

Wheelchair tennis athletes roll into Rockford

Four Belmont players take on international competition



AWESOME TENNIS - Pat Besta of Belmont shows off his backhand game in Midwest Wheelchair Championships tennis tournament this weekend in Rockford.

Over 70 wheelchair athletes from 15 states and three countries brought their best tennis games to Rockford this past weekend at part of the 2005 Midwest Indoor Wheelchair Tennis Tournament hosted by the Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association (GRWSA) at Champion Health & Fitness. Among them were 13 West Michigan players, including four from Belmont.

According to tennis coach Lynn Bender, tennis is the fastest growing of all wheelchair sports. She said these tournaments include world-renowned athletes who compete internationally. This weekend's competition included ranked players from Mongolia, France and Canada. The Belmont residents on the GRWSA Wheelchair Tennis Team are Pat Besta, Dave Briggs, Eric Brockschmidt and Susie Egeler.

"These people are here to compete like anyone else would compete," Bender said. "It's a great weekend to watch some awesome tennis."

This is Besta's third year competing in wheelchair tennis. He has played competitive wheelchair basketball for the past 14 years, but decided to give tennis a try.

"It's more of an individual challenge," he said. "It's a good learning experience for me."

He first competed in the local tournament a month after first trying wheelchair tennis. Despite his lack of experience, he was able to win his division's consolation prize.

This weekend Besta was able to make it to the "C" division singles final, succumbing to his doubles partner, Scott Bonk of Grant, 7-6; 6-4. The two won the "B" division doubles final 7-5; 6-4.

Besta is now ranked number 23 in the nation in wheelchair tennis, and travels all around the

country competing against the world's best. Earlier this year he played in Baton Rouge and Nashville. In September he will travel to a tournament in Hilton Head. He urges people to support the GRWSA, since they make it financially possible for athletes such as him to travel and compete.

The GRWSA was founded in the early 1980s as one of the Midwest's only wheelchair tennis programs. Today, the GRWSA offers both a competitive, nationally ranked wheelchair tennis team for adult players, and a newly created recreational youth wheelchair tennis program. They also offer a wheelchair racing program and a summer wheelchair sports camp for children.

Bender was first asked to help run the local tournament five years ago when they were short-staffed. It was there she met her future husband, Curt, who was one of the competing athletes. She attributes the success of the tournament to the 30 volunteers who help with transportation, food, prizes, ball-running, set-up and tear-down. Players also like playing at Champion Health & Fitness because it is one of two climate-controlled indoor tournaments, she said.

Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital helped sponsor the event by offering \$9,000 in prize money.

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