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FALL/WINTER 2026



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Pictured on cover, Chrissy Molnar.
Photo by Curling Canada/Anil Mungal.

WELCOME

Passion and People

Throughout this year, a common theme emerged. Centered around improving the state of sport, sport leaders and community members came together to evaluate it, providing thoughts and feedback on how to move forward.

The newly-released *Future of Sport in Canada Commission Preliminary Report Findings* is a testament to that collaborative work, as are the provincial community sport summits to end the year.

It is time, more than ever, to take the time to evaluate current barriers, capacity limitations, and funding issues. This applies to all areas of sport as we strive to provide safe and quality sport experiences for people of all ages and abilities across Ontario.

It is also important to celebrate the amazing programs and people who dedicate countless hours to creating adapted programming for people with disabilities, with limited resources. Evidence shows that increased funding is needed to better support grassroots organizations. This is especially true for adaptive sport.

Current clubs and programs across Ontario exist because of the passion and dedication from the people who run them, in most scenarios volunteering their time and energy. Without these parasport champions, there would be even less programming available for Ontarians with disabilities.

Let us appreciate the amazing people across Ontario who are working tirelessly to provide opportunities for people with disabilities and creating pathways for participation from grassroots to high-performance. There is great work happening in wheelchair curling at all levels, which exemplifies how more grassroots opportunities can be offered while also supporting para athletes who are competing at the highest level.

It is important to learn from the past, live in the present and plan to improve the future. What remains constant is the people with passion and dedication working every day to increase quality adapted sport experiences for people with disabilities. These are the people who “find a way” and “make it work” to ensure that everyone is included on the field of play.

We all strive for a better future, and throughout this past year we have used our voices to advocate for what is needed across the parasport sector. There is true and unquestionable value that adaptive sport provides for people with disabilities, and the community at large, and ParaSport® Ontario will continue to showcase and support the people and programs that provide these pathways across the province.

James Murphy
Executive Director, ParaSport® Ontario



ParaSport® MAGAZINE

ParaSport® Ontario

3701 Danforth Avenue
Toronto, ON M1N 2G2

Phone: 416-426-7187

E-mail: info@parasportontario.ca

Web: <https://parasportontario.ca>

Facebook: @parasportont

Twitter: @parasport_ont

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SQUASH STAR IGNITES EXCITEMENT FOR WHEELCHAIR PROGRAM

The inaugural Canadian Wheelchair Doubles Squash Championship Invitational concluded in thrilling fashion with Ontario's Jeff Harris, with support from Giselle Delgado, emerging victorious over Marshall Lucatch, also from Ontario (with support from Samantha Cornett), in the final match.

To reach the final, Harris overcame Ken Gregory (Ontario) in a competitive head-to-head semifinal, while Lucatch secured his place by defeating Ontario's preeminent multi-sport and Paralympian Martha Gustafson in another hard-fought match. The historic event marked a major milestone for accessibility and inclusivity in Canadian squash.

Held in conjunction with the Connor, Clark & Lunn Private Capital 2025 Canadian Senior Championships,

the tournament was hosted by the Toronto Cricket, Skating and Curling Club, a venue with deep roots in adaptive sport. Home to one of Canada's first wheelchair squash programs, the club welcomed the first Canadian Wheelchair Curling Championship in 2004.

The tournament featured mixed teams of wheelchair athletes and able-bodied support athletes competing in a round-robin format. Reflecting on the event's impact, Kim Watson, a Squash Canada Director at Large, remarked: "This championship is more than just a tournament. It's the culmination of vision, dedication, and belief in the power of sport to bring people together. We celebrate not just competition, but inclusion, accessibility, and progress."

For more information on the Wheelchair Squash Program visit squashontario.com.



Jeff Harris (third from left) – Champion, Canadian Wheelchair Doubles Squash Championship Invitational. Joined by (l-r) Steve Hisey, Papito Wilson and Leonel Cardenas (#13 world-ranking). Toronto's Wilson was a member of Canada's Rowing Team at the 2008 Paralympic Games and is also a competitive wheelchair tennis player.





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The next edition of the Paralympic Winter Games will be held from March 6-15, 2026, and feature six sports – para alpine skiing, para biathlon, para cross-country skiing, para ice hockey, para snowboarding, and wheelchair curling. Visit <https://paralympic.ca/games/milano-cortina-2026/>.

