

Episode 93: Authentic Representation For Parasports Pt.1 | Nathan Bragg

Manisha Ramlu 0:05

You're listening to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio, brought to you by the Vancouver Adapted Music Society. To learn more about accessible music programs and opportunities, please visit our website@vams.org That's www dot V, A, M, S, dot O, R, G. Now let's get into today's episode.

Nathan Bragg 0:34

My name is Nathan Bragg. Professionally, I'm the senior communications coordinator at BC Wheelchair Sports. I'm also personally involved as an athlete, sort of as a coach, a bit of a accessibility and inclusion advocate, in some ways, done a lot of work around sport development and sport communications in the parasports space, as well as just trying to, you know, increase representation and disability and all that fun stuff. And hopefully, I don't want to say change the narrative, because I don't necessarily think the narrative is wrong, but like, promote different narratives in parasport, and ones that are more authentic and athlete-focused and have a more holistic view of disability and its role within that, rather than just like your classic, "Oh, they're so inspiring, and, "Look at what they've accomplished," when there's so much more to the people and to their stories than that really kind of linear basic narrative and trope, if you want to call it that.

Manisha Ramlu 1:41

Yeah, totally. Well, thanks for the intro. I really appreciate it. So let's jump right into it. So can you share insights into your role as the senior communications coordinator, and what are the key initiatives you're currently focusing on?

Nathan Bragg 1:57

Yeah, so as a comms coordinator, I lead all of the external communications for the organization. So our content, style stuff, so athlete profiles, recaps, program information, fundraising campaigns. When we do our fundraising campaigns, probably around three, four times a year, those things, a little bit of video, not much, trying to branch a little bit more into that this year, and then coordinating a lot of our media relations as well. So when we have events encouraging media to come out, handling all of the liaison style stuff they're doing, thing, doing that sort of stuff, and making sure that our athletes stories are being promoted in a in an authentic, ethical and genuine way.

Manisha Ramlu 2:52

Awesome, yeah, just sharing everyone's story, and informing the community is definitely important work in terms of events. Do you have any events currently going on or upcoming?

Nathan Bragg 3:08

Yeah, so we've got, we're kind of getting ready to head into our heavier season of the year. So we have our largest fundraising event, which is called Push for Impact. It's a philanthropic wheelchair rugby tournament that's coming up on March 1. Then we have our Vancouver Invitational Wheelchair Rugby Tournament, which is at the Richmond Olympic Oval. It's one of the longest running club wheelchair rugby tournaments in the world. It's our 25th Vancouver Invitational this year. So that's pretty exciting, and it brings top teams from across Canada and the Pacific Northwest together. Hopefully I should be able to confirm this by the end of this week, we're probably going to have a women's team compete in Division Two as well this year, which is great because we've been doing a lot of work, both provincially at BC Wheelchair Sports and a lot of our other provincial partners in other places, and trying to increase the number of girls and women getting involved in wheelchair rugby. So that's really exciting, kind of giving them their own sort of team to play on in the mixed sport, giving a little bit more visibility to that, and yeah, hopefully leading to some some really exciting games. And then this summer. Summer is always a busy time for us, so we've got our two international wheelchair tennis tournaments. So we have one in Kamloops in early July, and then another one in Vancouver to kids beach several days later, which are both International Tennis Federation international tournaments. So we'll have athletes come from countries from all over the world to compete in that, as well as some of our top local players. And then we're really excited that this November, we're hosting the Birmingham National Military Tennis Championships at UBC. So we haven't hosted that in about 10 years. We're hosting it this year and next year. So we're really excited for that to happen, and hopefully get some newer tennis athletes out competing in that as well. And then, obviously, this summer is track season, so lots of meets for our athletes. It's a Canada Summer Games year, so that'll be exciting for a few athletes in our programs, and yeah, just kind of continuing to to work through our all of our weekly and regular programming in the meantime. But that's kind of a really fast overview of our major events.

Manisha Ramlu 5:33

Wow, that sounds so exciting. And definitely lots of major events coming up. And just for our listeners, if they want to, you know, learn more about these events and figure out or see

how they can join and maybe even volunteer. What's a good way for them to kind of reach out to you and learn more?

