

# Wheelchair tennis players to play in West Michigan tournament

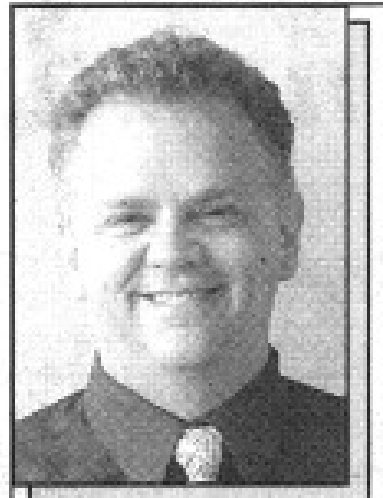
BY CLIFF YANKOVICH

One of the best things about reporting on athletes like Rockford's Pat Besta and Nicole Seif from Caledonia is the opportunity to learn.

Besta and Seif are both involved in wheelchair tennis, and they practice on the courts at Calvin College's Gainey Center every Monday evening from 6 to 8 p.m. Thirteen-year-old Seif is involved in the juniors program, and Besta plays in the adult league, which is open to players over 18. I went out to the courts to learn more about wheelchair tennis and the people involved in the sport.

Did you know that tennis players from all over the United States and from as far away as Canada, France and Mongolia will be coming to play in a tournament in West Michigan July 18-20? It's true: MVP in Rockford will be hosting the Midwest Indoor Championships, and more than 70 wheelchair tennis players from all over the world will be competing in the International Tennis Federation (ITF)-sanctioned event. From what was observed on the courts last week, future ITF tournaments might be won by someone from the area.

Having played tennis in high school, it was interesting to see how closely wheelchair tennis resembles the game played by able-bodied people. The first similarity was that the juniors were doing drills designed to get



## Cliff's Riffs

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first drill I saw Nicole working at consisted of starting behind the service line and moving up to return a shot from the right-hand side of the court, and then spinning her chair around and getting into position for another shot coming at the left-hand side of the court. Agility and readiness are the rule of the day in any form of tennis.

Later, Nicole and the rest of her crew were doing sprints in their chairs back-and-forth across the court. Boy, did that bring back the memories. Her coach was telling her to keep her chair in motion all the time just like any coach tells players to keep their feet moving all the time. Upon investigation, I learned that the only difference between wheelchair tennis and the game as played by able-bodied people is that wheelchair

makes up for the extra effort expended in rolling a wheelchair into position before hitting the shot. However, many of the shots played by the adult players were made on just one bounce or as a volley.

Rather than interrupt Seif during her drills, I walked over to watch Besta playing a spirited game of doubles. He was playing with Curt Bender of Zeeland, Dan Bolhouse of Caledonia and Graham Irvin - an able-bodied player from East Grand Rapids. The game had all the elements one would expect from a round of doubles with good players on the court: hard first serves, lots of spin put on the ball, solid ground strokes, fast-paced volleys and shots banged directly at the opposing players.

Besta has been playing tennis for six or seven years. He is also active in wheelchair basketball. He likes the individual effort in tennis, and one of the things Besta likes the most about playing tennis is it gives him the ability to compete with anyone.

"When I play singles I can't blame anyone else - it is an individual effort," Besta commented. "What I really like is that I can play against anyone, able-bodied or not. I can play tennis with my kids."

Seif will be an eighth grader at Caledonia next year. She has been playing tennis for two years and really has come to enjoy the game. Seif is very active with the Pacers basketball team. Her dad,

them comfortable hitting the ball from any spot on the court. The

players can have two bounces.

