

**An Interpretation of the History of Wheelchair Basketball; An archival study
of the University of Illinois wheelchair basketball team.**

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“Who, what, when, where, and why” are the questions that everyone is striving to answer, especially when it involves our past. There is no single correct answer to any of these questions which is why there are so many conflicting stories and ideas. One person’s experiences may not be the same as those written in books. An example of this was given by a teacher of mine who grew up during the 1960’s but never experienced the turmoil that is often described with that particular time period. If she were to write a book about her experiences, they would not be wrong because those were her experiences but they would also not support the popular theory of what happened. These contradicting stories occur in history quite often. Something as relatively recent as the 1960’s still has conflicting accounts because even though we thought we kept an accurate history, in all actuality, there can’t be an accurate account of history. Everyone has biases that are included in their writings.

Trying to combine a single persons experience into a groups and that particular groups experience into a countries is basically impossible and always has room for error. This leeway leads to multiple interpretations of history and is the main idea that every history is based on interpretation. How one goes about interpreting the past is how we understand it in the present and the future. The following paper is my interpretation of the history of wheelchair basketball based on the information provided by newspapers

and archival research and the effects of World War II on this sport. I will show not only how writers' interpretations affected the sport but the war itself caused its popularity

Enter the War

While I was trying to understand the history of the sport of wheelchair basketball, I had to look at the specific events that caused the it to be developed. The major event surrounding the development of wheelchair basketball happened to be the Second World War, the deadliest war that the world has seen up to this point. The advancements in the fields of medicine and surgery helped the wounded from the war survive¹. Over 670,000 wounded men returned home to the United States (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_Two). In any other war, these men most likely would not have survived.

Once the soldiers returned home, many were admitted to hospitals all over the United States. These men were forced to see and experience situations that no person should. Concentration camps, bodies thrown without care into ditches, starving children, not to mention the psychological damage caused by knowing you killed human beings had to have had a profound effect on the soldiers. Every soldier experienced these horrid events and the psychological damage that went with it but the wounded men had even more stress put on them because they lost parts of their bodies. Some men would never be able to stand up without the help of crutches while others would never have any function in their legs again. Other men would never be able to give a hug or throw a baseball because of the loss of one or both arms.

¹ During World War II, there was an unwritten code of ethics between the Germans and Allied forces where they would try not to shoot at each others medics. This unwritten rule also could be another reason why so many men returned home wounded instead of dead. The more medics there were to tend to the injured, the higher the chance of these men surviving (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Combat_Medic)

These men needed something in their lives to let them have a sense of normalcy. Many of the veterans turned to sports. This was encouraged by doctors as a type of therapy, a sense of escape. The men who participated in sports were able to take out their aggression in a friendly way, stay in shape, and experience the mind set that they could do the same things that they could before the war. Sports such as wheelchair basketball, football, baseball, and track started to grow, the most popular being wheelchair basketball. Men with many different types of injuries were able to participate and competed regularly. Soon, hospitals began competing against each other which sparked a new trend of games for the disabled.

The Beginning of Wheelchair Basketball

Many different places claim to be the first to invent the game of wheelchair basketball (<http://www.nwba.org>). In theory, it is possible for each and every one of these claims to be correct. War veterans were all coming home around the same time and these hospitals were all looking for ways to keep these men occupied. Sports were one obvious way and so it is possible for all of the hospitals and places to have “invented” the sport because they all started participating around the same time. The contradicting history of who started the sport, although interesting, has nothing to do with the wars effect on the sport. World War II was the reason the sport was invented (no matter who created it) and because of the large number of disabled veterans, the sport continued.

The University of Illinois starts a tradition

The University of Illinois was very proud of its soldiers and posted many fliers asking the student body to support the men. There were also many newspaper articles encouraging veterans to attend the University. One particular newspaper article entitled

“Disabled War Vets Attend Galesburg” was exactly what the disabled veterans needed to boost morale and let them know there was a place specifically for them to attend. This article also let the veterans know that there were opportunities out there for them that many did not know about. The first few sentences of the article were beautifully written and appealed to the veterans and people disabled from other circumstances (polio, accidents.). It said “Doors to new worlds of endeavor have been opened to paraplegic victims of war through facilities of the Galesburg undergraduate division of the University of Illinois. Out of a creature designed and built during war has been another to heal the scars of conflict.” The article told of the problems that occurred previously when trying to incorporate paraplegics and amputees into the college which included travel and transportation challenges, mostly due to wheelchairs (“Disabled War Vets Attend Galesburg”).

