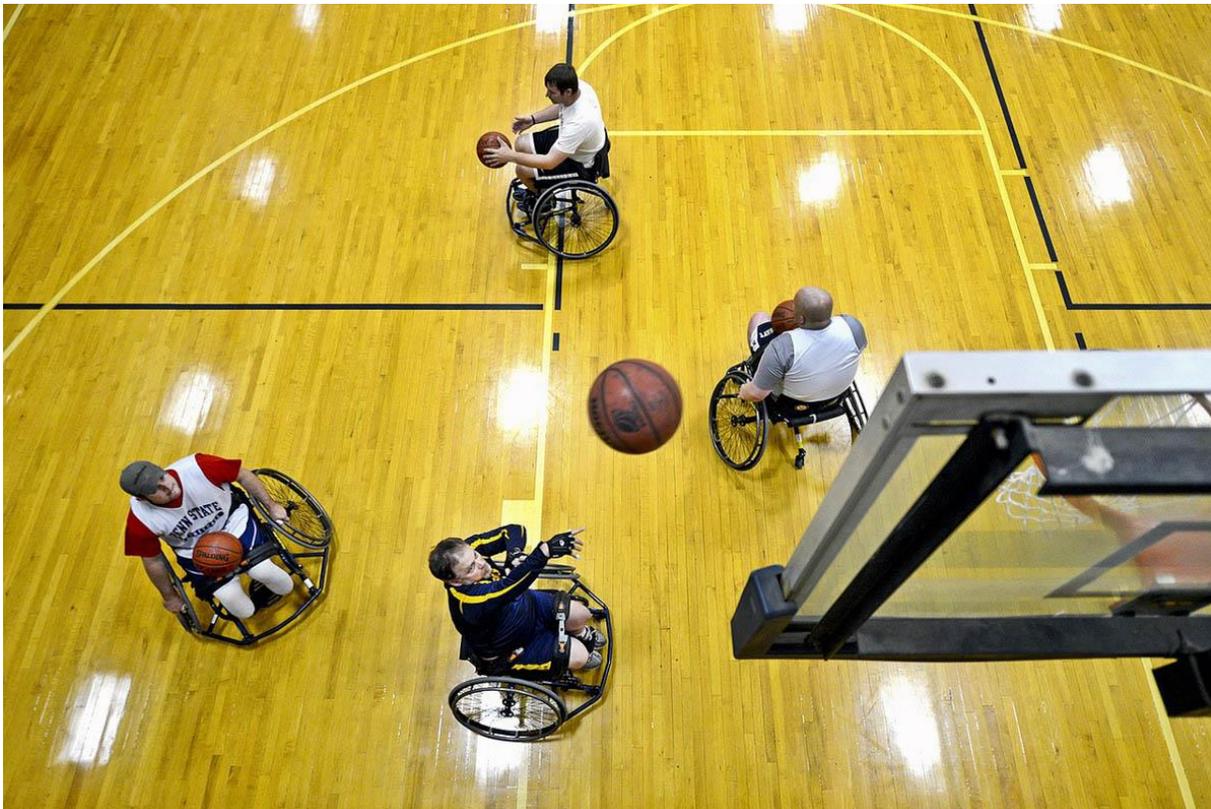
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How Wheelchair Basketball Changed My Life

By Katherine Torres
UCF Forum columnist
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(Photo courtesy of Pixabay)

I have been around sports all my life. My older brother played basketball when we were kids and I always remembered sitting in the stands cheering him on. He loved the sport so much that my parents bought him a basketball hoop so he could play basketball at home whenever he wanted.

At the time I was about 6 years old and I thought sports were for boys, so I didn't care too much to play with him, but I would still watch from the side and cheer him on.

In elementary school, I participated in a few Special Olympics track and field events and received participation metals and ribbons. For a long time, that was the extent of my participation in sports.

Spending most of my childhood in Orlando, I became a huge Orlando Magic fan. I watched almost every game on TV and attended some in person. I started to understand all the calls being made by the referees and learned the players' names on the team. I fell in love with the sport, just as my older brother did.

Around this time, I started to expose myself to other sports such as football, tennis and soccer. I didn't understand them as well as I did basketball, but my curiosity kept my eyes glued to the screen.

One day something inside of me clicked. I realized that with every sport I came across on TV, from the time I was a toddler to even now, I had never seen someone who was in a wheelchair or had some form of physical disability playing on a team. I didn't quite understand why. I mean, if I am able to fall in love with a sport, then other people like me probably do too. I thought maybe the reason we can't play the sport is because our chairs or something else limits us.

I quickly found out this limitation wasn't true when my next door neighbor bought a basketball hoop and I would play with him every weekend. I discovered that I was actually able to get the ball into the net.

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But I still didn't understand why I never saw anyone with physical disabilities on TV playing sports.

A year went by and I met someone who was also in a wheelchair, Gabriel. We became good friends and I learned that he played on a local wheelchair basketball team. This was the first time I heard of a sport team specifically for people who utilize wheelchairs. Shortly after, I learned about the Paralympics and found myself watching countless YouTube videos of sports that were adapted for those who had physical limitations.

Gabriel kept trying to convince me to go to a practice and play with the team, but I constantly denied the invite because I felt I was not good enough – I only played with my neighbor for fun.

But Gabriel never gave up. Every year they were having tryouts he always told me and I always turned down the offer.

It was not until I was a student at the University of Central Florida when I learned about an upcoming intramural two-on-two wheelchair basketball tournament that was inviting people of all abilities to play. I finally pushed aside my fear and told myself: "Why not? It's just a one-day tournament."

Alas, we ended up in last place. Although for me it wasn't about what place we finished, but rather the impact and awareness the tournament had on me and everyone participating.

That tournament changed my entire outlook on sports!

It made me finally feel a part of something and made me appreciate the people who recognize that the disabled population is the most underserved population in the country and are trying to make a difference.

Allowing people of all abilities to participate in these kinds of tournaments and leagues helps bring this kind of awareness to everyone. I often hear feedback from people who are able-bodied on how difficult it actually is to push the chair, dribble the ball and shoot all at the same time, and how much they respect those who play this sport. Hearing this feedback fills me with joy.

It is amazing to see how simple it is to adapt a sport for those with physical limitations. Every time someone hears about a Paralympics sport and I show them a video, they seem so amazed and always say: "I could never play this, it looks so difficult!"

I hope that at someday I am able to come home from a long day at work, turn on the TV and watch a live game of wheelchair basketball. Now that would be the cherry on top.

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