Nathan Bragg 5:52

Yeah, so you can reach out to us at any time. Our website is bcwheelchairsports.com, our staff directory is listed there. We have all of our program staff listed for specific sports. If you have a specific sport you want to get involved in, but if you just want to send a general inquiry, you can email info@bcwheelchairsports.com or you can email me at communications@bcwheelchairsports.com and we'll make sure it goes to the correct person who can point you to the right program or the right event.

Manisha Ramlu 6:21

Awesome. Yeah, thank you for that. We'll definitely link that in the episode details as well. So if someone didn't get that through the podcast session, they can definitely look at that detail there. Okay, so in terms of, I mean, you guys host so many events, is there a specific experience that really stood out to you in your time at BC Wheelchair Sports?

Nathan Bragg 6:45

Man, that's a bit of a tough question. So I've actually been involved in BC Wheelchair Sports for a very long time, even before I started working for them. So my first interaction with them was as a teenager, when I got involved in their junior sport camps, which is often how a lot of our younger athletes have their first experience within our program. So there I got introduced to a whole range of wheelchair sports, including all three of the ones that we run, which are wheelchair rugby, wheelchair tennis and wheelchair athletics. And from there, I got involved in our rugby programs. So I would say both like professionally and personally, I'm quite actively involved in the rugby community, both in my job, but also just personally as a lead of, one of the co-leads of the Vancouver Wheelchair Rugby Club. So I would say my involvement in that and in rugby has always been like a really, really big thing for me, beyond just the professional, because it's a sport that I've got a lot of great community benefits from, lot of great physical benefits, and met a lot of really good friends as well, and got to have some pretty cool experiences, both within and outside of BC Wheelchair Sports. Yeah, so that's kind of been really sweet. I really enjoy working on our Canada Cup International Wheelchair Rugby Tournament. We run that every two years, and it's a big international event. And I think working on that, and even before I was working there, volunteering on that in the past, opened up a lot of doors for me just to do different parasport comms. So I've got to, you know, attend world wheelchair rugby events and do some work for the International Federation. I've got to do some work for the Canadian Paralympic Committee. And I don't think I'd be able to have done any of that if I hadn't had

the experience like working at BC Wheelchair Sports and working on an event of that level and that scale, because it really gave me the tools and experiences to be able to kind of go elsewhere and fit in in any of those environments.

Manisha Ramlu 8:49

Yeah, wow. You've done some empowering work. That's amazing. Thank you for sharing that. So where do you like within your own personal goals in the organization? Where do you see BC Wheelchair Sports heading in the next few years?

Nathan Bragg 9:04

I mean, I think we're in a pretty good place right now, where it's kind of the start of a new Paralympic cycle, with it being 2025. We kind of work on, like, four or five-year strategic plans. So we're kind of early in our next phase, where we're in a really, I think I can say this confidently, we're really focused right now on athlete recruitment and then strengthening the programs that we do have. So a lot of people don't know that parasport exists, or what parasports are out there for them, and that's kind of a big part of my work in communications. It's getting that awareness out, doing that work, working with our fantastic PGG coordinator, Daniel, who does so much community outreach, going to so many different events, and kind of getting our name out there, and being the boots on the ground while I'm more the guy behind the screen, right? So, yeah, it's been great to kind of get more people connected to our programs, to increase that awareness piece, and then, yeah, hopefully get these people involved in sport. One of the great things about BC Wheelchair Sports is we really endeavor to remove as many barriers to participation as possible, whether that be financial, whether it be equipment, whether it be some of those attitudinal barriers, you know. We do a lot of work to make sport as accessible as possible to our members and to those that want to get involved. So that's, you know, I think that's really important. And, yeah, we are always looking to increase those numbers. It's a really vibrant and supportive community, once you get involved in it. And it's a little bit cliché for me to say, but it can be so much more than sport, even if you're not like the most athletic person and you don't want to like you don't have to want to go to the Paralympics to get involved in sport and come out to program, have fun and improve your fitness a little bit. You know that. But if you do want to be, you know, that next level athlete, and take your game, whatever it may be, to the next level, we also have, you know, the tools and supports in place to help you do that. So yeah, this is a really long winded answer, probably answered your question, but yeah, it's just continuing to kind of grow our membership and really continue to stay committed to our goals of removing barriers and allowing people to be active and involved in sport, right?