Other schools attempted to educate paraplegics by placing them all in one large classroom. This would be very unfair because only one subject could be taught. If a student was interested in a different subject, s/he would be out of luck. The University of Illinois was lucky when the army decided to let the world famous Mayo General Hospital be used for the public and the university took hold of it. This 156 acre establishment was perfect for schooling the disabled. There were 117 brick buildings, many one story, which were all connected by corridors and ramps, perfect for wheelchairs. This launched the University of Illinois as being one of the best places for the disabled. Once the disabled had a school to attend, they were able to start their own traditions, one being wheelchair basketball.

Although it is disputed who was the first to come up with wheelchair basketball, all of the records I have found shows the University of Illinois was the first college to offer wheelchair basketball as a collegiate sport. This team was known as the Gizz Kids and the newspapers loved the team. In 1949, the Gizz kids hosted the first National Wheelchair Basketball Tournament in Galesburg. This tournament was the beginning of an Illinois tradition of greatness. There were six teams invited to play in this tournament and the Gizz kids were the champions. The coach that led the team to so many wins was Timothy Nugent (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wheelchair_basketball). He was the driving force behind the creation of the team. He also knew how to work not only his players but also the press. The biggest fan of the Gizz kids seemed to be the newspapers.

Extra! Extra! Read all about it.

In the archives at the University of Illinois, there are boxes stuffed full of newspaper articles about the Gizz kids and other sports involving the disabled. By reading these articles, the history of the sport could be seen and where the wheelchair basketball was heading. The first article from sometime in the very early 1950's² told about the new team and how the U of I supported its veterans ("Disabled War Vets Attend Galesburg"). The article let the public know about the new "exciting" team and how this team even came with its own halftime show which included wheelchair square-dancing and wheelchair cheerleading³. There were literally hundreds of advertisements

² I am guessing 1951 because the box at the archives started in 1951 and that was the first article in the box. This may not be correct though because someone might have accidentally placed the article on top. The newspaper also looked very different than the type of paper used in the later 50's.

³ One interesting note I found was from "Kitty", who was someone who either sponsored the team or coached the team. The note also said at the top that she was locally connected. She sent out a letter "for release at will" which basically meant anyone who could help could read it. It stated that the Gizz kids have more backing than ever so the number of cheerleaders should be increased. They started out with four girls but wanted to increase this number to seven to accompany the boys on trips and support them at home (Note from "Kitty").

over the years promoting the disabled team and encouraging the public to see this newly founded sport. It seems the public responded because the newspapers kept on writing about the team whereas later, we will find out what happens when the public stops responding.

The newspaper clippings from the Champaign area never referred to the team in any negative way which showed how our university adapted to the idea of disabled men playing basketball. Our community supported the team and kept it alive. The rotary club decided to sponsor the Gizz kids as well as many other local businesses. There were many pictures of the team and many solo shots of Ron Stein, the wheelchair basketball captain. Stein turned out to be possibly one of the greatest athletes the university has ever had.

Another sign of the progressive nature of the U of I and its community was found by comparing the newspaper articles from other areas and states. One article I found said “the crippled gets a chance for full college life” (“Unusual Team Stops For Night In Atlantic.”). No where in any of the hundreds of articles I viewed from the University of Illinois newspapers did any writer refer to the team as crippled. There were however many positive terms used, especially by a sports writer named Heck. He used adjectives such as star, famous, and exciting: all positive terms.

The next two articles are interesting because of their different interpretations of the same event. It is because of articles like these that the entirety of history will never be known. One article was entitled “Kids to get AF Airlift”. This article told how Chanute Air Force Base in Rantoul was behind the team and let the team know it in a special way. The Base offered to fly the entire team to the National Wheelchair

Basketball tournament in California. This ten hour flight would have been a very long and tedious drive for the team in a bus so the Air Force offered its services. The Air Force at one point cancelled but then reversed its order and flew the team to the required destination. After I read this article, I soon found another that told the reason for the Air Force agreeing to take the team after the cancellation which yet again was astounding. The Air Force was publicly criticized for telling the team it would take them to California but then canceling. After the Gazette ran a story about the cancellation, banners all over the United States popped up that made officers “shudder”. One banner said “Air Force Bumps crippled” while another said “Air Force Grounds Handicapped Veterans” (“Remand ‘Bump’ Of Wheelchair Team Loads.”). This public scrutiny made Chanute Air Force Base quickly change its mind about canceling on the Gizz Kids.