Canada's Honorary Captain • Sault Ste. Marie's **Mac Marcoux**, a three-time Paralympian and six-time Paralympic medallist (two gold, one silver, three bronze), has been named Honorary Captain of Canada's 2026 Paralympic Team. Marcoux retired after the Beijing 2022 Paralympic Winter Games, and now works with the Canadian Paralympic Committee as Coordinator, Athlete Engagement.

Marcoux will shine a spotlight on the athletes, sharing the stories of the Canadian Paralympic Team with the public to engage audiences with the Games. "I am absolutely

thrilled to be the Honorary Captain of the 2026 Canadian Paralympic

Team," said Marcoux. "As an athlete, competing alongside my teammates was one of the highlights of my career, and I am stoked for the opportunity to continue to play a role with the team and bring their stories to people across the country."



Renowned Paralympian Retires from **WHEELCHAIR RUGBY**

Four-time Paralympian Zak Madell, one of Canada's most dynamic and influential wheelchair rugby athletes, has announced his retirement from international competition.

Over a 13-year career, Madell became a pillar of the Canadian national team, known not only for his explosive speed and scoring power but also for the leadership and selflessness he brought to the court. He was introduced to wheelchair rugby in 2011 at a prospect camp, where he was noticed by the sport's founder, Duncan Campbell.

At just 18 years old, Madell made his international debut at the London 2012 Paralympic Games, helping lead Canada to a silver medal. It remains one of his most cherished career highlights. That silver medal set the stage for an outstanding career. Madell went on to win multiple Parapan American and World Championship medals, including silver at the 2014 World Championships where he was named the Most Valuable Player of the tournament.

Former Team Canada head coach Patrick Côté notes: "He [Madell] basically redefined what it means to be a high-pointer in wheelchair rugby. Players like him raised the physical standard. They made the game evolve."

Although his retirement marks the end of an era for the national team, Madell's contributions to the sport will be felt for years to come. "On behalf of Wheelchair Rugby Canada, I want to express our deepest gratitude to Zak Madell," said Paul Hunter, CEO of the national sport organization. "Zak is truly one of the greatest to ever play our sport. His impact has been felt both on and off the court – through his skill, leadership and commitment to the game."

Looking ahead, Madell is focusing on accessibility advocacy in Canada. With a diploma in architectural technology, he hopes to help shape a more inclusive built-environment.



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Earlier this year a widely diverse group of golfers took to the course at Hawk Ridge Golf Club just outside of Orillia. It was a showcase of abilities of golfers from across the province with a variety of disabilities. The event was organized by ParaSport® Ontario, Paragolf Ontario, and the Golf Association of Ontario.

"Golf is the first sport in history to actually have a handicapping system so anybody can play with anybody," explained event organizer Joe Millage who works with ParaSport Ontario and Paragolf Ontario. "Our goal was to raise awareness about who plays and who can be good at the game and who might consider getting into it or getting back into it."

Among golfers with limb loss, cerebral palsy, sensory disabilities and various others, was Tess Trojan who competed at the Special Olympics World Summer Games in Abu Dhabi. In an interview with CTV News, Trojan said that the day was all about inclusivity. "All of us who play golf can show our abilities and how well we can play," she promoted. "It showcases all abilities and that everyone's welcome."

Amateur paragolfer Chester Wilson has managed to maintain his love for golf after a life-altering injury thanks to Paragolf Ontario. "I always loved playing golf," he shared, "and I knew golf was a very adaptive sport to take up. I love the challenge and the community... the people you meet out on the golf course. And of course, everyone loves long drives and sinking putts at the end of the day."

Paragolf Ontario supports athletes by helping find the right adaptive equipment and professionals who can teach para golfers how to play the game with as few limitations as possible.



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BREAKING THE ICE THROUGH BLIND HOCKEY

Adapted from a SIRC article by Paula Baker

National Indigenous History Month is a time to reflect on the strength, resilience, and contributions of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. It's also a time to acknowledge the gaps that still exist, particularly in areas like sport, where Indigenous youth, especially those with disabilities, continue to face systemic barriers. Yet amid those challenges, powerful stories are emerging.

Stories like those of Meghan Mahon and Cassandra Ruttle. The two Indigenous athletes are using their experiences to inspire other Indigenous youth who are blind or partially sighted to try blind hockey and see themselves in the sport.

Mahon, a proud Métis athlete from northern Ontario, is a force on Canada's Women's Goalball Team and a veteran of the blind hockey scene. She's also a mentor for younger athletes like Ruttle.

