

# Wheelchair athletes take to tennis

By "HOWIE" MARR

The public's perception of a physical disability as a mental disability is the biggest problem facing wheelchair athletes as they strive to achieve legitimacy in the world of sport, according to Doug Wilton, Executive Director of Sport for the Disabled, Ontario. It is this image that wheelchair athletes were attempting to shed at the Central Canada Qualifier tournament held at the National Tennis Centre, at York University.

Behind a wall of euphemisms that include handicapped, disabled, and physically challenged, these athletes have the basic desire to compete and be active even more than the vast majority of physically abled people. Paul Novak, one of 12 athletes participating in the tournament, says that tennis has allowed him the opportunity to vent some of his frustrations. "When I was on my feet I used to play everything," said Novak. "After I broke my back I tried everything." It was Novak's desire to be continually active that led him to wheelchair sports.

Novak originally started out as a basketball player, and played the sport for nine years. He eventually decided to quit basketball to pursue tennis. "I started playing wheelchair tennis against a wall," said Novak. Novak's dedication to the sport led the Etobicoke resident all the way to Hamilton to practice his sport regularly. He explains that since his participation in last year's Ontario championships, he has begun to put more into the sport.

Novak says that he prefers tennis over basketball because tennis lends itself to a better integration between the disabled and able-bodied. "Tennis is the best opportunity for the disabled and able-bodied to compete together," says Novak. Many wheelchair athletes cite this reason for. Although it is sometimes difficult for wheelchair athletes to find wheelchair partners, a game of wheelchair tennis can easily be played with the able-bodied with a slight adjustment of the rules.

Another problem with tennis is that courts are not always accessible to the handicapped. However, Novak says that indoor courts are quickly becoming more equipped for the physically disabled.

The rules for wheelchair tennis are the same as those for the able-bodied game, but some exceptions are: a wheelchair player is allowed two bounces, the first bounce having to be in the court, the ball must be served with the two rear wheels behind the baseline, the wheelchair is forbidden to touch the net or the ground on the opponent's side of the



**\$500 richer:** Dean Mellway grabbed top spot in the Central Canada Qualifier tourney held at the National Tennis Centre.

court, no player can intentionally jump out of his or her chair to teach a ball, and each player is only allowed two five-minute maintenance delays in a match.

Wheelchair tennis is the culmination of a continuing drive in disabled sports. Disabled sports emerged on the athletic horizon after the end of WWII with the accompanying large number of physically handicapped veterans determined to lead normal lives. In 1948, Sir Ludwig Guttmann pioneered wheelchair sports by staging a competition as part of the 1948 Olympic games in London. At the time he prophesied that "the time will come when this new sports event of ours will be truly international... and [we] will have a disabled person's equivalent of the Olympic games." Since the time of Guttmann's declaration there has been a wheelchair Olympics held in the country of the host city of the able-bodied games.

The focus of Guttmann's plan was his attempt to prove that the wheelchair was not a symbol of disability

and sickness. In fact, Guttmann felt that the wheelchair was proof of special abilities. When a large body of disabled athletes began to emerge, with the large number of returning veterans, Guttmann was able to put his ideas into action. He helped to give new impetus to the idea of sport helping to rehabilitate the disabled. Prior to WWII 80% of paraplegics in Great Britain died within three years of injury. In terms of prognosis and rehabilitation, Guttmann cited a defeatist attitude within the medical profession towards spinal cord sufferers. Unfortunately, this attitude became a major stumbling block for the paraplegic's recovery. However, since the Second World War, 80% of paraplegics have had normal life expectancies because of new rehabilitation methods.

Guttmann's belief in sport was based in its therapeutic value which provided a natural forum for remedial exercise. Moreover, sports had a recreational value that prevented boredom, and provided a new bond between society and those confined to wheelchairs.

men were divided into two pools of six where they played off in a round robin tournament. Three of the six in each pool advanced to the quarter-final of the tournament. In pool one, tournament favorite and eventual victor, Dean Mellway of Ottawa, dominated by winning 32 games and four matches. He was followed by Steve Little with 26 victories and three matches won, and Mark Byron, who won 20 games and two matches.

