



## Jeni Rummelt uses sports experience to help kids at wheelchair camp

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Press Sports Editor

ALLENDALE -- If being a high school athlete (basketball and softball) taught Jeni Rummelt anything, it was that you never, ever, give up.

That lesson paid dividends for the former Lowell High School standout, 30, who with her husband Trent owns the Solid Impact Fitness gym in Caledonia.

In 2001, on a visit to Iowa, the Rummelt's car was hit head-on by another vehicle which had crossed the median. Trent's brother Chad died. His parents were injured.

And Jeni wound up in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down.

"Right from the start I faced choosing to cry about it or to face up to it and move on," she said Tuesday, while helping to instruct kids at the Wheelchair Sports Association's weeklong camp at Grand Valley State University.

"This is my first year," she said. "I've been wanting to do it for quite a while, but the timing never worked out. It has been a wonderful experience to see how hard these kids work, and how they won't let themselves be held back by a disability. They are amazing. They don't stop, they keep going, they have all this drive and energy. I hate to say it, but sometimes they overwhelm me."

The camp, in its 20th year, offers sports such as basketball, roller

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hockey, tennis, track and field, cycling, sled hockey and football.

Some wheelchair athletes have never known any other way. Rummelt was a successful able-bodied athlete, and had to first overcome the idea that what she had was taken away from her.

Owning a gym has helped.

"Fortunately, most of our machines were accessible," she said. "We didn't realize it when we purchased them. I've seen other machines, even in gyms that specialize in wheelchair athletes, that could never translate to the workouts wheelchair athletes need.

"So we can do most of it, especially lifting with the upper body. And that is important because it allows me to live better day-to-day, not just in extra-curricular activities."

Even though it's her first time at the camp, Rummelt has already had an impact.

"I don't know if it's my coaching or not," she said. "But since I'm pregnant (due in a month), a lot of kids have had questions, especially the girls. Some didn't even know they could get pregnant.

"They've never seen anybody like me right now, and they have questions, especially about how you raise a child. I have a 2-year-old, and he can wear me out.

"I chase him around all the time. The problem is that being pregnant that's seen as high risk so I can't exercise or anything, and being in a wheelchair it's hard to move.

"I was bed-ridden with my son, but so far I'm not. And I'm happy about it."

Her injury is called a T-12 complete.

"No feeling below my belly button," she says matter of factly.

"The doctors are saying I have no feeling, I have no hope. I tell them that it's text book, and they don't make the call. There is technology out there, surgery in Portugal.

"I've looked into it, but can't do anything because I'm pregnant. I know the odds are long, that maybe nothing can be done. But I'm not going to quit on this until I've done the best I can to fight it."

"Why not? They can't make you worse?"

Rummelt has adapted to her life, and has been making the most of it.

But she will admit that there are those moments when she can feel, deep inside, the need to do some of the things that the accident has denied her.

"It happens every day at the gym," she said. "There are people who have slight disabilities and they'll say 'I hate leg days, they are so hard,' or 'I'm so tired today, and then they look at me and say 'Sorry.' "

"I wish I could hate bad leg days. But days like that are all the same for me.

"There are nights I go home and I cringe when I turn off the treadmills, and I tell myself this just isn't right.

"But I'm able to tell myself that this happened for a reason, and I get strength from that."

There are some parents who try to protect their kids, instead of letting them do as much as they can.

"It's natural," Rummelt said. "You always protect your kids, and if you have one who is in a wheelchair, you would probably be double-protective.

"But the world isn't like that. You can't keep kids insulated, because sooner or later they will have to learn to face things and deal with them.

"I come out here and watch these kids laughing and playing and working out and challenging themselves. I find it inspiring. I wish every parent could have the chance to come out here and see what it can do for their kids."

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