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Title: Overcoming Barriers: Adaptive Athletics and a Lack of Community Support

About the Author:

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Abstract: My research focuses on the support for adapted athletics. I am investigating why these successful and competitive programs do not receive more support from the campus community. I have defined support in terms of fan base, publicity and funding. These appear to be the main barriers to mainstreaming and popularizing adaptive athletics. Most of my research comes from interviews I conducted. I talked to a student-athlete, several DRES athletic administrators, and the president and vice-president of Illini Pride. From these sources and others I found that education would be the best resource to improve support for adaptive athletics. If people knew and were exposed more information on the teams, they would be more likely to support them. In addition, if these sports became part of the Division of Intercollegiate Athletics (DIA) they would receive access to more resources that would improve their visibility and promotion. 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.


The document I examined is a picture of Timothy J. Nugent giving a talk to the Gizz Kids during a wheelchair basketball game. The picture is from 1955, which is also the second year the Gizz Kids were national champions. The 1950s was also an
important time period for disabilities on the University of Illinois campus. There were large numbers of disabled veterans returning to campus and receiving higher education through the GI bill. This greatly contributed to the formation of the strong disability culture on campus. Additionally, during the 1950s the University of Illinois was known for having one of the premier disability programs in the nation. This image originally appeared as a photographic print. It appears the photograph may have been used at the 50th Anniversary celebration of Division of Rehabilitation Education Services. In the archives the photograph can be found in a box donated from DRES with other photographs, news clippings, and scrapbooks related to wheelchair sports, and social activities. The photograph can also be found in the digital online archive as a downloadable JPEG file. The digital version was the one I found and used for reasons of simplicity, accessibility, and time.

This photograph reveals a wealth of information about disability on campus. Upon first glance it shows a glimpse into wheelchair athletics at the University of Illinois. The campus has had a long-standing and strong tradition of supporting athletics for the disabled. The first of these many organizations is wheelchair basketball. The Gizz Kids were the University’s first wheelchair basketball team and they were founded around 1947 with the start of DRES. The photograph shows a full 1955 team to suggest that the program was a success and was continuing to expand and improve. It also show that the students involved were truly treated as athletes with matching uniforms, warm-ups, coaches, and even managers. Additionally, the picture presents a unique perspective of a team huddle. The team huddle is an iconic sports image across America, as it shows the team coming together to strategize and bond in order to develop their future plan of attack. By presenting this same image, but with wheelchair athletics, the photograph seems to suggest that the wheelchair athletes and their game were respected and approved by the surrounding campus.
community. The photograph also shows an important figure for disability rights on campus, Timothy J. Nugent. Tim Nugent was highly involved in running disability services on campus, even though he was not disabled himself. He was president of DRES, founded the National Wheelchair Basketball Association and Delta Sigma Omicron, and worked for accessibility standards in buildings and transportation. This photograph also highlights his important role in disability services at the University of Illinois. Here Nugent is pictured as the coach of the Gizz Kids and a central focus in the photograph. He is viewed instructing the team during their huddle and is easily viewed as an authority and advocate for disabilities. Finally, the photograph presents a positive aspect of disability on campus. Strong positive relationships are shown between the disabled team members and their non-disabled coach and managers. It also shows fans in the background, revealing that wheelchair basketball enjoyed some social support from the campus community. Additionally, it shows the players as intent, focused athletes. This gives them respect as athletes and students. Finally, the students themselves seem content and proud of their situation. This is the most important factor as it shows the students with disabilities were content with their situation and treatment on campus.

Something that would be interesting to explore about the photograph would be its true original context. To be able to find out the game it was taken at would be able to answer contextual questions as to why the team is pictured in a huddle. For example, who is their opponent? Were they winning or losing at this point in the game? Was this a critical situation, or an every game event? I think this would be especially interesting to find out since this same year the team went on to become national champions. I would love to be able to explore the history of the game and to discover more about the individual players in the photograph and their stories of disability and athletics. It would also be fun to figure out what play
they were discussing and see if it is something still used today or if it had been out-dated due to better wheelchair technology and refined rules and organization.

Finally, my path to this document was very short and simple. With the recent additions to the digital archives I was simply able to search wheelchair basketball and found several digital records of photographs, files, and scores. I was then able to simply download the file to my computer and used the archives as a resource for additional information and background.

