

Episode 94: Authentic Representation For Parasports Pt.2 | Nathan Bragg

Manisha Ramlu 0:05

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Manisha Ramlu 0:35

So how has technological advancement influenced wheelchair sports and the adaptability of it in both equipment and then training?

Nathan Bragg 0:46

Okay, yeah, so that's a pretty big question. Obviously, like the equipment and adaptive sports, it continues to change and evolve and improve, even from, you know, when I first got involved, like 10, 15 years ago, to now, I've just seen differences in terms of how good the equipment is, in terms of, like, its ability to turn, agility, speed. People are always trying to make things lighter, you know, that's a big thing that changes, definitely. If you look through the history of wheelchair sports going back way before my time, people were playing a lot of these sports in day chairs, like everyday wheelchairs or hospital chairs. And now on the wheelchair sports side, at least, pretty much each sport has its own style of different wheelchair and different setup, which is pretty awesome. It's pretty incredible what a lot of these, these chairs can do, and how different they feel when you strap into it, like it's a completely different feeling when I get into my rugby chair versus when I'm pushing my everyday chair around, or even when I'm in my boccia chair in terms of the stability it has, versus my day chair. Yeah, so, you know, those things are great. The challenge with that and with all those equipment and technological advances is obviously costs keep going up and up and up. And if you're an able bodied person and you want to play basketball or you want to play soccer, you know you might have to spend two, \$300 on a pair of shoes, and that's a pretty large expense. But then if you want to come out and try a wheelchair sport, you know, these chairs are 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, even 12 grand in some circumstances. So that can be a real challenge. And that's where, like, at least with BC Wheelchair Sports, where our wheelchair loan program really is very helpful for a lot of athletes, where you can pay a very small fee. It's like \$10 a month, or \$100 for the year, to rent a chair for the year and use that, which is a lot cheaper than going out and like buying

your own full on chair. And then if even that level of cost is a huge barrier, there is additional supports available as well for those who kind of want to reach out to us, but, yeah, we do our best to remove that barrier and then allow people to experience that technology and get involved in it. And then on a more I guess, like socio, cultural and communications level, technology with streaming now, with social media. Like, it's a lot easier to find these sports than it ever was before. Like, I like to joke with people that I'm a bit of a parasport encyclopedia. People, they've called me a lot of different names around search engines and parasport and like, I remember like being like, 12, 13, 14, years old and having to really search to find things. And now all you got to do is open up YouTube, open up Instagram, open up TikTok, and just put in, like, wheelchair sports and, boom, thousands of things come up. Now the challenge with that is the organization of that information can still be a bit of a barrier, and that's something that in my work, I try and work and solve and fix that element. But, yeah, it's so much easier to find these things now than it used to be. And that's great.

Manisha Ramlu 4:12

Yeah, yeah, the power of the internet is incredible. And, yeah, definitely, I can't even imagine life before the internet. Like, how do people find things? So I'm sure there's a lot of textbook research and, like, you know, using, like, a phone book, for example. So, and definitely just having accessibility is huge. So just going back to the loan program, how does that work? Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Nathan Bragg 4:39

Yeah, so if someone wants to rent one of the pieces of our equipment, they do have to be enrolled. They have to be one of our members. They have to be enrolled in one of our programs, and kind of be a consistent, you know, showing up consistently for that. But then they can reach out to like, the applicable program staff. So we have a rugby manager, we have an athletic coordinator, and we have a tennis manager, so they would reach out to the applicable program staff, or the regional staff, if you're outside of Lower Mainland and you're in, like the Okanagan or the island or up north, and they would kind of help support you in that process with our wheelchair loan program to get you set up. And yeah, I think oftentimes when you talk about technology, and what would I say to people when they first want to come and try something, is to kind of merge those two questions together, is sometimes the first time you try the equipment, it might not be the most comfortable thing in the world, and the first setup you try is nine times out of 10 is not going to be the setup that you end up sticking with. So you know, in those early few practices, we might test somebody out in a few different setups, until we learn the best way that things will work for their body. And that's another element with the technology now, is it's become so much

more custom and change to each individual athlete. Say, for example, if somebody has full use of their abdominal muscles and has all their core strength, they're going to sit in a very different way in a sport chair than somebody who maybe has a spinal cord injury and has paralysis where they don't have access to their, what we call, trunk. So you know, the muscles that allow you to balance or move your core, the seating is going to be different. You know, an amputee might want to sit higher, versus like a paraplegic is going to want to sit lower. If you have, like in rugby, for example, with our athletes with less physical—I'm going to use the word function—less physical function, or less mobility, who might not have grip strength in their hands or the ability to use their fingers, their wheels are probably going to be stickier, and they'll have a different push rim than the athletes who have a little bit more hand and arm function. So, you know, there's, there's so many different setups based off function in the individual athlete now as well, it's not a lot of cookie cutter chairs. As much as we do have, you know, our standard club chairs and things, yeah, there's a lot of kind of trial and error that goes into finding the best equipment to allow somebody to have the best experience possible.

Manisha Ramlu 7:14

Yeah, wow. That's wonderful though, that you have the adaptation to, you know, have that chair set up in a way where it's beneficial for the client.

Nathan Bragg 7:26

Yeah, and like, it's not always going to be perfect. And the other thing that I really stress to people too sometimes, is that sport chairs, generally, they're made for sport, so it might not feel as comfortable as like a day chair, for example, but from a mobility perspective, you're probably going to be able to do more in that, in terms of the movement that you need to do in a sport, versus, like a day chair, you know?

Manisha Ramlu 7:51

Absolutely. Awesome, so I actually don't have any more questions for you, but is there anything else you'd like to share with your own personal journey, or anything with the organization? The floor is yours.

