



POWER PLAY

Electric Wheelchair Hockey is Scoring Big with Kids and Adults

By Tina Dealwis

When 15-year-old Nathaniel Reid decided that he no longer needed his old power wheelchair, little did he know that his life would be changed forever.

Nathaniel and his mother Jennifer went about inquiring how and where to donate it. They met a woman who suggested that they donate the chair to a local power wheelchair hockey league. Nathaniel and Jennifer were intrigued.

"That was the first we'd heard of power wheelchair hockey," says Jennifer Reid. Nathaniel, who has cerebral palsy, had never played a sport before, but decided to try it, and has never looked back. "It was the first time I had played any sport," Nathaniel remembers. "I was nervous. But I got more comfortable with a little bit of practice. I practiced at home and got really good at it!"

Power wheelchair hockey (also called electric wheelchair hockey) may be one of the adapted sports world's best kept secrets. Fun, fast-paced, and as thrilling as its ice-based counterpart, electric wheelchair hockey is a perfect sport for kids with more involved disabilities. The rules are generally the same as ice hockey, except that power wheelchair hockey is played on a gymnasium floor. Players with limited upper body strength can strap their hockey sticks directly to the wheelchairs. They shoot the ball by quickly moving their chair side to side. For safety, the players wear protective eyewear and securely tuck their feet in.

Not only does playing Canada's national sport give kids a sense of pride and inclusion, it also enables them to learn teamwork, develop social skills, and most of all, have fun. "Because hockey is such a big part of Canadian culture, it's something kids with disabilities can share with their families, and their able-bodied friends," says Robert Dancel, president and coach of the Southwestern Ontario Division of the Canadian Electric Wheelchair Hockey Association, located in London, Ontario, where Nathaniel plays.

Fifteen-year-old Cole Mellows has been playing power wheelchair hockey for three years, and agrees that hockey has been life-changing. "I felt like I couldn't do much, but with hockey, I felt more confident in stuff, like I can do it," shares Cole, who also has cerebral palsy.

Cole plays with the junior division of the Toronto Power Wheelchair Hockey League. In his three years in the sport, he has had many proud moments, but says two of his greatest accomplishments are scoring his first goal and receiving the Most Improved Player award last year. "That was really cool," Cole smiles. "That was a great day for me." In fact, he still has the ball from his first goal. It's framed in his living room! "It shows me where I started, and how I can improve from there."

Cole's mother, Lisa Mellows, says hockey has given her son much more than a game he can play. "Cole is more outgoing, more likely to try new things, more likely to put himself out there and take risks, and it's made him more social," she describes. Mellows explains that Cole has tried many other sports and found them difficult, but with hockey, he shines. She says hockey's social aspect is its biggest benefit. "It's an opportunity to socialize and participate in a recreational activity with people he has something in common with, and with whom he shares a physical disability."

Thirteen-year-old Adam Rodeghiero agrees. "Wheelchair hockey is so much fun," he enthuses. "It makes me happy and it makes me feel involved in a team." Adam, who has a spinal cord injury, plays with the Toronto Division of the Canadian Electric Wheelchair Hockey Association. Now in his second season, Adam says he has made a lot of new friends, and has even won Rookie of the Year and Sportsmanship awards! "I'm happier now with hockey because I feel it's another part of my life," Adam offers. "It's competitive, but everybody is still friends at the end of the day win or lose."

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And it enables me to have an active lifestyle," he adds.

Adam's dad Bob Rodeghiero is one of Adam's coaches, and sees team play as one of the biggest benefits of hockey. "Team camaraderie," he emphasizes, "and everybody feels that they have a special place on the team. It's a level playing field and it's great to see them all work together."

"Hockey has opened up a whole new world for me," exclaims Nathaniel. Like Adam, Nathaniel is also in his second season, and has discovered a sport he loves. And like Adam, Nathaniel is also a Rookie of the Year award recipient! "It's improved his self-esteem so much and his smiles and love of life are much greater because of hockey, and being able to fit in somewhere," observes Reid.

Dancel agrees that the social aspect is a huge benefit of hockey. "Some players come in very shy or hesitant. But once they start socializing with the other players, they develop confidence in their hockey skills." Says one coach, "having a disability doesn't mean not being able to do something, it just means doing something differently."

Increasing awareness is one of the biggest challenges facing electric wheelchair hockey. Esther Dzura, president of the Toronto Power Wheelchair Hockey Association, started the league with Paul MacDougall in 2006 when she discovered that parents and kids struggled with a lack of opportunities to play hockey. "The kids wanted to play hockey but didn't have a place to go," Dzura remembers.

"There isn't very much awareness," agrees Reid. "We knew about sledge hockey, but we knew it wasn't a great fit for Nathaniel. Nobody knew about power wheelchair hockey. There needs to be more awareness. There have been players who have been playing for 21 years, and I would have loved to have known about it earlier."

Both the Toronto Power Wheelchair Hockey League and Canadian Electric Wheelchair Hockey Association will loan power chairs to players who don't have them. Dzura says that hockey can also improve driving skills outside of hockey. "I've had therapists come back and say it's amazing what hockey has done, the repetitive motion of driving



Courtesy of Bob Rodeghiero

and moving the chair."

Dzura encourages parents to bring their kids out to watch a game. "Let me put a child in a power chair and see what they can do. Sometimes parents are reluctant to bring their child out. I tell them 'bring your child out and let them tell you if they're interested or not.'" Dzura points out that the opportunity is good for parents too. "It's networking. The parents get a lot of their information through hockey, through other parents."

Cole, Nathaniel and Adam encourage other kids with disabilities to give power wheelchair hockey a try. "Just get out there, and try it," advises Cole. "It might change your life." It certainly changed the lives of these three hockey stars.

For more information on the Canadian Electric Wheelchair Hockey Association visit www.cewha.ca or the Toronto Power Wheelchair Hockey League: <http://tpwhl.startlogic.com>.



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