



Inside the game: Local wheelchair tennis players train, face off

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In a large indoor fitness complex, David Briggs flies across the tennis court to return a serve from his old doubles partner, Pat Besta.

A lofty 1980s guitar solo drifts down from the rafters as the two 30-something men prepare for their next tournament.

During the year, both Briggs and Besta, of Plainfield Township and Belmont respectively, said they usually practice twice a week for a combined four to five hours more if they're feeling ambitious.

If all goes right, when this article hits the newsstands Briggs and Besta will have already competed in the 2005 Midwest Indoor Wheelchair Tennis Tournament, at Champion Health & Fitness, in Rockford.

Win or lose, they'll have towed off the sweat from last weekend's three-day event, and gone back to their families and day jobs.

As part of the Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association's tennis team both men said they get up early before a tournament in this case 5 a.m. and head to the tournament courts to warm up before their first match at 8 a.m.

While the wheelchair tennis season starts in March, players practice all year.

The Grand Rapids team starts off the first hour of practice with drills, and then the last half is devoted to one-on-one matches. If players compete on the traveling team, they could head out to tournaments once a month as far away as Atlanta or St. Louis.

Skilled players can compete in U.S. Tennis Association-sponsored tournaments for national attention. The very best players can head out to the Summer Olympics to play other wheelchair players.

On any given team throughout the country, players can range from purely recreational to professional, based on their level of interest.

Since most of the players on GRWSA's seven-member traveling tennis team end up at the same tournaments every year, they know almost every face, he said.

"Typically, we play with people we know. We get to know the players after awhile," Briggs said.

While Besta has played wheelchair sports for about 13 years, Briggs just started playing.

"I had never played tennis before I got hurt. So it's all kind of new to me," Briggs said.

Briggs lost the use of his legs after a motorcycle accident about five years ago. He started playing tennis almost three years ago, when a friend, the former head coach of GRWSA's wheelchair tennis team, encouraged him to join.

But even now, because of raising small children with his wife, Briggs has scaled back the amount of time he plays, dropping out of the traveling team to focus more on family.

Unlike other wheelchair sports, wheelchair tennis has only one different rule wheelchair players get one extra bounce to respond when the ball heads their way.

One thing that not many people know, is that because of the mechanics of a tennis wheelchair, it can be played on any regular court, even against able-bodied players, said Lynn Bender, head coach for GRWSA's tennis team and tournament director.

They call this type of game a "one-up-one-down" match.

"A lot of the reason Dave and I joined, is that you can get out and compete against able-bodied people you can play against your wife and kids," Besta said.

The tennis chair itself moves fast. Players have to strap their feet and waists to the light titanium frame, or the inertia of quick turns would have force enough to throw them.

"It's the closest thing to playing tennis standing up. It makes them twice as fast," Bender said.

Instead of four wheels, like a standard chair, all sports wheelchairs have an extra fifth rear wheel for stabilization, and angled main tires for quicker turning. In tennis chairs, that fifth wheel extends out farther than a wheelchair intended for basketball.

Bender compared playing tennis in a standard wheelchair to an able-bodied person trying to run a marathon in high heels. It just doesn't make sense, she said.

Players such as Briggs and Besta who still have the use of their arms will hold the racquet in one hand, pushing the wheels forward with their free hand on one wheel and the racquet's grip-taped handle on the other. Quadriplegic players use motorized wheelchairs, often times taping the racquet to their hands.

Strategically, players might play a bit farther backcourt.

"They typically only come to the net if they have to," Bender said.

When the athletes get out and compete, they're also hoping to inspire children in wheelchairs to get out, get fit, and take pride in their accomplishments, Briggs said.

Adult wheelchair tennis players have very few tournaments they can attend locally. The July 22 to July 24 tournaments represent the closest location outside of Canada.

"For some people, this might be the only tournament they play in," Bender said, adding that the tournament tends to draw many players from neighboring states.

For more information on how to donate, sign up for a team, or become involved with the GRWSA, visit www.grwsa.com or call 242-0351.

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