In the other pool, another favoured finalist and hometown Toronto boy, Paul Novak, led the way with 32 wins and four match victories. Also advancing to the quarter-finals were Barry Butler with 29 game wins and three matches, and Frank Peter who won 25 games and picked up two match victories.

The quarter-finals saw things get serious as Paul Novak advanced by thrashing Mark Byron 6-1, 6-1, and

Dean Mellway also advanced by beating Frank Peter 6-3, 6-0. Both eventual finalists had to get by two determined semi-finalists before playing for the championship trophy.

The final turned out to be somewhat anti-climatic as Mellway easily romped to a two set victory by scores of 6-0, 6-1. After the match, Novak cited a lack of concentration for his bad performance. "I wasn't burned out," said Novak. Novak says he's looking forward to meeting Mellway in the national championship and in fact he wouldn't mind meeting him in the first round.

The national championship will pit eight players from Western Canada against the six Central Canadian qualifiers in addition to two qualifiers from the east. Mellway expects to be competitive against the West and plans to continue his aggressive play which he felt contributed to the downfall of Novak. "I took the game to him; getting my first serve in was

The earliest sport associated with the wheelchair was track and field. Track and field basically involves wheelchair races. Along with track and field came basketball and a variety of other sports. The growth of the "Para-Olympics" have reached such heights that over 30 countries from both the Eastern and Western Bloc now compete. Traditionally, the games are held right after the able-bodied Olympics. In 1976, Toronto played host to the Para-Olympics when the Olympics were held in Montreal. Canada's representation has traditionally been very strong, almost always placing athletes in the top three along with perennial favourites Great Britain and the United States.

Canada's success in tennis has been a more recent phenomenon. The sport originated on a global basis in 1976, and Canada's entrance into the field did not occur until 1981. Wheelchair tennis has been familiar to British Columbians for over eight years, but has only been played in Ontario for about three years. In the United States, wheelchair tennis has been played since its inception in 1976.

Wheelchair tennis, like other wheelchair sports, demands great anticipation and wheelchair mobility. Many of the athletes cross-train tennis with other sports. Not surprisingly, the key common-denominator for all wheelchair sports is the wheelchair. Novak says that being able to pivot well is an important ingredient for the successful player. Arm strength is another important consideration for the wheelchair athlete. While Novak doesn't use weights to increase his strength, as many athletes do, he prefers continual practice on the court.

Wheelchair athletes are continuing to attach a more serious effort to their sports every year. As a result, some athletes are gradually becoming specialists in one sport. "Practice makes perfect as in all sports," says Novak, and tournaments like the Central Canada Qualifier are continuing to provide wheelchair athletes with the practice they need.

Novak thinks that recently the public's acceptance has become overwhelming. "Things have changed positively," Novak states. "Part of it is due to Rick Hansen, who showed the strength and endurance [of wheelchair athletes]." However, Novak thinks there is still room for a greater change in attitudes towards the wheelchair athlete. "Let's not look at what the disabled can't do," Novak states. "It's time to look at what they can do."

## Competitors from across Ontario come to York

By "HOWIE" MARR

Physically disabled athletes from throughout Ontario gathered at York's National Tennis Centre last weekend to compete in the Central Canada Qualifier tournament. Six male athletes from the 12 participants would win the right to represent Central Canada at the national wheelchair tennis championships in Ottawa.

The tournament was designed to showcase athletes from the provinces of Quebec and Ontario. However, of the 12 men and three women competing, none came from the province of Quebec. The majority of the participants were from Toronto and Ottawa areas. The lack of Quebec representation was attributed to a timetable conflict that placed some athletes at a tournament in Quebec.

Nevertheless, the tennis at the National Tennis Centre still proved to be quite competitive. The 12

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