**EUI Links**

I read both the Mogged and Baldwin papers for this assignment. While the Baldwin paper was more technical and was clearly written with more experience, the Mogged paper has a much stronger subject link to my own area of research. From the Mogged paper I was interested to find a more general history of wheelchair basketball through the ages. I found it particularly interesting that the rise and fall of wheelchair basketball as a popular sport seems linked to wars and conflicts of the times. I was surprised to find in her paper the initial enormous support for the sport and team, as they are practically unheard of today on campus. Additionally, the Mogged paper presented some sources that could possibly be useful to me in my research.

However, something that I would address that Mogged did not is the current state of the wheelchair basketball team. She focused only on history and archival work, where as I would want to conduct interviews and focus on more the present to the future of wheelchair basketball. This is where the Baldwin paper was more helpful because it showed more of the interview process and how to structure an interview to gain information that would be helpful and interesting.

**Initial Question:** The question I am focusing on at the moment involves wheelchair sports at the university. I wish to
investigate why these highly successful and competitive teams do not receive more recognition at the university. I wonder why they are not promoted as activities to attend and cheer for, unlike other well know sports such as football, basketball, soccer, baseball, etc. As background, I also wish to discuss the current state of the teams and to highlight some of their achievements. Finally, I will look to give suggestions as to how wheelchair sports can be integrated into the strong sports community at the University in the future.

Many things inspired me to research this question. I would say first and foremost would be my personal interest and knowledge about wheelchair basketball. I had previously attended a game and learned about the team. I could not believe the intensity and skill involved. I felt that this should be more widely recognized. Additionally, the visit to the student life archives helped to inspire this question. Seeing the history of wheelchair basketball and its early prominence and success made me wonder why it had lost so much popularity even though it continued a tradition of excellence.

Class readings have also helped contribute to my interest in this subject. The Mogged paper contributed to my general interest of the history of wheelchair sports on campus. Additionally, it was helpful in discussing the decline of popular support for wheelchair basketball. Also, the Baldwin interview with the wheelchair athlete was helpful for my research. It showed that the University has a very strong wheelchair athletics program and it greatly influences students with disabilities to attend the University. This contributed to my interest in why these excellent programs are not advertised more on campus.

My research into the history and the development of the wheelchair basketball program led me to my focus on current situation of the sports. Additionally, seeing how they teams were featured in the past
lead me to wonder and want to research more about their low popularity today.

My classmates have helped me through providing good source ideas. During discussions they brought up people that I now definitely want to interview. They also addressed issues of funding and support which would be interesting to investigate the differences if I can gain access to figures.

In order to answer my question I will need to conduct many face to face interviews. I would want to talk to wheelchair athletes and possible their coaches. Also, I would want to talk to Illini Pride executives to discuss their views of wheelchair athletics and why they aren’t covered in their program. Additionally, I would need to find funding stats and facts for the various wheelchair teams and compare them to figures from the main University sports. Finally, I will need to research the current state of the various wheelchair athletic teams. This might include discussing University participants in the Paralympics.

I expect to encounter problems in conducting many interviews for my paper. It will be difficult to schedule and arrange multiple of them. Also, I suspect that funding numbers for sports teams could be difficult to find or access. However, I feel that I will be able to deal with these issues as they arise and I will be able to completely my research successfully and on time.

Source Annotated Bibliography:


I used this paper for its insightful interview with a student wheelchair athlete. In the interview he discusses how the strong athletic programs were the primary reason he chose to attend the University. This is important because it shows that not only are the programs large and successful, they can have a
large impact on students and their impressions of the school. I will use this paper to argue that if wheelchair athletics had more support it present a better image of the University to wheelchair athletes and draw more disabled and even able bodied students to the school.


I used this paper to support my question of why wheelchair athletics are not more supported at the University of Illinois. The paper discusses in depth multiple ways to increase disability awareness and resources across the campus. However, athletics are not even part of the main study. They are found in the concluding paragraph as a way that had been previously mentioned to integrate disability on campus. I found this very interesting and in my research I hope to discuss what if anything has been done to promote wheelchair athletics since the study. Finally, the afterward mention of disability athletics supports my idea that they do not receive enough support on campus.

