Overcoming Barriers: Adaptive Athletics and a Lack of Community Support

Introduction

The University of Illinois currently has an athletic team that is repeat national champions, and has sent multiple athletes to the Olympics. However, few students even realize that this team exists, much less their achievements. This is because the team is part of the adaptive athletics program, and it is the wheelchair basketball team. The University of Illinois has long been known for its positive relationship with disability. This tradition is continued with adaptive athletics program. Adaptive athletics includes the women’s and men’s wheelchair basketball and the wheelchair track team. These programs continue to be a highly competitive and respected tradition in the disability community. (DRES).

When the wheelchair teams began in the 1950s the teams were immensely popular. They were the first teams of their kind and paved the way for other collegiate teams. The team was highly competitive and successful, winning multiple championships and developing new wheelchair technology. The team was also highly supported and very popular. Their games were recorded through videos, photographs, and press. The team had their own wheelchair cheerleaders and they were well known throughout the school (DRES). However, as the team continued to grow and develop, these levels of support slowly dropped out (Mogged, 2006). Today, the cheerleaders are gone, attendance is low, and press is scarce. However, the adaptive athletics program is just as successful, so it seems strange that they do not have the same resources and support available to them.
Methods

I first came to the idea of researching the adaptive athletics program through the class readings of the Mogged and Baldwin papers. These papers included a history of the wheelchair basketball team and an interview with a student-athlete on the wheelchair track team (Mogged, 2006 and Baldwin, 2008). I discovered within these papers large disparities in terms of support mentioned for the teams and athletes. Additionally, in a class trip to the Student Life Archives I discovered a photograph of the 1955 Gizz Kids and Timothy J. Nugent (16/6/11, Box 5, Folder 12). This photograph demonstrated respect and support of the athletes from students, athletes, and the community. These initial ideas with my personal interest in the wheelchair basketball teams led me to investigate the current support of the adaptive athletics program.

I quickly realized that this research would not come from the archives and history, but from current sources and interviews. I knew that my best information would come directly from the team since they would have the most experience and knowledge with the subject. I had previously known a student on the women’s basketball team, so received her permission to interview her. I recorded the interview through notes of questions and answers, and also general discussions. Additionally, I contacted administrators who work closely with the teams to learn their perspective. They agreed to be interviewed, and again I transcribed the questions, answers, and discussions from the interviews. These interviews provided the most useful information since the administrators knew more about both the student-athletes’ and university administration’s point of view.

During class discussions the idea had been raised of student awareness and support, so I thought to contact the largest athletic support organization on campus, Illini Pride. Illini Pride
organizes events and fan bases for many Division of Intercollegiate Athletics (DIA) sports on campus, but not for the adaptive athletics. I wished to learn the reasons behind this, and any feelings they might have on including the program in the future. I contacted their president and vice-president. The president was too busy to meet in person, however, he did respond to questions via email. The vice-president agreed to meet for an interview. I transcribed the interview, questions and general discussion as with previous interviews. The interview with the vice-president was truly helpful and insightful into the world of student support for adaptive athletics. Finally, I contacted the student run newspaper, The Daily Illini, to learn their ideas on reporting on the team. However, no one ever responded from their organization.

In addition to conducting interviews, I felt that recent first-hand experience was necessary to view support for the team. In order to complete this I attended a wheelchair basketball game, and recorded my observations. I was unable to attend a wheelchair track meet, since there are no home meets, and they not in their competition season.

Findings

Investigating the level of support for adaptive athletics leads to the question, “What is support?” This is truly an important question as each person has their own definition and idea of what support means. However, there were a few main ideas shared among all the interviewees. In their minds support primarily comes in visible, monetary, and attitudinal forms.

From a student-athlete’s perspective visible and attitudinal support are the largest factors (student-athlete interview). Student-athletes look to fans support and encourage their team. They like to experience large numbers of friends, family, and community members showing interest in and commitment to the team. However, wheelchair athletes do not truly receive this level of
support. Attendance at games is low and there is a small fan base for the team (field notes and student-athlete interview). In addition, most of the fan base is the teams’ “disabled family”, or other students with disabilities (student-athlete interview). This shows that the general student population is not strongly supportive of the adaptive athletics program.

While visible support is important, student-athletes also appreciate attitudinal support. This means viewing them equally athletes and students. Wheelchair athletes often feel as though they must overcome misconceptions about disability in order to be seen as athletes (student-athlete interview). With “wheelchair” in the sport’s name the general population tends to underestimate the sports seriousness. They associate wheelchairs with the inability to move, and often do not know the immense strength and skill required to play on the wheelchair basketball team. This is a large hurdle to overcome in terms of gathering community support. It is also important that the university administration adopts the same view as the student-athletes. If they truly view the students as athletes and consider them members of a sports team they will be able to make more informed decisions regarding the students’ abilities and futures (DRES athletic administrator 1 interview).

