

# Independent Living PROVIDER

The Sales & Service Magazine For HME Dealers

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## New Products & Technology For 1995

Capturing New Ideas,  
Conquering New Markets



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Sheila Roush, coach for the Wright State Rolling Raiders quad rugby team, goes over strategy with her players during halftime of their game with the Columbus Capitals in Dayton, OH.

# What A

As the Columbus Capitals set up their defense, Vi Vorasane brings the ball

up court for the Wright State Rolling Raiders. When a defender lunges forward, Vorasane jukes left then races past. Two of his teammates crash headlong into two other defenders, creating an alley barely large enough to slip a wheelchair through. That's all Vorasane needs as he darts his wheelchair over the goal line.

The crowd cheers, but the players get no time to celebrate. Amid shouts of "Get back! Get back!" and "I've got the middle!" and "Stay in your corner, Eddie!", the Rolling Raiders race back down the basketball court as the Capitals go on the attack. And "attack" is an appropriate description, for both the offense and defense. At any time, a defender will hurtle toward the ball carrier with a collision of wheelchairs that stops them both dead. The ball handler has to escape before he gets pinned in or pass the ball off to a teammate.

This fast-paced game—a basketball/football hybrid that most resembles demolition derby—is called quad rugby and is one of the fastest-growing sports in America. Players must have the equivalent of C-7 quadriplegia or higher to be eligible to play—paraplegics are not allowed on teams, which

**The Popularity  
Of Sports Among  
People With  
Disabilities Is Yet  
In Its Infancy,  
Creating For  
Dealers A Ripe  
Market That Is Far  
From Maximizing  
Its Potential  
Sales Growth.**

By Eric Minton

is justice for quadriplegics tired of being relegated to the end of the bench in wheelchair basketball.

Wheelchair sports and recreation is growing so fast that its governing bodies can't keep track. Yet, authorities predict the popularity of sports among people with disabilities is yet in its infancy, creating for dealers a ripe market that is far from maximizing its potential sales growth. Furthermore, this consumer segment eagerly seeks retailer participation, a ready-made marketing opportunity.

"Should dealers get involved in these events?" Bruce Scott, director of sports and recreation for the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA), asks rhetorically. "Heavens, yes! Right now the majority of folks consumers get to see at tournaments is manufacturers. They don't get to see the dealers."

Indicative of wheelchair sports' popularity is the number of national governing bodies belonging to the umbrella organization Wheelchair Sports USA in Colorado Springs. Last year's addition of the U.S. Wheel-

# Sport!

chair Fencing Association brings to nine the number of associated organizations covering basketball, archery, table tennis, shooting, swimming, weightlifting, track and field, and quad rugby. These are the associations, along with the National Foundation of Wheelchair Tennis, that conduct sanctioned tournaments and issue rules. Total membership of athletes is about 3,900, an increase of 700 over the past year.

That number should see a significant increase by this time next year, thanks to the U.S. Quad Rugby Association alone, which started with six teams in 1988. It had 18 teams when current president Ed Suhr, coach of the Eastern PVA Strykers of New York, joined in 1991. The '93-'94 season saw 43 teams, and this year Suhr expects to field more than 50. "When you're talking about adding ten people per team, you're adding about 100 people per year," notes Scott.

## TENNIS ON THE MOVE

The fastest-growing wheelchair sport is tennis. The National Foundation of Wheelchair Tennis, founded in 1981 and now staging 70 tournaments annually in

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the United States, has seen its membership virtually double in the past five years to the current 2,000 registered players, says Vicki Turner, director of special events. That number, though, doesn't begin to put the sport's popularity in perspective because many wheelchair users play recreational tennis.

"It's hard to know the number," she says. "Every community has a tennis court, and a wheelchair user can play with able-bodied persons. You also don't need a team to play. To play most of the other sports, other than road racing, you need a team, and road racing is a very lonely sport."

Tennis is only one sport where recreational play is shadowing the growth of organized sports. Even wheelchair basketball continues to grow, though membership in the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) has actually declined in recent years. "We've seen other leagues increase, which leads us to believe that more and more folks are playing recreational wheelchair basketball as opposed to professional," Scott says.

This is a realization of the PVA's goal since it began promoting wheelchair sports in the post-World War II years. "It was felt that the way to best promote the sport was to showcase the elite athlete," Scott says. "And we have done so, and done so very successfully to the point that now the Paralympics is almost equal in stature with the Olympics." The International Paralympics are held the week after the Olympic Games in the city hosting that year's Olympics.

Now, says Scott, many of the elite athletes are getting older, but want to stay active in sports, leading them into more recreational activities, such as bowling, snow and water skiing, cycling, fishing, camping, and other outdoor activities. David Neal, manager of Hamilton's Health Aid Services in Dayton, OH, says he sees more people with disabilities wanting to join their families in cycling and outdoor activities.