Division of Rehabilitation-Education Services Adapted Athletics. Website: http://www.disability.uiuc.edu/athletics.

I used this website to gain background knowledge on the wheelchair athletics offered through DRES. This was especially helpful in educating me about the wheelchair track team as I did not know as much about the team. I will also use the website for pictures and for finding names of athletes and coaches to interview. The website also helps me to develop interview ideas and perhaps narrow my research somewhat as to why aren’t wheelchair athletics supported through a wider college sports organization. I found it very interesting that the sports were supported through DRES.
I used this photograph during the Archival information class assignment, as my initial idea for the paper had been wheelchair athletics in particular basketball, since it is the better known program. However, after carefully analyzing the photo I began to wonder why the team was not as well known and supported today even though they enjoy the same success. The previous idea is now that basis for my research, so the picture is the inspiration for my initial question. Additionally, it led me to investigate Tim Nugent and the history of the team which is useful background information. Finally, I might use this picture in the paper to compare to modern photographs or to set up how I came to my topic.

Illini Paralympics Results. Website: http://ahs.uiuc.edu/news/finalResults.html

I used the Illini Paralympic Results to demonstrate the success of the wheelchair athletics program. The large list of athletes who attend or attended the University of Illinois shows the size and strength of the program. This article was also featured as a link on the University website homepage which shows some support for the wheelchair athletics program. It would be interesting to use that placement to argue for continued growth and support of disability athletics.


I used this paper as background knowledge about the wheelchair basketball team. The paper discusses the beginnings of the program, its rise under Nugent, and finally its fall during the 1970s. The part that I found most useful was the discussion and theories...
as to why wheelchair basketball faded in popularity in the 70s. This is critical to my research since it reinforces the idea that wheelchair athletics should be receiving more support currently. Additionally, this paper was helpful in directing my research. It gave me ideas of things I would not want to do, while still supplying good information and ideas. I will possibly cite this paper in my own as the source of my knowledge of wheelchair basketball’s fall from popularity.


I used this article to show that there is often uneven support for disability athletes. This helped me to perhaps focus my investigation of funding issues surround athletics versus disability athletics. I am now going to find funding records for each of the teams and investigate any interesting similarities or discrepancies.

Revised Question: My current research question focuses on the support for adapted athletics. I am investigating why these programs do not receive more support from the campus community. I am currently defining support in terms of fan base, publicity and funding. These appear to be the main barriers to mainstreaming and popularizing adaptive athletics.

This question has changed from my initial question as it is a lot more specific. I have kept the same idea throughout the process, however, it is now narrowed to focus on support for the team. I achieved this focus through interviews and class discussion and feedback. I talked to a female wheelchair athlete this past week and that was extremely helpful to my project and really helped to move my research forward. Additionally, talking with the class about my question and the “bad paper” I could have helped to point me in the right direction and give me some fresh ideas.

Conducting the interview was what truly pushed my
research forward. Talking to the athlete gave me the perspective and information I needed. Her information and thoughts helped me to reach my definition of support and to define that as the key issue of the sports low popularity. She told me about attendance at games and tournaments, funding, as well as mainstreaming and publicity efforts. This information was the most pertinent out of anything I had found in previous research and really focused the key issues for me. Her information and the information I will receive from upcoming interviews later this week will be the most important information and resources for my paper.

The feedback I received from my classmates was also very helpful. Their ideas and thoughts helped to push me in the right direction and steer me away from mistakes I could have made. I forget who made the exact comment, but the idea of the apathy and ignorance of the students made a huge impact on my project. Being as involved and interested in disability as I am, I often forget or do not realize how little others know or care. The idea of incomes and funding was also address, which I believe will be useful in my paper to show how the university administration offers their support to the team.

I still have quite a bit of information to uncover for this paper. I am in the process of conducting interviews, which will be the source of most of the information and research. Once these are complete, it will significantly easier to write and organize my paper. Additionally, I think it might be useful to uncover more concrete financial figures in order to evidence University administration support.

My revised question will focus on several important issues in disability studies. I will look at mainstreaming and integrating disability into general culture by discussing a larger base for support for the adaptive athletics. In addition, I will examine preconceptions people might have about disability and athletics and how this impacts their interest and
knowledge of the sports.

Recommendations to Campus Honors Program:
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 implication for the campus and disability communities.