"Growing up, I wasn't as openly connected to my Métis culture," Mahon shares. "As my mentor relationship grew with Cassandra across goalball and blind hockey we discovered that she is also Indigenous." This shared heritage, and the mentor/mentee bond between the two athletes, has become a powerful source of strength. "It's so much

more than being in sport," Mahon adds. "It's a powerful representation that no matter how many barriers or stereotypes are put on a person, you're able to carry it and let it empower you!"

At just 17, Ruttle is already showing signs of becoming a future star in blind hockey and goalball. A member of the Calgary Seeing Ice Dogs, Ruttle's drive is matched only by her humility. "My dad is a Sixties Scoop survivor," she explains, a quiet, weighted truth that echoes through generations. The Sixties Scoop refers to the mass removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities between the 1950s and 1980s, placing them into non-Indigenous homes, often without consent.

Through sport, Ruttle is reclaiming more than just a jersey, she's reclaiming identity. She wants other Indigenous youth with disabilities to know that blind hockey is an option for them too. For Mahon, she knows that there are barriers. "Organizations need to recognize what it means for people who are living at the intersection of Indigenous culture and who are blind or partially sighted," she says.

To connect with Blind Hockey, visit www.canadianblindhockey.com.

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Left to right: Joe Millage, Minister Raymond Cho, Ken Shaw, Austin Smeenk, PLY, Brodie L., Rouzalin Hakim, Bernie Gluckstein, James Murphy

BRINGING TOGETHER a Community of Support

The 8th Annual Awards Brunch and Para Pro-Am Golf Tournament

By James Murphy
Executive Director, ParaSport® Ontario

The 8th Annual ParaSport® Ontario Awards Brunch and Para Pro-Am Golf Tournament Fundraiser, held on a hot summer day in July at Ajax's Deer Creek Golf Club, was an opportunity to pause, recognize, and celebrate the disability community and those who support and champion their efforts.

The Presenting Sponsor of the 2025 Awards Brunch was Ultimate Golf & Leisure, which helped to raise the level of our event with Vice Golf equipment donations, ParaSport Ontario branded golf balls for all players, and putting green activations and prizes. The company's commitment to supporting the disability community and adapted golf was easy to see and we look forward to a continued partnership and their support.

Hosted at the fully-accessible Deer Creek Banquet Hall in Ajax, the morning Awards Brunch assembled 300 attendees from rehab centres, community groups and provincial sport organizations, as well as parasport athletes, Paralympians, and corporate golf team members. The event included the opportunity to try a variety of different parasports like

sitting volleyball, wheelchair basketball, and sledge hockey, all led by ParaSport Ontario's Para Athlete Ambassadors.

The ambassadors always strive to inspire the younger attendees to see what's possible when barriers to participation are removed. Add to that, the ambassador team showcased how the sport of golf is welcoming to all through the Paragolf Ontario/Golf Canada First-Tee demonstration on the putting green.

The Awards Brunch began with a welcome message from the Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility's long-serving Minister, Raymond Cho, who consistently dedicates time to support people with disabilities and advocates for increased activity and participation.



Paralympian Austin Smeenck's medals from the 2024 Paris Games, showcased next to the ParaSport Ontario Awards Brunch Program.

A highlight of the event was a presentation to the attentive audience from Paralympian Austin Smeenck, a two-time medallist at the 2024 Paris Paralympic Games. Smeenck spoke about his journey through parasport and the positive impact that sport has had on his life in all facets. Ontario-born, Smeenck's story about the barriers to participation that he, with the help of others, broke down throughout his career was truly inspiring. With medals in hand, he was the in-house celebrity that kids flocked to for photo-ops following the brunch.

Our emcee for the event, Ken Shaw, is a long-time adapted sport champion and best known as a respected newscaster for CTV News. With his wit and candour, Shaw garnered laughs from our guests with personal stories about relationships he has with many in the audience.



Attendees trying out wheelchair basketball at the ParaSport Ontario Awards Brunch.



*Left to right: Ken Shaw, Scott Dennis, James Murphy.
Dennis receiving his Community Impact Award.*

With his commanding news-telling voice, Shaw shared stories of community impact and the need for community champions to work together to remove barriers to participation for people with disabilities, reminding all why they had come together on this day at Deer Creek... to support ParaSport Ontario in this mission.

The Awards Brunch also served as the fitting stage to celebrate and congratulate Scott Dennis from Durham College/Ontario Tech University. Dennis received ParaSport Ontario's Community Impact Award for Community Parasport Development.

