

Sports

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BASKETBALL

Hoopfest dares able-bodied to spin wheels

Richmond News sales rep Don Grant tries his hand on the court for a charity tournament from a wheelchair



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The Rick Hansen Foundation team (left) dons grey and prepares to hit the courts at Hoopfest. Clockwise from top, Ramon, Neil, Marylene, Kevin, Amir, Jim, Amanda (coach) and Nathalie. Right, the Vancouver Fire Fighters enjoy a pre-game warm up, getting used to the feel of their new wheels.



BY DON GRANT
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First of all and in the interest of full disclosure, I suck at basketball. Always have.

Growing up it was the one major sport at which I had almost no proficiency. Shooting the ball around in a game of "horse" was okay, but when it came to running and dribbling I had two left feet and two left hands — a rare combination indeed and not one conducive for this sport.

So when I was approached by the BC Wheelchair Basketball Society (BCWBS) to be a media representative at Hoopfest 2012, I immediately flashed back to those awkward high school gym moments that stick in one's memory bank forever. But it's for a good cause so I swallowed my insecurities and ineptness and agreed.

Hoopfest is a community basketball tournament held annually since 1994 to raise funds in support of wheelchair basketball programs throughout British Columbia. Its goal is to create awareness about the sport, the athletes involved and the abilities of people with disabilities.

This year's event was held at Cambie secondary a couple of weeks ago (April 14) and included teams from various lower mainland fire and police departments as well as corporate and community organizations such as the Rick Hansen Foundation. Rick Hansen is a pioneer of wheelchair basketball in Canada and is a founding member of BCWBS.

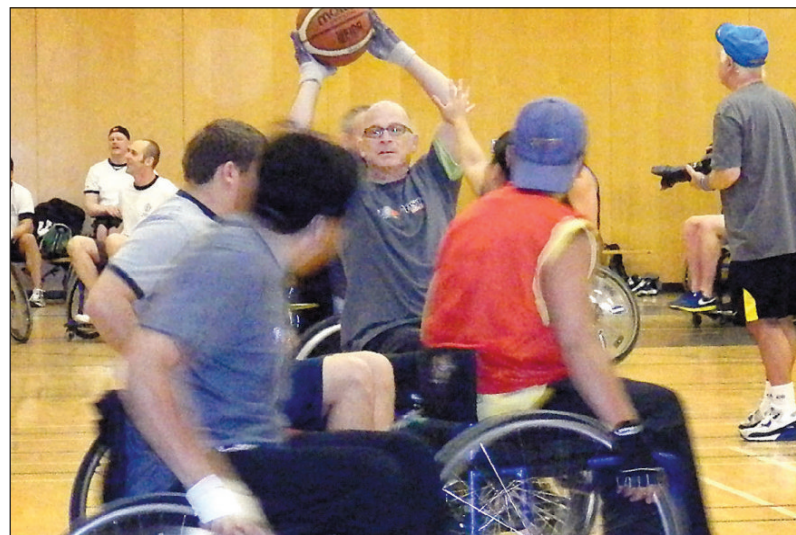
When I arrived at Cambie and was waiting for one of the organizers to decide which team would be burdened with my lack of talent, I started watching some of the participants, all able-bodied, warm up in the chairs specifically designed for the sport.

Gasp. What in the name of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was I doing here? Players were wheeling forwards and backwards, side-to-

side, starting and stopping on a dime, precision passing and shooting, and to me, the most horrifying part — dribbling!

The rule is that a player can use two pushes maximum before having to dribble the ball at least once, either in front or to the side. Intimidated? You bet.

To play a game on two legs at which I have limited ability is tough enough and now to play it while sitting in a vehicle with which I'm completely unfamiliar was going



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Jim from the Rick Hansen Foundation team scans the court, looking to pass the ball during game time.

to test my skills to a completely different level. Using one's legs or raising oneself out of the seat is strictly prohibited. I was now the ultimate example of the phrase, white men can't jump.

The natural instinct to use my legs was almost insurmountable and the realization of how we take for granted such a natural thing hit me right between the eyes. I've played sports all my life and the thought of not being able to do so was sobering to say the least. My anxiety was growing, as was the thought of looking like a fish out of water. I needn't have worried.

I was placed on the team from the Rick Hansen Foundation. We had a blast. Granted, they were carrying extra weight on their shoulders (me), but we performed admirably against our three opponents that morning. Two of those teams were the Vancouver Police and Vancouver Fire departments, both of whom are extremely accomplished at this sport. So I viewed playing these teams as my own version of the Bad News Bears playing the New York Yankees.

But we gave each of them a good game and my teammates were magnificent. Kevin, Marylene, Amir, Nathalie, Jim, Ramon and Neil exhibited some great passing and shooting. Our coach was an inspirational young woman, Amanda Yan, 23, who was injured in a snowboarding accident in 2008.

She showed us the basics of the game like how best to pick up a ball from the floor, which is done by holding the ball against one wheel and letting the wheel rotate it upwards — not an easy trick. She also diagrammed some plays and strategies for the offensive and defensive ends of the courts.

Strategies?!?! My strategy was to not tip over or mangle my fingers in the spokes or crash into an opponent, a teammate, myself or some poor bystander who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But I actually managed to operate the wheelchair with reasonable skill.

Its slanted main wheels and the small pivoting wheels on the bottom of the frame make it incredibly maneuverable. I made a few good passes and even pulled off one shot, which unfortunately missed. It seems some things never change

Yan constantly cheered us on during the games, instructing and encouraging us between games. Speaking to her and learning more of her story, immediately put into perspective how relatively trivial are the problems I and most other able-bodied people have to face.

She exudes no remorse or self-pity, however. She considers herself an athlete first and foremost who just happens to participate in a chair. She plays with great dignity and enthusiasm the hand she's been dealt. To say being around her is uplifting would be a massive understatement.

I'd like to thank her and all my teammates for a great morning. It was a learning experience I won't forget. I definitely intend to play again next year — hopefully they won't trade me in the off-season.

If you've never seen this sport and want to see it played by the best, get out to the Richmond Olympic Oval on the May long weekend (May 18-20). Canada's top wheelchair basketball players will be converging there for the 2012 National Championships. Yan will play on the BC Breakers Women's Provincial team.

Many other players are from the Canadian senior teams and are in town to hone their skills for the London 2012 Paralympic Summer Games. Their skills and athleticism will make you stand up and cheer.