Nathan Bragg 8:09

Cool. I mean, it's weird to kind of just brag about your company. But no, I am pretty like privileged to be able to work where I do. I think we do a lot of good work in the community, where we're always trying to, you know, improve and make things better. And we're at a time right now, we hired a lot of like, newer staff in the past couple of years who have really brought great energy and enthusiasm to our organization and are really dedicated to

helping support people chase their goals. And, yeah, I do really want to reiterate that, like, if you're thinking about coming out and trying, please come try it. We're more than willing to help you and support you and get you involved. And whether you want to be a recreational athlete and you just want to come out once a week and get your little bit of exercise in, or you want to be a competitive athlete and play at tournaments, try out for provincial teams, etc, etc, like, there are options and opportunities for you. And also, you know, even if tennis, rugby and athletics, those three sports aren't your thing. Like, keep trying to find things and keep asking questions. I think it's great how many opportunities exist for people with disabilities nowadays. And, yeah, it's really important. So that's great. And then also just, you know, the reality is, you know, we're a nonprofit, so we do rely a lot on our donors, our partners, things of that nature. So always, thank you to those who chip in that little bit that they have to help support that and help change lives through sport. I do think sport can be really transformative. I'm not going to sit here and say it's a cure for all of your ills, and it will magically make you an entirely better person, but I do think the community aspect of it can be really helpful for people. Whether you have, you know, a congenital disability and you've been born with it like I have, grown up with it your whole life, or you're somebody who's, you know, gone through a traumatic incident or an accident and acquired your condition, there are so many benefits to like being involved in those communities and in those sports that I think a lot of people from the outside looking in, you might not realize, right? Just the ability to like be around other peers who can show you how to do things. I think for me, that's been one of the biggest things when I take myself outside of the work bubble, and then put my, kind of, athlete cap back on, or participant cap back on, like being able to be around other people with disabilities and pick up on all the little ways that they do things has been so helpful. And I don't love using the word empowering, but really it, generally, it probably is the accurate word to use there, like being able to see how other people go about their lives, and then realizing how you might be able to adapt that skill in your own life, I think is really important. And I think that representation piece and understanding that, oh, like, "I'm not the only one who can't do this or has to do this this way, like, this person does that," or, "Oh no. Like, man, what am I doing about this?" And it's like, we got someone on our team who's a teacher, we have someone on our team who's a doctor, we got someone on our team as an engineer, we have some goofy guy like me who things on Facebook for a living, you know. But you see kind of that whole gamut of experiences and opportunities. And I think that element is really nice, and that's where not just the sporting orgs, but a lot of the other, you know, great organizations around the province, and the ones in our SCI community service network, like you guys with Disability Foundation, SCI BC, Neil Squire, they all do such a really like, great job of fostering that and supporting people. And I know for a lot of people, sometimes it can be daunting, you know, as a disabled person, to access those services or join those sorts of communities,

because there is sometimes that resistance of like, "I don't want to be like, if I access this, then I'm having to, like, admit that I'm disabled." But like, disabled doesn't have to be a bad word. The community isn't a bad thing. Being a part of it is probably like, accessing the community resources and meeting those other people is probably going to open so many doors and opportunities for you. So, yeah, having that element is really, really crucial, and it's weird, but I'm, like, privileged that we have such a great, vibrant sector in this area of the world to kind of help people and create that.

Manisha Ramlu 12:58

Yeah, absolutely and definitely, BC Wheelchair is an avenue for that, and doesn't have to be this, like, you know, quote, unquote, like scary thing, or a thing that we need to hide behind closed doors, and that can truly kind of feel like themselves when they're, you know, active in these sports. I think that is all from my end. Um, anything else you'd like to share, we can wrap it up.

Nathan Bragg 13:28

Um, yeah, sorry, I ramble a lot.

Manisha Ramlu 13:32

No, I love it. [Laughs] It's great. It's just, it really shows how much you care about the organization and how much you're involved and how much it's truly been a part of your life.

Nathan Bragg 13:47

I will say like, if you had told me, you know, when I was like, 12, and that demo team came to my elementary school for the first time, and I was introduced to wheelchair sports that, like, I would be working in it 20, almost 20 years later, man, I'm getting old, you know, two decades later, and that it would have opened up as many things it has for me, I wouldn't believe you. My parents wouldn't have believed you. And, yeah, it's pretty surreal kind of now to look back on. But it's also like, it is really nice to kind of have the opportunity to give back and pay things forward. I think that's really important. And yeah, I think it's really nice to be able to look myself in the mirror and say I'm doing things that like would have made younger me like better, because I can't, I can't fix, I can't change how things were or change the stage 10, 15 years ago, but I can maybe make it so the next new person that comes out to our programs, or the next, you know, junior athlete that we get involved leaves feeling better about themselves than when they showed up. And I think that is one of the, like, really important things is support. Right now, obviously there's, you know, a huge respect and support movement going on, which is, you know, incredibly important. So, yeah, just trying to, always trying to leave things better than you left them. And yeah,

trying to be the person that a younger me would have wanted to see, and thankfully had the opportunity to see that in other role models as well. And so now being able to try and pay that forward again has been a really, really rewarding experience beyond just obviously having a job and going to work each day.

Manisha Ramlu 15:57

Yeah, absolutely. That's amazing. You know, we're taught in psychology that, like younger parts of us are very much alive, like they co-exist with us. So, you know, you doing this work, and you paying it forward, is still, you know, kind of showing your younger self that, like, "No, we've made it this far," and, yeah, love that. Well, thank you so much for coming on the pod again. Is there anything else you'd like to share before I wrap up the pod?

Nathan Bragg 16:30

I think that's all. Hopefully I've given you guys enough to work with.

Manisha Ramlu 16:34

Yeah, you absolutely did.

Outro 16:37

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