Dennis has supported ParaSport Ontario in our work to increase participation opportunities for people with disabilities by providing top-tier facility usage at Durham College/Ontario Tech during coveted times of the day. Dennis continues to support sitting volleyball sessions each week, with a commitment to host the 2nd Annual College/University Sitting Volleyball Tournament again in Spring 2026.

Without community champions like Dennis, ParaSport Ontario would

not be on its current pace of progress in improving adapted program access for people of all ages and abilities, and ensuring that students with disabilities have access to programming that meets their level of accommodation and support.

Paralympian Jolan Wong of Pembroke, Ontario, was awarded the ParaSport Ontario Ambassador of the Year Award. Unfortunately unable to attend in person, Wong sent a heartfelt Thank-You video message that was shared with attendees. Wong, who won a bronze medal with the Women's Sitting Volleyball Team at the 2024 Paris Summer Paralympics, is also a dedicated community ambassador. Specifically, she supports ParaSport Ontario's efforts to promote and expand sitting volleyball programming across the province in partnership with the Ontario Volleyball Association.

Wong has supported many school events and programs in leading sitting volleyball sessions for over 2,000 students in the region of Pembroke. She advocates passionately for sitting volleyball to be integrated into school programming to allow students of all abilities to play the game that she loves and excels in at the highest level for Team Canada.



*Jolan Wong, a libero,
playing for Team Canada.*

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Tess Trojan

These recipients have supported ParaSport Ontario for more than five years and have gone above and beyond to support the Play to Podium Fund and everything we do to assist Ontarians with disabilities to find, connect with, and stay involved with adaptive sport and physical activity.

MATT MALTESE LEGACY AWARD

Russell Aide

Allan Kerr

Ibrahim Odza

Aubree Clements

Kevin and Brock Potter



Left to Right: James Murphy, Kyle Hall and Marty Robinson. Kyle Hall received a donated prosthetic running blade in partnership with PBO Group Toronto and Ossur Canada.

Thanks to the support of the Para Pro-Am Golf Tournament sponsors, corporate teams, and community partners, ParaSport Ontario was proud to again donate \$150,000 in adaptive sports equipment in 2025!

Recipients in 2025 included individuals with a disability and organizations that provide adaptive programming across Ontario with the goal of ensuring that adaptive equipment limitations are not a barrier to participation or reaching their next level of performance.

Play to Podium Fund recipients, among others, included Kyle Hall who received a prosthetic running blade in partnership with Ossur Canada and PBO Group Toronto (Marty Robinson). Hall, a high-performance sitting volleyball para athlete, was incredibly grateful for this state-of-the-art running prosthesis which will enable him to run again as part of his training plan and diversify his parasport participation opportunities.

In partnership with Sunrise Medical, Kiera Black and Charlotte McElroy both received new sport chairs for wheelchair basketball, adaptive equipment that is custom fit to their needs to increase performance and comfort levels.

For the second year we had the privilege of honouring the late Matt Maltese and his incredible life. His father, Vito Maltese, a long-time Para Pro-Am Tournament planning committee member, along with his family, were proud to present this legacy award and funding to support its recipients for their dedication, perseverance, and joy in life through adaptive sport. Thank-you to the Maltese family for creating this legacy award to support these well-deserving recipients.



Left to right: James Murphy, Kiera Black, and Mike Longo from Sunrise Medical.



Accepting the Matt Maltese Legacy Award. Back left to right: Aubree Clements, Ibrahim Odza, Allan Kerr, Russell Aide, Sheila Maltese, Vito Maltese and his grandson Matteo. Front left to right: Brock Potter and Kevin Potter.

Lastly, another great example of community partnership and support was shown by Securian Canada, stepping up this year to support our Play to Podium Fund with a donation of a custom racing wheelchair for Tai Young. This new sport chair will help Young reach the next level of performance at provincial and national level competitions. Dr. Elizabeth Charles, AVP of Inclusion at Securian Canada, was on hand to share the company's commitment to supporting participation for people with disabilities and ensuring accessibility and inclusion for all!



Left to right: James Murphy, Tai Young, Dr. Elizabeth Charles from Securian Canada.

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Matthew Miller

Charlotte McElroy

The Awards Brunch ended on another high note with a special performance from Simone Soman. Born blind, Soman has been singing her entire life, performing at a young age, and was a contestant on Canada's Got Talent. She captivated the attendees and got kids up dancing to end the morning. This positive energy was a great way to end the ceremony and made for a terrific segue as golf teams collected to head out to the course!