These two different articles are telling the same story in a different way. Both articles are correct but give a different feel to the situation. One positively supports the Air Force while the other says tells how the Air Force was basically backed into a wall and forced by popular demand to fly the team. The writers’ interpretation of the incident affected how history is now known. Without the second article, I would not have known the circumstances surrounding why the Air Force decided to not cancel. Does this really affect history though? We know that the Gizz kids flew to California, and the circumstances surrounding how they got there are unimportant in my exploration other than to show how much the nation supported the wheelchair basketball teams. It could, however, be an interesting topic to explore with further research.

It seemed everyone in the community was behind the wheelchair basketball team except for possibly one group, the U of I administration. Although I can not say this for

sure, I do think with the following evidence, there is some support for that theory. The evidence that bothered me was written by a newspaper in Omaha that was entitled “Illini Wheel Chair Cagers Stranded in Area, Seek Tilts”. Our nationally famous team had a malfunction with one of its vehicles and was stranded in Atlantic, Iowa. The clutch went out on their bus which could happen to anyone but reading further, I found that after the bus was fixed using the money the team was going to use to get to their game, the University of Illinois did not send any money to help the team so the men used the newspaper to their advantage. They wrote out a challenge to anyone who would want to play them⁴. The way they would raise money would be to charge fans that came for the show and then be able to travel to their next game in St. Joseph, Mo (“Unusual Team Stops For Night In Atlantic.”). I could not find any more information on this incident but it did prove that the wheelchair basketball team was making it on its own, without the help of the U of I.

With all of the articles supporting wheelchair basketball all throughout the 1950’s and 1960’s, the support started to dwindle down during the 1970’s to the present day. The Daily Illini once had many articles about the Wheelchair Basketball team where as today, there are few if any. The team is still around but the students know nothing about this team. The initial craze of wheelchair basketball was sparked because of World War II. Patriotism was still big in American Culture and supporting the veterans was one way of being patriotic. As the years went by, the popularity of wheelchair basketball declined as did the support the people had for its troops. Is it a coincidence that newspaper articles

⁴ The article claimed the team would go up against anyone, able bodied or not. All the opposing team would have to do is play in wheelchairs. They also boasted they would still win even if they gave a 50 point lead. This was a brilliant move because it challenged everyone to try and beat men in wheelchairs. An able-bodied man would certainly take this as a challenge and try to play the team which would in turn raise money for the team.

about wheelchair basketball started declining during the late 60's and early 70's? The Vietnam War was a very unpopular war and veterans of that war were often subject to much harassment. People did not want to watch the veterans of this war in sport. The nationwide support of its veterans and the wheelchair basketball team are a tradition that seemed to start with a war and die with another.

How could you continue this research?

There are many different ways to continue this research that have crossed my mind while writing this paper. With more time, I would have loved to explore the actual players' lives, especially one player in particular. Ron Stein was a famous athlete for the University. I have mentioned him previously but this man was fascinating. From what I could find, he started college in the late 1950's. He was an amazing athlete and was recruited by many colleges to play sports until he was stricken with polio after his senior year of High school. He did not let this discourage him and decided to come to the University of Illinois because it was recognized internationally as one of the best colleges for the disabled. He played wheelchair basketball, football, and track (Chamberlain, Charles).

Articles claimed he excelled in every position in football and not only his offense but his defense in basketball was something to behold. He also went to the Paralympics. I found all this information out from newspaper articles but there was no real information provided about him. One would think with all that publicity that the University would have dedicated something to this man or had a file about him. There were countless

articles about Stein and two I found even claimed he could possibly be the world's greatest athlete. He was inducted into the National Wheelchair Basketball Association hall of fame. He was also named the "outstanding player of Illinois" and was named All-American multiple times (Chamberlain, Charles). This man's legacy with the University of Illinois is amazing and something that should be studied. I found out towards the end of my investigation that Ron Stein is still living in his hometown of O'Fallon and anyone with an interest in this topic could find out this man's real story. His triumphs and tragedies are something that should be told.

Some other interesting topics that could be pursued from the previous research is the Vietnam war's effect on sports at the university. The effect towards wheelchair basketball was negative in my opinion but it could have been different for other sports. You could also compare why sports flourished after World War II but didn't during Vietnam.

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