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Advocating for Student Athletes with Disabilities

A movement is growing across the country as high school and college students with physical disabilities challenge the status quo that sports are for able-bodied individuals only. Having a physical disability no longer means sitting on the sidelines. Although adaptive sports have been around for decades, it is only in the last several years that people are taking notice to that fact that 'adaptive' does not mean 'less than.' In other words, an adaptive sport can be just as competitive as its non-adaptive counterpart. I am advocating for the inclusion of adaptive sports into the landscape of athletic programs at the university and college level.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) offers tremendous financial and academic support to students attending college and participating in NCAA recognized sports. The purpose of the NCAA is to provide a governing body for all collegiate sports programs. With each sport organized into three divisional categories, there are currently over 450,000 student athletes in the NCAA as of September 2012. These students participate in well-known sports such as Football, Basketball, Baseball, and Hockey as well as in less-known sports such as bowling, fencing, and rifle. Students who play in NCAA-level sports have invested countless hours in training for their sport and have earned the right to play in college and receive the athletic and academic support necessary to succeed (Hendrickson).

College-bound student athletes with disabilities do not have the same benefits entering college as the student athlete without disabilities. Many of these student athletes with disabilities have been training just as long and as hard as their non-disabled peers. Many have competed at

just as high or higher levels of competition including in International Paralympic Committee (IPC) sanctioned sports. Yet, student athletes with disabilities that compete at a high level are not afforded recognition or the same benefits as able-bodied student athletes by many colleges and universities because adaptive sports are not sponsored by the NCAA (Hendrickson). Tutors are not provided to the traveling student athlete with disabilities. Consideration on missed classes is not explicitly given to the student athlete with disabilities. Both of these are provided to the able-bodied student athlete. This adds a tremendous amount of stress to the athlete training and competing in adaptive sports. It is very difficult to find a healthy and productive balance with academics. In addition to support, the NCAA student athlete has the opportunity to receive scholarships directly (Division I and II) or indirectly (Division III) related to their athletic participation. Unless a student with a disability is capable of participating in an NCAA sanctioned sport, the support both academic and financial is virtually non-existent (About the NCAA).

There are currently two dozen universities and colleges in the United States that recognize disabled sports in their athletic programs (About the NCAA). In the Winter 2013 issue of the NCAA Champions magazine, these schools were hailed for being on the forefront of inclusion but we are still far from seeing any institution offer the same benefits to students with disabilities as those without. The consensus is that these benefits will not be available until the NCAA recognizes a category of adaptive sports in their organization (Hendrickson).

I am a sophomore at the University of Pittsburgh and have a physical disability as well as a slight learning disability. My physical disability, Spina Bifida, has resulted in paralysis below the knees. I am able to walk only with the use of leg braces and crutches. I use a wheelchair for long distances such as getting around Pitt's campus. I also have Arnold Chiari Malformation

Type I, which means my brain stem is herniated through the opening at the base of my skull. This has caused a secondary condition known as Hydrocephalus, which is an excess build-up of fluid in my brain. When I was born, I had a shunt placed in the right ventricle of my brain to drain the fluid that cannot drain normally down the spinal cord. Although the hydrocephalus is controlled by the shunt, its effect, as well as several shunt revisions, have resulted in me having difficulty with processing complex math problems and following multi-step scenarios. With academic support I received in high school, I managed to overcome these challenges and graduate with a 3.67 GPA and was a member of the National Honor Society.

I never let my disability affect my desire to play sports. Growing up, I played baseball, soccer, and even lacrosse, but as the sports became more about competition and less about inclusion, I looked to adaptive sports to feed my need for competition. At the age of five, I was introduced to sled hockey, an adaptive form of ice hockey. I quickly realized that this sport was played as close to and was as competitive as ice hockey. I was named to the U.S. Junior National Sled Hockey Team when I was 14 years old and began traveling the United States for competition. In 2010, at the age of 16, I was selected to the US Men's National Sled Hockey Team. I travelled nationally and internationally with the team and was able to balance high school academics with training and competition because of the support I received that was provided through my Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Last year, as a freshman at the University of Pittsburgh, I entered my third year as a member of the US Men's National Team. Although Disability Services and my professors at Pitt were supportive and understanding of my involvement in an international-level adaptive sport, there was little formal coordination to help me juggle academics with training and travel. As luck would have it, finals in both semesters fell right after international travel. In the first

semester, I competed in the World Sledge Challenge in Calgary with our team taking first place. My celebration was short-lived, though, as I had a final the day following my return. Last semester, I returned from the World Sled Hockey Championships in South Korea only to take a final the next day. Needless to say, my freshman year did not end as strong as I had hoped academically.

I recently made the 2014 U.S. Men's Paralympic Sled Hockey Team. I have worked hard for over 10 years to reach this goal of playing for the U.S. in the Paralympic Games. I will be traveling to Sochi Russia to compete in the 2014 Paralympics in March. As the Olympics and Paralympics approach, there is growing support of the Paralympics sweeping the nation. The mission of this "Paralympic Movement" is to increase awareness of Paralympic sports and to show that Paralympians put in the same amount of hard work and dedication as able-bodied Olympians to get to the top of their sport. People are starting to realize that disabled athletes have quite a bit in common with able-bodied athletes.

Because of my commitment to the U.S. Paralympic Sled Hockey Team, I opted to be a part-time student at the University of Pittsburgh this fall. I did not feel that I could adequately focus on Paralympic training while carrying a full-time academic load. I will be taking a semester off this spring in order to prepare for and compete in the Paralympics. My goal is to return to the University of Pittsburgh for the 2014 Summer session and concentrate on earning my undergraduate degree.

This essay is not intended to focus on the University of Pittsburgh or me but rather to convey the discrepancy between support able-bodied student athletes receive versus student athletes with disabilities. The able-bodied student athlete has a built-in system of support because of the NCAA structure. Student athletes with disabilities who are competing at a very high level

do not receive the same benefits even though they put in just as much time into training and competing. Therefore, I am advocating for the NCAA to recognize adaptive sports to ensure that these athletes receive the same benefits as their peers.

Works Cited

About the NCAA. 30 September 2013. 30 September 2013. <www.ncaa.org>.

Hendrickson, Brian. "Boundless Determination." *NCAA Champion Magazine* (Winter 2013): 46-53.