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Grand Valley Lanthorn

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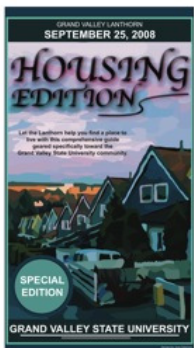
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Housing Issue



Sports Articles

GV wheelchair tennis competes at national championships

By Brian Beaupied
11/13/2008

When he was 19 years old, senior Bryan Wilkinson was in a dirt bike accident, which left him without the use of his legs from the waist down.

At 4 months old, junior Jessica Sporte was diagnosed with cancer and had one of her legs amputated.

Neither of these Grand Valley State University students would let their disabilities overcome them though. Wilkinson and Sporte were instrumental in helping to start GVSU's wheelchair tennis team. GVSU is the only university in the state to offer a competitive wheelchair sport's team.

"They just want to be seen as athletes," said GVSU head coach Lynn Bender. "They didn't have a choice. That is the hand they were dealt and that is what they have to deal with."

In October, the GVSU wheelchair tennis team competed at the 2008 Collegiate Wheelchair Championships alongside able-bodied players at the ITA Small College National Championship.

The event featured players from GVSU, the University of Arizona and the University of Texas at Arlington.

"It was really exciting the fact that it incorporated into an able-bodied tournament," Sporte said. "A lot of people don't know about wheelchair tennis."

Sporte, who is also the president of the wheelchair tennis team, won her first match before dropping her second in three sets and the final in straight sets.

"Going the three sets (in the second match), that was just a huge improvement for me," Sporte said, who has been playing for only two years.

Wilkinson advanced to the semifinals in the men's division before losing to a wheelchair veteran who had been playing for more than 20 years.

"I did well -- I played a lot better (this year)," he said. "The tournament was awesome -- just a really good experience."

The only difference in wheelchair tennis is players can return a serve or shot on two bounces instead of the traditional one shot.

But Wilkinson said there is more strategy involved than some may think.

"We try to work circles (in the wheelchair)," he said. "It is important to stay behind the hub, or center baseline, to give players the best position to return shots."

The team looks to continue expanding exposure of collegiate wheelchair tennis when it hosts a home invitational next spring.

Until then, Bender will keep the team going with a rigorous practice schedule.

"They have weekly practices and can be on the court up to three other times with other wheelchair associations," she said. "We also encourage them to get into the weight room for strength and conditioning."

Wilkinson said just playing might be enough of a workout.

"You'll never see a wheelchair tennis player with small or flabby arms," he said.

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