



Published on SVAYAM (<http://www.svayam.com>)

## When rugby plays liberator

By Editor

Created 2008-01-15 16:29

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New Delhi: In the rehabilitation centre at the Indian Spinal Injuries Centre (ISIC) in Vasant Kunj, a number of patients were strapping on armour, putting on gloves and warming up. They were getting ready for a session of wheelchair rugby. At least half the players are quadraplegic, which means that as a result of spinal cord injuries, they only have limited arm and hand movement and cannot control movements from the chest downwards. The game of rugby, however, is no less rough and tumble for that.

The game was introduced to patients at ISIC by Jonathan Sigworth, a level C-5/C-6 quadraplegic patient. Two years ago, Sigworth met with a cycling accident in Mussoorie and had to come to ISIC for treatment. The lanky 21-year-old, who now reads a course in Film and Middle Eastern Studies in Wesleyan University, says, "After spending sometime here I went back to the US, completed my treatment and joined college. Over the winter break, I came back to India and visited ISIC. I felt really depressed and wondered how I could help things in a realistic way within a span of three weeks. That is when I hit upon the idea of introducing patients to wheelchair rugby."



"The idea of wheelchair rugby is a mind opener to people as it is an aggressive and sometimes violent sport. People wear armour and smash into one another in their wheelchairs. Most of the time, quadraplegics are made to feel fragile and debilitated. Rugby makes them feel empowered and motivated," says Sigworth.

Sigworth plays in a wheelchair rugby team in the US as well, where he is the youngest player. The oldest is 50. In ISIC, most players are in their 20s, with only one or two in their 40s. Says Sigworth, "In India, being disabled seems to be a stigma. There is very little government or infrastructural support for them. One of the things I've learnt is that it helps enormously if one is in a community of similar people and that is what I'm trying to inculcate here." The knowledge of what someone with the same disabilities can do spurs one to do more, he says.

At first, the response was tepid. Many people were skeptical and just came to watch. Then gradually patients started joining in.

Showket Jeelani(40), met with an accident last year and suffered from level C-4 spinal injuries. Jeelani, who was an ace football player in college, started playing rugby a few days back. “One doesn’t play with one’s feet but I feel like I’m playing football again,” he says.

Sunil Phougat (24) used to be a wrestler before his accident two and a half months ago. His once-powerful arms still steer the wheelchair about at a tremendous speed. “It feels good that one can do something like this even in this condition,” he says.

Twenty-five-year-old Amit Sarohar testifies to the benefits of playing rugby. “My mind and body feel fresh. Wheelchair speed and body movements improve,” says the former national level hockey player.

However, ask 18-year-old Amit Kumar, another patient, what his favourite part of the game is and he replies with glee: “Ramming into other people’s wheelchairs.”



NOT JUST FUN AND GAMES: Patients practise wheelchair rugby at Indian Institute of Spinal Injury

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Source : Times of India, Delhi, 15th January, 2008

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