## POPULAR AMONG TEENS

Wheelchair sports are becoming popular among teens, too. Todd Hatfield, program manager for Wheelchair Sports USA, says that while membership for the NWBA has leveled off, junior membership has increased. Scott also sees a movement toward more intercollegiate and interscholastic wheelchair sports programs.

Wright State University in Dayton, OH, recruited Jim Munson, a T-10 paraplegic, to play wheelchair basketball in 1988. He became a four-year player on

**Quad rugby action between the Wright State Rolling Raiders (in yellow) and the Columbus Capitals (in red). Vi Vorasane (jersey number 5), Wright State's top offensive threat, is playing defense here.**



a limited scholarship and tuition breaks. Now a junior high school teacher, he coaches the Wright State team. Munson says he was the all-around jock in high school before he broke his back falling from a tree ten years ago. He first resisted suggestions from family and friends to get into wheelchair athletics, but changed his mind when he saw a wheelchair basketball game in Detroit. "They were studs, definitely," Munson says.

He had always loved competition and, realizing how much he missed it, he took up wheelchair basketball. Now, though, the appeal is the camaraderie. "It's being with other people in my situation," he says. "Not just in this community, but in the whole Midwest area; you interact with people with similar interests to yours." Games and tournaments have become social events in addition to sporting events as teams and players eat and party together before and after the games.

Whether it's the recreational users or athletes at the organized adult or junior level, these consumers represent a lucrative, well-connected market for dealers, a market that goes far beyond sports or recreational chairs and equipment.

Advantage Health Services, Inc., in Columbus, OH, supports organized sports programs primarily through volunteer labor and funding for teams and tournaments. "It takes cash to run the facility, pay for referees, do the mailings," says Tim Simmons, sales manager. "All these activities are expensive, and it takes outside interest to fund them and keep them going." Munson suggests that because socializing has become so much a part of wheelchair sports, dealers can sponsor food or drinks accompanying the event.

A variation on team or tournament sponsorship is

conducting clinics. The dealer can either hook up with a manufacturer to bring in professional athletes or work with a local rehabilitation center or PVA chapter. "I hold water skiing clinics and bring in 25 or 30 wheelchair users for each clinic," says Hamer Cole, sports director for Southeastern PVA and a Quickie rep in Conway, SC. "We do the same thing with snow skiing in January. If they like [the sport], they buy the equipment; if they don't, they won't." Even if they don't, they tell friends of their adventures.

Event sponsorship serves several purposes. One is marketing. "We're visible, and our equipment's visible," Simmons says. "It helps in sport chairs sales; it supports everyday chairs."

Scott agrees. "When you develop trust for a wheelchair, all the other medical supplies and equipment come with it," he says. "You'll find that individuals with disabilities will be more loyal customers than able-bodied people, primarily because once they've established confidence that you'll be able to meet their needs when they need them, they'll be reluctant to change."

### **CUSTOMER SERVICE IS A TOP PRIORITY**

Macio Jacobs Jr., a counselor for the Disability Action Center in Charleston, SC, puts customer service at the top of his priorities as a consumer. The 26-year-old, a former college scholarship football and baseball player, started using a wheelchair when he was 22 because of transverse myelitis, a swelling of the spinal cord. His father, tired of seeing him hanging around the house, pushed him into athletics, and the younger Jacobs took up track and field. He competed in the

shot put, discus, and javelin as well as the pentathlon, which includes 200- and 1500-meter races.

"The first year I started racing I started doing so well my father wanted me to have my own [racing] chair," Jacobs says, leading to his purchase of an Eagle racing chair. He went to the 1990 Paralympics trials and came in fifth in the pentathlon, missing out on a berth for Barcelona.

Now Jacobs plays tennis and is shopping for a tennis chair. Though he's leaning toward a Top End by Action, he says "It's real competitive out there" as far as quality of chair. That is why customer service is so important. You need to be able to get in touch with your representative for parts, like tires. Are they going to get it to you on time? If you don't have a good company, it's going to be hard to get tires or what you need for the chair."

This translates into using a provider Jacobs can trust. "It's like with a physician—if a doctor gives you a prescription, he or she will tell you the best place to go to get it filled," says Jacobs. He chose his dealer from recommendations of friends and fellow athletes.

For this reason, dealers should look at sponsoring individual athletes in addition to events. Wheelchair

manufacturers contract with professional wheelchair athletes to endorse and compete in their chairs; dealers can get similar mileage out of local athletes. Advantage Health Services sponsors athletes by giving them discounts on merchandise. "And they get our name out there and tell their friends," Simmons says.

Jacobs isn't sponsored, but he feels he's helped sell

## ***Dealers had better be prepared to provide more customer service with sports chairs than for other products.***

a couple of chairs for his dealer. "You see a chair in a magazine or brochure, but it's not the same as seeing it on the street," he observes.