Students and student sports enthusiasts also see visible support as a key to promoting their favorite teams. The president of Illini Pride believes that attending games is the primary way to show support for a team. Telling people about your favorite team and wearing their colors and apparel, or following the team through the media is also an effective way to show support (IP president, vice-president interviews). The vice-president of Illini Pride feels that at a basic level the adaptive athletics are supported because, “people would never say they don’t support it.” However, he also feels that the team does not receive the attendance and promotion they truly
deserve. Both the president and vice-president of Illini Pride note, “more people would probably follow these teams if they knew more about them”. Since adaptive athletics are not in the DIA, they do not have official marketing agreements with radio, tv and newspapers (IP vice-president interview). This makes it hard for students to find information about the teams. However, once a student attends an event they will be sure to go back. This is due to the fact the games are very intense and competitive. In addition, “the teams have everything they need to be successful: personality, success, and education” (IP vice-president interview). These conflicting ideas seem to reflect the continuous struggle of adaptive athletics to gather community and student support in the face of their achievements and winning records.

Finally, adaptive athletic administrators feel that monetary and attitudinal support is the best ways to promote the team (all DRES athletic administrator interviews). Monetary support is important just to keep the team running smoothly. Equipment, apparel, travel, coaches, and trainers all require funding (DRES athletics administrator 1 and 2 interviews). These items are all necessary for the team to function, much less succeed. Also important is scholarship money for the student-athletes (all DRES athletic administrator interviews). This allows the students to focus on athletics by alleviating their need to work. Many wheelchair athletes are out-of-state students (DRES athletic administrator 3 interview). Scholarship money makes a significant difference for them by lowering tuition to a reasonable level. The Division of Disability Resources and Educational Services (DRES) does an excellent job of supporting the adaptive athletic teams. DRES provides a majority of the teams’ funding (DRES athletic administrator 2 interview). This support is visible through DRES providing each student-athlete with a wheelchair built to specially fit their needs (student-athlete interview). While the university
administration does have limited resources to be split among many student groups, they could be more generous in their contributions to adaptive athletics (all DRES athletic administrator interviews). Almost as important is the university’s attitude towards adaptive athletics. This means investigating whether or not the administration truly considers the sport before the disability. One way this is shown is through the resources available for the team to train, practice, and compete in. The wheelchair track team experiences strong support from the university in this aspect. They train on the indoor and outdoor track, which is the same as their non-disabled counterparts. They are allowed ample time in these spaces, sometimes even sharing the facility with the other teams (DRES athletic administrator 3 interview). However, wheelchair basketball experiences some space concerns. The ARC is adequate for training; however it is a less than ideal location to hold competitive games. Sharing the facility with the public takes away from the competition and seriousness of the games (DRES athletic administrator 2 interview and field notes). ARC also does not provide easily accessible seating for any real number of fans (DRES athletic administrator 1 interview and field notes). A final way the university can show its support is through the promotion and advertising of the teams. This is an area that appears to be quite lacking (all DRES athletic administrator interviews). The team is not well known in the general community and there is little marketing aimed towards the general population. The small amount of the promotion the team receives usual portrays them as a human interest story, making the athletes seem like “super crips”. An example of this is found in the Daily Illini article, *Injured athlete takes different path*. This article discusses how Jennifer Warkins took up wheelchair basketball after two ACL tears that stopped her from playing basketball. It paints her injuries as terrible accidents that changed her life, but then wheelchair
basketball became a saving grace that allowed her to continue to be involved in athletics. The article also mentions, “On those rare occasions when local or national media take an interest, stories inevitably overlook the athletics in favor of inspirational tales about people who refuse to let a wheelchair keep them from living.” The “super crip” idea undermines the students’ athletic ability and merits. It focuses the attention on the disability instead of the athleticism of the student-athletes (DRES athletic administrator 1 interview). Positively promoting adaptive athletics would be a major show of support from the university and surrounding community.

