

Episode 43 | Nathan Bragg Pt. 1

Sarah Smith 0:10

Hello and welcome back to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio. I'm Sarah Smith, your host of the podcast and a student intern at the Vancouver Adapted Music Society. Today, I'll be having a conversation with Nathan Bragg. Nathan is the communications coordinator at the BC Wheelchair Sports Association, but aside from working there, he's also involved in other ways, and he'll share his perspective from different roles throughout our conversation. Just before we start, though, it's important that I take a moment to acknowledge the land on which we are fortunate to host this podcast. This is the unceded and ancestral territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, and has been stewarded by them since time immemorial. Vancouver is located on territory that was never ceded or given up to the crown by these peoples. The term unceded acknowledges the dispossession of the land and the inherent rights that Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh hold to the territory. The term serves as a reminder that these Peoples have never left their territories and will always retain their jurisdiction and relationships with the land. Nathan, welcome to Discover Stories. Thanks for joining me today.

Nathan Bragg 1:25

Well, thanks for having me.

Sarah Smith 1:27

Yeah, hello. How's your week been?

Nathan Bragg 1:28

It's been okay so far, it's been pretty busy, but good.

Sarah Smith 1:28

Oh, good. Okay. Well, thank you for making the time just to get going. Could you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about you?

Nathan Bragg 1:39

Okay, so my name is Nathan Bragg, and I'm the communications coordinator at BC Wheelchair Sports. I'm also one of their athletes in wheelchair rugby, and I'm one of the club leads for the Vancouver Wheelchair Rugby Club.

Sarah Smith 1:53

Very cool. So you play a couple of different roles there, it sounds like. That's awesome.

Nathan Bragg 1:56

Yeah, I wear a few hats.

Sarah Smith 1:58

Nice, nice. So you've mentioned your role at BC Wheelchair Sports in occupational context. Could you tell us a little bit more about what you do there?

Nathan Bragg 2:09

Yeah, so I run our communications and marketing. So I manage our websites, our social media. I run any sort of our recruitment or awareness campaigns, anything in that realm, and I'm also one half of our fundraising team.

Sarah Smith 2:24

Wow, very cool. Again, lots of different hats.

Nathan Bragg 2:26

Yeah, promoting our programs, promoting our sports, and making sure that the stories of our athletes are being told in a respectful and authentic way.

Sarah Smith 2:35

Amazing. I love that. That's like a perfect fit for what we do here on the podcast as well. Nice. And what is your "why" for the job that you do?

Nathan Bragg 2:48

Oof, that's a that's a tough question. But I personally have been involved in wheelchair sports for a very long time. I started, I was first introduced to wheelchair sport when I was like 11 or 12, my demo team from BC Wheelchair Basketball, who, at the time, was part of BC Wheelchair Sports and is now their separate organization, although it's also part of the SCI BC Community Services Network alongside us, the Disability Foundation, Spinal Cord Injury BC, Neil Squire, yeah, I think I hit all five of us there. But yeah, demo team came in my elementary school and introduced wheelchair basketball to me and my classmates. And then I got involved in the wheelchair basketball program. And then from there, I got involved with BC Wheelchair Sports's junior multi-sport camp, which is a week long summer camp where we introduced children and youth to a variety of different wheelchair sports. We've been doing it for a very long time, and we're really excited to have it back for

the first time in full since the pandemic this year. But that was kind of how I got introduced to BC Wheelchair Sports. And then from there, I got into the wheelchair rugby program when I was about 14 or 15. At the time, I was probably our youngest participant. And now we actually have, like, a wholly dedicated youth program for it, which is pretty sweet, and it's kind of gone full circle, which is real nice. And I think it's that full circle element that's part of my "why," like, I've always really been very passionate about wheelchair sports and para sport in general, and kind of not just the sports themselves, but the impact they can have on individuals once they get involved. Involved both from like a physical and mental health perspective, but also from just getting in touch with community and being around other peers in similar situations, who can kind of help you troubleshoot different problems and figure things out, whether you've been injured for six months or even had a disability for your entire life, so that aspect has been really cool. And just having gone through kind of every stage of the process, I guess, from being like a wide-eyed kid to now working for them.

Sarah Smith 4:52

Yeah, that is really cool. I love that you called it a full circle moment. I mean, that's exactly what it sounds like. But having sort of that inspiration. Getting a demo when you're little, and then now being an athlete, that's amazing. Yeah, very cool. Okay, so you mentioned wheelchair basketball and wheelchair rugby. Do you play any other adopted sports?