Dealers had better be prepared to provide more customer service with sports chairs than for other products. For one thing, chairs are becoming specialized for individual sports. Jacobs has found his racing chair ill-suited for tennis, which needs "something durable to be able to take the abuse of stopping and going and

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maybe running into a fence here and there," he says.

Suhr got a quad rugby chair from Top End by Action as his second chair, which provides better protection for his feet in games. Specialized chairs are not necessary, he says, "but as you increase your level of competition, it becomes more important."

Performance and fit are symbiotic in wheelchair sports. "That chair becomes part of you," says Scott. "The better it fits, the better it provides for your needs, the better you'll perform." Or, as Jacobs says, "The chair should fit like a pair of gloves."

Then, there are those people like Munson who list "looks" as his top priority for choosing a chair. "I want a sharp-looking chair, something that someone says, 'Hey, that's a neat chair.'" He has a Top End by Action that he uses as his everyday chair with an auxiliary camber bar to change the pitch of tires and the ability to lower the seat for basketball.

Such flexibility is important to customers who participate in more than one sport or who are purely recreational athletes and don't need specialized chairs. Indeed, Neal sees sports chairs becoming popular for non-athletes, who like their light weight, flexibility, and fit.

## THINK PERFORMANCE FIRST

For those dealers who want to win athletes, they need to think performance foremost. "If the performance is not there, the person won't be happy, I don't care what color the wheelchair is," Scott states. Dealers would thus be well-served to know each sport or recreational activity to best advise their customers. "I look for a dealer who knows what you're talking about and knows sports, who can look at a person and know what chair best suits him or her in the sport," Jacobs says.

The effort needed to sponsor events and clinics requires more time and energy than traditional advertising, Simmons says. "There are faster ways of making sales, more profitable ways," he says. Advantage Health Services, however, sees more long-term growth in sports sponsorship. "It grows our business," Simmons says. "It puts money into the community that pays our salaries. And the fun I've had is worth it."

Both Simmons and Neal, who is looking at sponsoring one of the Rolling Raiders quad rugby players, speak of the positive impact wheelchair sports can have on their customers' lives. For Neal this melds with his market strategy. "Our marketing is to long-term rehab, the continuing customer," he says. "We want the young person who is healthy and going to live to 60 or 70."

He admits, too, that selling sports equipment has a positive impact on his life. "These are the fun things to sell," he says. "You start out as the grim reaper: You are the one putting this person in a wheelchair. Then, after a while, he or she gets into biking and skiing and then you're the one selling all this fun stuff."

Simmons says sports promotion has a spiraling effect. Promoting the sport promotes the product, which further promotes the sport that further promotes the product. "The key thing is getting the word out," Simmons says. "Any customer who comes in here that I think is a potential athlete, I try to hook him or her up with a coach. A lot of people don't know the sports are out there."

His store has literature on wheelchair sports readily available, but merely carrying a line of sports equipment—from chairs to handcranked bicycles—in its showroom among the power chairs, walkers, and home health care supplies

### S I D E B A R

## Sports Organizations

Following is a list of sports organizations for people with disabilities. These contacts can put you in touch with authorities in specific sports, clinic organizers, local teams, and athletes:

- **The National Foundation of Wheelchair Tennis**, 940 Calle Amanecer, Suite B, San Clemente, CA 92673; 714/361-6811
- **Paralyzed Veterans of America**, 801 18th Street NW, Washington, DC 20006; 202/872-1300
- **Wheelchair Sports USA**, 3545 East Fountain Boulevard, Suite L-1, Colorado Springs, CO 80910; 719/574-1150, is an umbrella organization for the following associations:

- American Wheelchair Table Tennis Association
- National Wheelchair Basketball Association
- National Wheelchair Shooting Federation
- U.S. Quad Rugby Association
- U.S. Wheelchair Fencing Association
- U.S. Wheelchair Swimming
- U.S. Wheelchair Weightlifting Federation
- Wheelchair Archery USA
- Wheelchair Athletics of the USA

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**Jim Munson, a teacher at Studebaker Junior High School in Dayton, OH, uses a Top End by Action as both his everyday chair and for basketball, adjusting the camber bar and seat height.**

also promotes wheelchair athletics. "Everybody who comes in looks at the sports equipment," Simmons reports. "And everybody's curious and asks a lot of questions. Then they might say, 'I know a relative of mine, a friend who is young, with a disability from an accident, he's an athlete, and he would like something like that.' And that's how you get the word out. It's a way of developing your customer base, too."

That customer base is growing anyway, not only in the numbers of people with disabilities but in the toppling of more and more barriers because of federal and state civil rights and access laws. Then, too, popularity breeds more popularity, and Suhr, for one, thinks his Quad Rugby Association has a lot of potential—untapped players who don't even know about the sport. "There's a lot of people out there who don't do much, except sit at home watching TV and playing with their computer," he says. "They're not getting out."

Yet.

*Eric Minton, a freelance writer in Dayton, OH, has written on disability issues and other business topics for more than 40 national trade journals.*

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