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Spina bifida doesn't keep Zeeland tennis player off court

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Zeeland, MI — Zeeland East sophomore tennis player Chris Melton has gained respect from his junior varsity coach, Ray Lokers, who is one of the hardest working players on his team.

But when Lokers attended one of Melton's wheelchair tennis practices prior to him joining the team, he would quickly learn how Melton actually has to work.

"I was expecting to just watch and the coach had got me into the chair, and said 'You know, you're going to experience what it's like.' And so I did, and it was an eye-opener. It really was."

Melton is believed to be the first tennis player who uses a wheelchair to play on an able-bodied high school team in Michigan. It's an eye-opener to his teammates, coach, opponents and the community, but he's just doing what he has always done.

"He's always had that attitude: If he wants to do something he will figure out a way how he can do it to the best of his ability," said Melton's mother.

Chris was born with spina bifida, which is the most common disabling birth defect in the United States, and is a result of incomplete neural tube closure, according to the Spina Bifida Association. He has used a wheelchair his whole life.

Breaking barriers

His interest in sports began early. Chris played on a wheelchair basketball team when he was 5, but he has also been participating in other sports with his peers from a young age.

He quickly found a way to make it work. In gym class during a sprinting exercise, he'd push as fast as he could, speeding along on his wheelchair, his mother recalled.

Naturally, he wanted to play tennis alongside those same peers.

"I hope that he does break down some barriers and some stereotypes that people can look past the chair and see the person, right in and it's been good for the kids.

"I think at first it was eye-opening for them, but they've grown up with him and when they see him in gym class, he just fits right

That's not to say some opponents haven't written him off upon first look, as was the case against one player in eighth grade.

"He said 'Man I thought we'd be done 10, 15 minutes winning flat out,'" Melton recalled. "And we ended up winning the match flat out, and so he said that was a huge eye opener for him."

Committed to the courts

It didn't take Chris long to see the appeal, and potential, of playing tennis.

"From the start I knew there was something about (tennis) that it was going to be the sport," Melton said. "When I found out I could play a sport with everybody else, I thought that's the final straw there ... so I've been doing it ever since."

Melton's favorite weapon is his forehand swing with a nice dose of top spin. He admits he's not much of a volley player, but he said. He is allowed to let the ball bounce twice before he hits it, opposed to once for able-bodied players.

"I don't really know that many people who would have the guts to go out for a sport at all," said Ben Newhouse, Melton's sophomore longtime friend. "But the fact that he's able to take the criticism and still play in the wheelchair and actually do well at it, it really

Spreading the message nation-wide

Melton only plays doubles for the Chix, but when he competes in United States Tennis Association wheelchair tennis tournaments. The USTA competition has taken him to Washington, New York, St. Louis and as close as Grand Rapids.

He aspires to one day compete on a collegiate wheelchair team — his wheelchair coach, Lynn Bender, currently heads the Grand Rapids program.

As far as short term goals, he's probably pretty similar to other area high school players. He said he just wants to beat Holland

With the JV tennis season under wraps, Melton will shift his energy to ice hockey and downhill skiing. He said he watches a lot of tennis and also gets to see some pros in person.

A shelf in Melton's home is lined with tennis balls signed by some of the top names in the sport. He regularly attends a wheelchair tennis tournament in Cincinnati, and with it free tickets to the U.S. Open, where he got autographs from Andy Roddick, Rafael Nadal, James Blake and

"I like wearing my school uniforms and all that to the matches just to let them know that tennis isn't just an able-bodied person's sport. It's for (for) anybody that wants to play, no matter able-bodied, wheelchair or whatever."

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