

Wheels are turning for NCAA's disabled athletes



Leigh Klein

The Physical Education Building on the UT Arlington campus is an unassuming brown structure with a swimming pool and basketball court on its lower level. Walking through the hallway into the Movin' Mavs' offices, there's an aura of something different going on as you enter into the basketball suite. There are articles, pictures and papers all over, as if you've stepped into some sort of library standing on its head. We have found the epicenter of what sport is truly about, the axis of sport changing lives for a power higher than university ego or the almighty dollar.

Head coach Doug Garner was at the office with former players Tyler Garner (the coach's son), Jay Nelms, Juan Soto and current player Jan Gans. The hour they shared unveiled the basketball I knew as a kid, the one I had fallen in love with and seemingly lost through the cynicism and jadedness of today's big business of high school and college athletics.

As Garner took me into the locker room, he pointed to an empty wheelchair: "Here, this should work. It's not one of the best we have, but it will do." I lowered into the base and tried to catch up to Nelms, Gans and Soto as they headed out to the court. I wasn't exactly sure how to maneuver it. I spun the wheels gently to move forward and was optimistic that I'd clear the space, but I knocked into the wall. I spun the wheels backwards and then forwards and finally I cleared the locker room and entered the basketball court.

Garner passed me the ball and asked me to give it a try. "Pull up, and let's see what you got." I lifted the ball up and released. Air ball. My first four of five shots were all air balls. I turned to Nelms and asked, "Can you shoot the 3?" He took one shot. Swish. Then I asked Soto. Another swish. And finally Gans, the post player. He nailed it. Three players on the court with me, and three 3-point attempts; all swishes. *I'm the able bodied one*, shooting one for 10 from 12 feet and in. Along the way, I am fumbling the ball and wheeling hopelessly around the court after it.

I have entered the world of wheelchair basketball and found out first-hand that these athletes are more determined, passionate and driven than any I've ever encountered. They are in incredible condition, strong and coordinated.

Wheelchair basketball originated in the 1940s as a rehab model for war veterans. UTA started a community wheelchair program in the 1970s and entered the intercollegiate division in 1989. There are currently 10 schools competing in the college division and another 20 community teams loosely affiliated with colleges.

Wheelchair basketball has evolved from a rehab model to a way to unlock human potential. This is where adaptive sports are starting to go, allowing the athletes

to find through sport what they can do with their life and how to maximize it.

In 2013, the US Department of Education sent out a memo specifying school-responsibilities under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 to provide students with disabilities at the postsecondary level an equal opportunity to participate in athletics, including intercollegiate, club and intramural athletics. Adaptive sports have made a lot of progress recently with up to 30 states adopting state rules for students with disabilities to be able to participate in sports on the high school level. It's starting to translate to opportunities on the college level. Equity and inclusion as part of the NCAA system is furthering along the process.

The funding mechanisms for adaptive sports are still a work in progress, and the United States lags behind Canada, England and Australia in this area.

Garner's Movin' Mavs are seven-time champions of the Intercollegiate Wheelchair Basketball Division. As most college coaches travelled the country this July looking for the next crop of recruits, Garner spent July running five adaptive sport camps and visiting rehab centers.

Garner is the second coach in the history of the program. He took over for his mentor, Jim Hayes.

Hayes was a mashup of John Wooden and Jackie Robinson. He won seven national championships, developed 61 All-Americans and advanced the cause of people with disabilities around the UTA community for 30 years. Hayes was one of the first students in a wheelchair to attend UTA. He suffered a spinal cord injury during a diving accident on his 18th birthday.

Hayes understood that people with disabilities are less likely to go to college, less likely to be employed and more likely to have health issues. He recognized that sport was the way to get them to college and on the road to independence.

Hayes would recruit Doug's son, Tyler, to play for UTA.

Tyler was born in 1986 with spina bifida, a birth defect that prevents the spinal cord from developing fully.

Tyler was introduced to wheelchair sports through track and field, and as they networked more and more in that world, they found out about the Arkansas Rollin' Razorbacks team based out of Little Rock. The Garners would travel 90 minutes each way, two to three times a week to be a part of the program. Doug had coaching experience in baseball and gymnastics and hadn't played basketball since junior high school, but he was determined, "If it's going to happen, it was up to us to make it happen." Doug would become commissioner of the junior division of wheelchair basketball, where he worked on new program development and adaptive sports inclusion in public schools.



Leigh Klein, third from left, and UTA's Movin' Mavs.

Doug would later assist Hayes. He took over the program when Hayes passed away in 2008.

Tyler, who owns a house in Arlington, is now part of the kinesiology faculty at UTA, where he is starting his Ph.D. On this day, we weren't able to get Tyler on the basketball court; he was in his work clothes and didn't want to get sweated up.

Soto packed a powerful upper torso with arms that one would find on a running back. The former military man prides himself on being a good ballhandler and passer. This was Soto's final season for the Movin' Mavs intercollegiate team. Wheelchair basketball satisfied the competitive urge and filled the void of being a part of a unit.

Nelms is one of the best to ever wear the Movin' Mavs uniform. Soto describes Jay as "Michael Jordan in Steve Nash's body." Nelms has been a member of the U.S. National Team and MVP of the World Parapan Am qualifier in London.

Nelms remembers going to the gym between two and four in the morning in order to get court time. Court time is a prevalent problem for wheelchair basketball. Most wheelchair programs are non-profit and can't compete with able body for-profit organizations for court time. And, as Garner pointed out, "People don't want the wheelchairs marking up the floor."

Meanwhile, Nelms and Soto went one-on-one. As Nelms exploded down the lane toward the basket, Soto turned the chair 90 degrees to stop Nelms' drive. Nelms was able to get deep in the lane and then tilted his chair on one wheel to shoot the baby-hook shot. Score. Soto got the ball, trying to answer, but Nelms was too quick with his chair and tied Soto up with the ball.

These are athletes who train more rigorously than any on campus. They face more adversity than any other sports team, yet they are not considered part of UTA athletics. The Movin' Mavs are part of UTA recreation. They follow all 290-plus rules in the NCAA handbook and compete for a national championship but fall outside the university's interpretation of athletics.

The disabled athlete has grown all too familiar with being left on the outside despite recent progress. Inclusion continues to be the elusive goal for the disabled.

Nelms is generally laughing and smiling, but to make sure his point came through, he stoically pointed out that there needs to be more education and interaction with those with disabilities. "You will be wheeling down the sidewalks or at the airport and parents are yanking their children out of the way as if I'm going to run them over. They have a horrified look on their face and they tell their child something bad happened to that man (me). Come and ask me what happened; I was in a car wreck. It helps to talk about it and learn. Otherwise, that child is growing up and doing the same exact thing when they are a parent."

Sports for people with disabilities gets back to what sports are all about: People having the opportunity to exercise, stay healthy and maximize what they can do with their life.

Society needs to change the mindset. We are not going to fix disability, but we can help people with disabilities maximize their life.

Leigh Klein is the owner of Five-Star Basketball.