

Bobby Voss, pictured in the article below, shot THE BALL in St. Louis during the summer of 2007.



From the February 2008 edition of Rural Missouri.
<http://www.ruralmissouri.org/08pages/08FebOtherTigers.html>

The other Tigers

MU's wheelchair team makes basketball extraordinary

by Bob McEowen



University of Missouri sophomores James Senbeta, Bobby Voss and Andrew Tucker, all members of MU's wheelchair basketball team, scrimmage during practice at the university's Student Recreation Complex. Now in its third season, the team competes against other collegiate wheelchair basketball teams nationwide.

The University of Missouri Tigers are on the court and the action is furious. Players race down the lane, dribbling as they go. They pass and shoot with lightning speed. Athletes crash into each other and spill to the hardwood, only to pop up and get back in the game.

This game is just as exciting as any basketball broadcast on television, but a few details set it apart. These Tigers do not defend Mizzou Arena, but rather occupy court 10 of the university's Student Recreation Complex. Instead of thousands of screaming fans, barely a hundred spectators turn out to watch.

One more thing — every player on the court is in a wheelchair.

While that distinction surely sets this sport apart from “able-bodied” basketball, it's a superficial difference in some ways, according to Coach Steve Paxton.

“It's a basketball team, plain and simple,” says Paxton, who came to Columbia in 2004 specifically to form a wheelchair basketball program. “We just happen to play in wheelchairs.”

A paraplegic who broke his neck in a car accident at age 16, Paxton does not intend to diminish the accomplishment of these athletes. It's just that he knows his team plays basketball in a way that transcends the fact that wheelchairs are involved.

People look at an athlete in a wheelchair, and the first thing they seem to think is ‘Oh, that's nice,’” Paxton says, mimicking a condescending tone. “Come out and see a game, and you'll get a whole different concept of what's going on.”

Indeed, the athleticism and level of intensity of an MU Tigers wheelchair basketball game is hard to appreciate until you've seen one. The chairs soon become irrelevant as spectators are left cheering for a forward pulling down a rebound or a guard sinking a three-pointer.

In many ways, the wheelchair Tigers are no different than any other athletic program. Although officially part of the university's recreation department, the team functions just like the high-profile sports. “We have scholarships, we have eligibility standards, we have recruiting guidelines,” Paxton says.



Junior John Gilbert, left, confers with Coach Steve Paxton about a broken wheel. Gilbert is a three-time All-American who helped the USA team win the gold medal at the 2007 Parapan American Games.

Furthermore, the sport itself differs little from the able-bodied game. A standard court and regulation 10-foot-tall baskets are used, but to avoid a traveling call players must dribble every two pushes instead of every two steps.

Currently the sport is governed by the National Wheelchair Basketball Association, which represents 220 teams nationwide. The sport began after World War II as a means of providing recreation and physical fitness for injured soldiers. By 1977, the organization recognized college teams and the first collegiate championship was held. The sport has since expanded to include divisions for juniors and children.

“Wheelchair basketball allows people to focus on these individuals’ abilities and not their disabilities,” says Todd Hatfield, executive director of the association. “You focus on the talents that they have and not some of the issues that they face.”

Every player on the 10-member MU squad has a disability that requires the use of a wheelchair. Five were born with spina bifida. One has cerebral palsy. Four suffered a spinal injury that caused paralysis. Each player is assigned a classification, based on their level of disability, with the least disabled receiving the most “points.” To ensure that every player has a place in the game, league rules permit only so many points on the floor at any time.

Regardless of their classification, these athletes all play basketball only with their arms. They propel their \$4,000 custom ball chairs with their arms, and they shoot using only upper body strength.

“You want to talk about fitness and conditioning? It’s a whole different level with these kids,” Paxton says. “I would say to any able-bodied person, just come out and sit in a wheelchair and try to shoot a free throw, and we’ll see how that goes.”

Paxton, a former wheelchair athlete, built his team from the ground up, with an initial squad of just five players in 2005. One of those original athletes is Tom Knaus, a former Smith-Cotton football player from Sedalia who broke his neck shortly after high school graduation.

Knaus assumed his athletic days were over until Paxton approached the then-college freshman and asked him to join the fledgling team.

“I was going to my car and the coach wheeled up to me and talked to me about it,” recalls Knaus, now a junior. “I was glad that I could continue playing sports. I was glad I could still compete.”

The desire to remain fit and active, to compete and to belong to a team are universal themes among the university’s wheelchair athletes.

John Gilbert was an ordinary Missouri kid from Fairfax when a tumor on his spine left him paralyzed at age 9. Undaunted, Gilbert took up wheelchair basketball and played with an elite junior division team in Omaha, Neb.



Members of MU's wheelchair basketball team, scrimmage during practice at the university's Student Recreation Complex.

"I have a very competitive nature," says Gilbert, an MU pre-med junior majoring in biology. "I want to win all the time, and I hate losing. This is one way that I can come out and win."

Since Paxton recruited him to come to the University of Missouri, Gilbert has proven his competitive drive, in spite of paralysis that places him in the most disabled wheelchair athlete classification. A two-time Mizzou MVP, he's been named an NWBA All-American three times. In 2007, he traveled to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to help the U.S. men's team bring home the gold at the Parapan American Games.

Gilbert's talents and leadership as team captain have not yet translated into a winning record. Halfway through the 2007-2008 season, MU has won just a third of its games and faces a tough schedule, with matches against more experienced teams from Wisconsin, Illinois, Arizona and elsewhere.

"We're still young and we're still learning," Paxton says. "When we started this program, we had five players, two of whom had never played wheelchair basketball before. Now we have 10 on our roster. We're coming a long way."

Whatever its win-loss record, the team still manages to put on quite a show when they take to the floor of the Student Recreation Complex's Brewer Field House. Like any basketball game, the thrill of watching these MU Tigers comes from how they play the game — and not how they move across the court.

"At any given moment, something spectacular can happen," Paxton says. "It can be a fantastic pass. It can be a great layup. It can be a three-point shot. It can be somebody taking a huge spill and then popping right back up and getting back in the play."

But even Paxton agrees that at least some of the excitement comes from watching the players overcome obstacles. "Part of it will be spectacular simply because they're playing in a ball chair," he says. "It makes the ordinary seem extraordinary."

The Tigers wheelchair basketball team's next home games are Feb. 1-2, when the team hosts an intercollegiate tournament at the MU Student Recreation Complex in Columbia. Another tournament is scheduled for March 1-2. For more information, log onto www.mizzourec.com. To contact the National Wheelchair Basketball Association, visit www.nwba.org, or write to NWBA, 6165 Lehman Drive, Suite 101, Colorado Springs, CO 80918.