Nathan Bragg 5:11

Yeah, so I haven't actually played wheelchair basketball in a while, but I'm also a member of the National Espoir team for Boccia, which in BC is a sport run by SportAbility BC, which, again, is another organization. They're out of the same office that we are, though, and we're very happy to kind of point people in the right direction depending on what sport that they want to do. So that's kind of a precision-based sport, similar to lawn bowling or curling, for athletes with a more severe physical impairment in their upper and lower limbs. Yeah.

Sarah Smith 5:42

Wow, very cool.

Nathan Bragg 5:42

So I got involved in that about a year, a year and a half ago. And then, yeah, on the sports side, I've also coached some wheelchair basketball in the past, and do a little bit of coaching and rugby now too. So kind of a big breadth of things. And I'm very happy and very fortunate to also get the opportunity to work in sport, because it means I have, I get to learn a lot more about the wider system and how different pieces work and everything comes

together. And I think in turn, that's given me a bit more appreciation as an athlete, of all of the different things that go into making events and programs run and be successful, so that everybody can have a good time in what's hopefully a safe and supportive environment.

Sarah Smith 5:42

Yeah, that's really cool. It's kind of neat that you have that perspective from like, both sides of it, both coaching and as an athlete and as an employee, you kind of just see it all, yeah.

Nathan Bragg 6:30

Yeah, getting a chance to kind of see different pieces of the puzzle and how that all goes together. I mean, obviously that comes with its own complications sometimes, but I think it's, it's nice to have that holistic view of things.

Sarah Smith 6:31

Yeah, absolutely, very, very cool. We've touched on this a little bit, but I'm wondering if you might want to elaborate, you mentioned sort of that concept of building community and connection. And so I was wondering what role you think that BC Wheelchair Sports plays within the disability community here.

Nathan Bragg 7:02

Oh, I think, I mean, I'm not going to sit here and say that everybody loves sport and sport is the answer for everyone, but I do think for a lot of people, especially people with disability, sport can be an incredible outlet, and it definitely can come with that sense of community, because you're often working with other people towards common goals, and from that, you know, you kind of develop a sense of community there. Also, as I said, a lot of it, too, is just like that beyond the court stuff. I can say confidently that I've learned more about how to live as someone with a disability from my teammates throughout my life than I have from any sort of therapist or medical professional or any of that. And that's not meant as a knock on medical professionals. I've had some fantastic doctors, some fantastic physios, some pretty good OTs, all of that stuff. But it's different when you're in an environment and you're around other people who are experiencing similar things that you have, and you can ask questions and get really honest, occasionally raw answers as to, like, how they go about solving different things. You know, I think for me as someone who, you know, started out really young and kind of grew up with it, in certain programs, like seeing people who you know were working with a disability, or did have a partner, or did have children, all those things was really cool, and I think really helped different light bulbs go off in my mind. It's definitely too like there are things that I think both for people with disabilities and able-bodied people can learn from sport that do kind of transcend competition or whatever

you're working on, whether that be like creative problem solving, for example, that comes up a lot in sport, whether it means, like, being part of a team and knowing when to, like, step up and take on leadership versus when to kind of follow and accept the role, all sorts of things like that. You know, I think are important lessons that are brought through by sport. And the other big thing too is, like, I think people have a bit of a misconception, not just with BC Wheelchair Sports, but maybe some other sporting organizations in the sport world, is that you have to want to be this competitive, high level athlete. And yes, it's true, we do offer programs and supports for high performance athletes, but we do have programs and opportunities and events for people at every stage of the kind of athletic pathway. So whether you're a beginner, whether you're somebody who just wants to do something for a little bit of fitness and to maybe be around some other people with a similar disability, you know, once or twice a week and get a little bit exercise in, or you're somebody who, yeah, like, really has, a competitive itch that they're trying to scratch and is really looking for some sort of outlet. We have programs and events available for people at all stages of that pathway, and I think that's important. Like me realistically, in rugby, like I'm very much a recreational, I would say, semi-competitive athlete, like I'm not a superstar or anything, but it's a lot. Fun to just go out once or twice a week, get a good hour and a half, two hours exercise in with a lot of other good people and try and get a little bit better at the same time. So we kind of have a good mix of everything. Like there are definitely some really competitive folks who are, yeah, trying to make it onto an actual team or a high level provincial team. And we also have some other people within some of our clubs who are, yeah, they're just there to get their weekly exercise, some fun with some friends and get something out of that. And I think that there is, there's definitely positives from all of those approaches. And people can get what they want out of sport, really, and that's an important thing.

Sarah Smith 10:39

Yeah, that's really cool. And I mean, you're talking about sort of the breadth of programs and athletes.

Nathan Bragg 10:46

Sorry, I ramble.