That extra bounce hardly

Ken, said that she practices basketball at the YMCA in Belmont

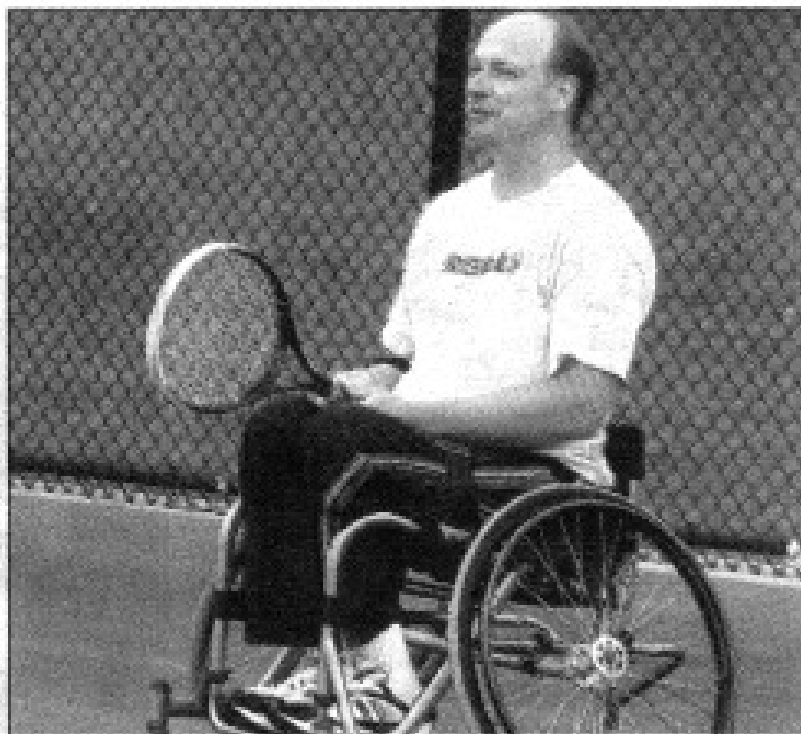
and travels to tournaments in Detroit and Indiana regularly. He added that they went all the way to Atlanta, Georgia for a tournament during the past season.

Seif tried sled hockey for a season, but she did not enjoy the cold or all the equipment she needed to wear. Speaking of equipment, Seif and Besta both have special wheelchairs for everyday use as well as one each specifically for basketball and tennis. Seif was awarded her tennis wheelchair during a week-long sports camp at Grand Valley State University in 2006 in recognition of her sportsmanship and hard work.

Maria Besta, CJRS, who is married to Pat, works at Mary Free Bed and serves as the president of the Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association (GRWSA). GRWSA is responsible for the tennis program at Calvin. The adult program has been active for around 20 years, and the juniors have been playing for five years.

Maria made certain that she mentioned the assistance she receives from Val Romeo and the adaptive sports program in the City of Kentwood Recreation Department.

Also, Maria said that the door is open to any wheelchair athlete who is interested in learning and/or playing tennis. She can be reached at 616-242-0352. She also mentioned that the door is always open for individuals, businesses and corporations who would like to support the program financially. Contribu-



**Pat Besta of Rockford returns a shot during practice with the wheelchair tennis program at Calvin College.**

tors and sponsors are welcome to contact her as well.

"These programs are great because they promote a can-do attitude," Maria commented. "People in wheelchairs can do the same sports as able-bodied people. We have a One Up, One Down tennis league that teams up wheelchair players with able-bodied players as doubles teams."

She cited an example of Chris Melton, who will be playing tennis on the team with able-bodied players at Zeeland East High School next year just as he has been playing with them in middle school. Maria went on to add that wheelchair athletes are getting college scholarships in tennis and basketball just as their able-bodied counterparts do.

The time spent with Besta,

Seif and the rest of the GRWSA athletes was a time of learning. Wheelchair tennis players have to spend time and energy doing the same kind of drills our coach had us doing. Seif and the rest of the juniors got as frustrated with them as any able-bodied teenager would.

However, the payoff of those drills could be seen on the courts where Pat Besta and the other adult players were smacking the ball with the authority and skill equal to that of any experienced player.

Maybe someday in the future I will be reporting on Nicole Seif taking home a trophy from an ITF event.

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