Future Research

Given more time and resources this research could be truly expansive. I would want to investigate the history of adaptive athletics’ support throughout their existence. In doing this I would want to discover exactly when and why adaptive athletics became less popular than at their formation. It would be extremely interesting to investigate what resources were available to the team at different points in time and what impact these had on team support. Another aspect that could be added is linking adaptive athletic support to trends in the disabilities rights movement. I would also want to investigate how to integrate these sports into the mainstream Big 10 sports culture at the University of Illinois. For my current research I would want to be able to address a larger number of people in interviews. I would want to talk to more press sources as to how they feel about reporting on adaptive athletics. I would also like to survey a sample of the general student population, such as a general education required course, to truly discover the average level of knowledge and support for the team. Lastly, it would be great to incorporate into future research more wheelchair student-athletes’ perspectives to learn how much individual variation there is in their definition and perception of support. In conjunction
with this, it would provide an interesting insight to compare the disabled community’s sense of support for adaptive athletics with that of the general population.

Recommendations

The largest factor for increasing support of adaptive athletics is education (all DRES athletic administrator interviews, IP president and vice-president interviews, student-athlete interview). A general lack of knowledge is the largest reason why adaptive athletics are not more popular and well supported. Once a student or community member is exposed to wheelchair sports they usually become quite interested and supportive (student-athlete interview). The Illini Pride president also notes that, “People may find it hard to relate to wheelchair basketball and track if they have never been exposed to it, so an increase in general knowledge and exposure could help raise awareness”. Additionally, one adaptive athletic administrator noted, “No one leaves without knowing (the university) has a football team. The same should be said of wheelchair basketball.”, without this support, “The university fails in an aspect of a student’s education” (DRES athletic administrator 1 interview). Increasing awareness and education can come from things as simple as creating more posters and fliers for the teams (DRES athletic administrator 2 interview and student-athlete interview). Creating more advertisements at least exposes the campus and community to the fact there is a very successful adaptive athletics program. Another very simple way to increase support for adaptive athletics is to place their schedule in a more accessible location. A small link on the Fighting Illini sports webpage would generate more knowledge of game time and locations than having to stumble across it on the DRES website (student-athlete interview IP vice-president interview).
Another great way to increase knowledge and support of the adaptive athletics program is through increased media coverage. Local papers could feature more stories of the wheelchair teams’ achievements and abilities to gather support and increase knowledge in the surrounding community (DRES athletic administrator 1 and 3 interview). More importantly, the student newspaper, The Daily Illini (DI), could promote education about adaptive athletics. The Daily Illini in a way participates in the education of students and could be a great tool in changing the way students’ view disability and adaptive athletics. However, there is very little reporting done on the adaptive athletics within the DI’s extensive sports section (DRES athletic administrator 1 interview and Daily Illini). One adaptive athletic administrator feels this may arise from some media outlets’ “knee-jerk response of ‘who really wants to read this?’” (DRES athletic administrator 3 interview). In reality, the general population would actually be quite engaged by articles discussing the teams’ skill, strength, and achievements (DRES athletic administrator 3 interview and IP vice-president interview).

Another way to increase support for adaptive athletics is to involve them at a varsity sport level. This means integrating wheelchair athletics into the Division of Intercollegiate Athletics (DIA). Being in the DIA would give adaptive athletics better standing and resources. The teams would be viewed and treated as varsity sports. Additionally, they would have access to more apparel, facilities, funding, and marketing (DRES athletic administrator 1 and 2 interview). These resources would be very beneficial to the team in gathering support. Obviously these actions would directly increase involvement of the university administration. Another benefit would be indirectly gaining support from the general population. If adaptive athletics were treated as varsity athletics more students would be exposed to and become involved in the
programs (DRES athletic administrator 1 and 2 interview). An example of this is becoming a member of the DIA would open adaptive athletics into membership in Illini Pride, the student organized athletic support organization (IP vice-president interview). Illini Pride would truly help increase campus knowledge and support of adaptive athletics by exposing large numbers of students to the programs and their goals. IP would also greatly increase the amount of promotion the wheelchair athletic teams receive. However, the biggest impact Illini Pride could make on adaptive athletics is to change the way most students view disability. By focusing on the strength and skill required in wheelchair sports, IP could highlight the athletics instead of the disability in the teams. This would redefine the way the campus community views physical disabilities by enabling students to see life in a wheelchair can be just as fulfilling as an ambulatory lifestyle (DRES athletic administrator 1 and 2 interview).

Overall, promotion and recognition of the teams’ achievements would be the best way to overcome the lack of support for adaptive athletics. It would also help to eliminate the adaptive athletics program need to, “re-educate constantly who we are and what we do” (DRES athletic administrator 3 interview). This is truly a simple step that would have much larger implications for the campus and disability communities.


Gizz Kids and Timothy J. Nugent, 1955, Division of Rehabilitation-Education Services Photograph File 16/6/11, Box 5, Folder 12, University of Illinois Archives.

Illini Pride President. Personal Email Interview. November 18, 2008.