Manisha Ramlu 11:31

Absolutely, very informative. And hopefully, you know, this podcast is a way for another means for that outreach, and hopefully we could get to connect with more members for the program. I think we really stormed through all of our questions here. But is there anything else?

Nathan Bragg 11:49

That's great. I mean, I will add on to that, like, for me, on a personal level, I've done a lot of work in starting to build our junior wheelchair rugby program alongside our great rugby staff and program staff, and a good friend of mine and one of our rugby coaches bought it on Vancouver Island, we've kind of built the first two kind of junior wheelchair rugby programs in Canada.

Manisha Ramlu 11:55

Wow.

Nathan Bragg 11:55

And we're really trying to build that up and grow it. There hasn't really been a playbook for that. So it's been great, outside of my working professional role in in the wheelchair sports community, to also be able to kind of volunteer a little bit and give back, and kind of get to use some of the knowledge that I've learned from observing and being around my colleagues to help support a program from the ground up there and get these kids active and engaged in sport. The interesting thing with wheelchair rugby, for those who don't know, is this is a sport for people with impairment in their upper and lower limbs. So you have to have impairment in your arms and your legs, so it's a smaller pool that we're able to pull from. And also, especially with those younger athletes, sometimes they come with less physical literacy than, say their able bodied or even more functional peers with disabilities. So you know, we really, at the early stages, have to focus on building those basics of, how do you push your chair, how do you pass, how do you catch? And then if those skills are challenging at the start, also helping them, like, build that confidence of knowing that, like, it's okay not to be good at this right away. It's okay to maybe not be able to do this the same way as everybody else, and it's okay to take time to learn different ways to do it. So I think that's been really fun and really rewarding. And it's kind of cool for me to have gone like full circle as someone who started out really young in the program, as kind of the young kid in our rugby program, like 15 years ago, to now being one of the older guys and one of the people trying to create more opportunities for those younger kids. Now I really just want the next generation to have even better opportunities and experiences than

I did, and to be able to develop that confidence at an earlier stage, right? I think that's really important. And I think that's one of the things that sport in general, but adaptive sport is really good at, is helping people develop confidence, social skills and a little bit of resilience as well.

Manisha Ramlu 13:12

Absolutely, yeah, absolutely. That's incredible work that you're doing and you're able to help, you know, children essentially from the ground up. So what advice would you give individuals who are considering getting into wheelchair sports, like, they've never done it, and they're considering to do it. What do you have for them?

Nathan Bragg 14:48

I mean, I think I say this all the time. You know, when I meet somebody new, or when I'm trying to recruit someone, is just, like, just come out and try it. And like, even if that first sport you try isn't for you, don't be afraid to try our other things. The great thing, and one of the wonderful things about BC is we have a really vibrant adaptive sports community. There are several organizations doing really great work around the province. So I'm also involved as a boccia athlete. So I interact a lot with SportAbility BC, and they're doing really great work right now with sledge hockey and boccia and power soccer. My first wheelchair sport I ever played was wheelchair basketball, and that kind of introduced me to this whole world. And BC Wheelchair Basketball does a lot of really incredible work. We partner with them, BC Wheelchair Sports, a lot, so they're fantastic for people with visual impairments. BC Blind Sports really phenomenal. They do a lot of great work. Goalball is an incredible sport that I've had the opportunity to work around in the past couple years with different organizations more so with the CPC, the Canadian Paralympic Committee. So yeah, there are, like, there's a lot of really exciting and interesting sports out there, and especially now with how accessibility is increasing is really growing. Like, just keep trying things as much as you can, until you find that thing you like, even if it's not sports, if you can find something that gives you a sense of joy and community, I think that's that's fantastic. So, yeah.

Manisha Ramlu 16:22

Absolutely, especially community is huge. You know, when you're kind of going through something that can feel very isolating, and just connecting with people who kind of gone through similar experiences can be so empowering.

Outro 16:38

Thanks for tuning in to discover stories on Re-Imagine Radio. If you enjoy our content, please support us by subscribing to the YouTube channel or following us on Spotify. See you in the next episode.