Sarah Smith 10:47

No, no, that's totally okay. I was actually going to say that just that sounds really great, because it sounds that that would create a really inclusive environment. And I think that sometimes when folks who might be new to sport, or even like a new sport for someone who is already athletic. Sometimes organizations can come across as, like, daunting, or for

professionals only, or that you have to have some sort of base level of experience or knowledge. So I really appreciate that you addressed that as well, in terms of, like, there's all range of competitiveness and experience level in terms of the programs.

Nathan Bragg 11:18

Yeah, and I think that's something that we really strive for, like we have this wonderful program called Bridging the Gap that's all about reducing barriers to support and physical activity for people with disabilities. Because the reality of it is that adaptive equipment can be quite expensive. So through our Bridging the Gap program, we offer wheelchair loans, low or no cost wheelchair loans to individuals that needed to participate in our programs, because it's not always feasible for somebody, you know, to shell out that eight to \$10,000 for a chair. That way, you can rent a chair from us for like, \$100 a year and use that for the programming. So it really kind of alleviates that cost. And then at our Bridging the Gap events, a lot of them are centered around, like being a fun kind of introductory or kind of recreational experience where you can come out, try the sports in a way with, you know, supportive coaching and other athletes, in a way that's inclusive and open to anybody who wants to kind of try it and get that first positive experience, because it's so important that somebody's first experience is a positive one, and that we give them reasons to come back. We definitely don't want to be, you know, too aggressive or overly competitive right off the hop. I will say that though, there are some people who definitely like when they come to us and they want to get involved in our programs, like they are looking for that and they're looking for that competitive element, we 100% do offer that as well, but definitely for that, like first entry, we really want to just make it clear that everybody is welcome to come give things a try and test things out. I mean, for myself personally, I'll say that I do believe that there is kind of a sport or an activity out there for everybody, regardless of who you are, regardless of what your impairment might be. I have cerebral palsy, and it affects most of my limbs, so I'm kind of like, I have impairment in my upper and lower limbs as well. So some sports are more difficult than others, and it just take me a lot of trial and error to kind of find the ones that fit me best, not only from my interest point of view, but also in a functional way, where I could compete and have some success, and we're more than happy to kind of work with people and find adaptations and help point them in the right direction for whatever they're looking for.

Sarah Smith 13:35

I love that, and I think some of the things that are coming through that you've mentioned is a lot about like community and culture that's being fostered in terms of both, like inclusivity, but also just, I think you phrased something earlier along the lines of, like, finding the right fit for whatever someone's looking for, whether that be in terms of

competitiveness and intensity, or also just ability in finding the right sport that fits with the individual person. So I think it's really great that there's, like, a wide range of offerings.

Nathan Bragg 14:04

Yeah, like for us, so at BC Wheelchair Sports, just so people are clear, because I know sometimes can be confusing when we say BC Wheelchair Sports and they think we run every sport under the sun. And that's not actually the case. We're the provincial sporting organization for three core sports, which are wheelchair rugby, wheelchair tennis, and then wheelchair athletics. And when I say wheelchair athletics, I mean track and field. So that would be wheelchair racing, and then the seated element of throwing events. So we call it seated throws. So that's, you know, two individual sports and one team sport there. So we've got options for if you're a team sport person, and we have other options on if you're more of an individual, sport orientated individual. So yeah, and that's also a big thing too, is certain personalities gravitate towards certain sports more than others, and that's a big part of it as well.

Sarah Smith 14:55

Yeah, I love that. Thank you for that clarification. That's useful to know, because, I mean, even when we're talking about, like, competitiveness and ability, then there's also just personal preference that comes into that. Like, what do you actually enjoy doing?

Nathan Bragg 15:06

Yeah, and that's that really is the key question is, like, what do you want to do? Right? Like, I, obviously, I'm here in my capacity with BC Wheelchair Sports, I want to promote us and want to promote what we do, but I'm just a big believer for anybody, disabled or not, that it's important to have a passion or an activity or something that motivates you to want to get up and do things and have a good time and enjoy yourself. So whether that's you know, some of the stuff that you guys do at Disability Foundation, like through VAMS, if it's music, you know, that's awesome, if it's art, if it's gardening, if it's sport, just making sure that people are aware of all the options available to them, because I definitely think, as someone who's grown up with their disability, I wasn't always exposed to all of those things. And I'm very thankful that, you know, I was lucky. I had a really enthusiastic vice principal who noticed that I seem to like sports and didn't really have an outlet and, like, did the research for me. But not everybody has those people and those champions in their lives. They'll do those things for them. So it's where things like this are really important in terms of just getting the word out and making sure people know what's out there and available to them.

Sarah Smith 16:13

Yeah, totally. That's a really cool story. Thank you for sharing that.