The Para Pro-Am Golf Tournament that followed is first-in-class, with food stations and refreshments donated by mainstay supporter Derek Wasser of Food Dudes. Four phenomenal on-course food stations were accompanied by additional refreshment options from Lake of Bays Brewing Company (Eric Wolfe) and Dirty Devil Vodka (Kevin Keagan).

The hot and humid conditions on this day were difficult, but everyone finished their rounds and returned to the clubhouse with smiling faces, appreciating the impact that they made by being part of the day. We can't thank each and every sponsor and team enough for their dedication to being a disability community supporter and returning to this event each year to continue its success in making a lasting impact for people with disabilities.



Paragolfer Jason Lucci.



Left to right: Adrian Johnson, Valerie Jones, David Wettlaufer and Joe Auger.

Congratulations to this year's winning team (Adrian Johnson, Valerie Jones, Joe Auger) and their PGA of Canada Pro (Dave Wettlaufer) and Paragolfer Chester Wilson. With the win, the team qualified to move on to the PGA of Canada RBC Scramble Ontario Regional Final in 2026.

If interested in entering a team or sponsoring next year's tournament (July 2026) to support ParaSport® Ontario and the Play to Podium Fund, please call (416) 426-7186 or email james@parasportontario.ca. Partial or Full Charitable Tax Receipts can be provided (Charitable Reg #: 129602553RR0001).



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1. Hollister Clinical Study, CLR-00847, 2021 2. Hollister Clinical Study, CLR-00847, 2021 3. Hollister Data on File, TR-00643, 2023 4. European Association of Urology Nurses (EAUN), Evidence-based Guidelines for Best Practice in Urological Health Care – Catheterisation, Urethral Intermittent in Adults Dilatation, urethral intermittent in adults (2013), pages 25, 33, 47 5. Hollister Data on File, CL-001027 6. Hollister Data on File, CL-001015 7. European Association of Urology Nurses (EAUN), Evidence-based Guidelines for Best Practice in Urological Health Care – Catheterisation, Urethral Intermittent in Adults Dilatation, urethral intermittent in adults (2013), pages 25, 33, 47 8. Hollister Data on file, CL-001017

In Pursuit of Excellence



Recipients of the Play to Podium Fund

By Daniel Vieira, *Strategic Initiatives & Engagement Manager, ParaSport® Ontario*

ParaSport® Ontario continued its donations of a wide variety of adapted sport equipment in 2025 to individuals and organizations through the association's Play to Podium Fund.

Among this year's recipients was Hamilton's Charlotte McElroy. Charlotte is a rising wheelchair basketball star and ParaSport Ontario was honoured to present her with a new sport chair to help her pursue her goals in the sport of wheelchair basketball.

Charlotte discovered wheelchair basketball when she was just six years old at a multi-sport "Try-It" day at McMaster University. She tried it for the first time and has been hooked on the sport ever since. She loves the fun and inclusivity of wheelchair basketball. "It bridges the gap between

people with and without disabilities and removes stereotypes for an inclusive environment," she explains.

Today, Charlotte plays on three different teams: her club team the Burlington Vipers, Team Ontario, and the U25 Women's Team Canada. One of her favourite memories in the sport,

so far, is competing at the Women's U25 World Championships in Thailand in 2023. When she talks about the experience, she focuses not on her own performance but on the bonds that she built with her teammates.

"Those team members are like my sisters," she shares. "Being with like-minded people that support each other through hard practices and games is what made the experience so memorable." She's also competed in the Canada Games with Team Ontario, and earned her league's MVP award.

Currently a Grade 12 student, Charlotte is applying to universities in both Canada and the United States. She hopes to continue her athletic journey in wheelchair basketball at a school in the United States while majoring in psychology. Not only that, she also has her sights set on competing on the national team at the Paralympics one day, be it in Los Angeles in 2028 or Brisbane in 2032. Charlotte hopes the new sport chair donated by ParaSport Ontario and partner Sunrise Medical will help make that pursuit a reality.

ParaSport Ontario wishes her continued success as she moves into her post-secondary career and pursues excellence on and off the court.

Another recipient of adapted sports equipment from the Play to Podium Fund was the Hamilton District Sledge Hockey Association, better known as the Hamilton Sledgehammers. In partnership with sled manufacturer Unique Inventions, ParaSport Ontario presented six youth sleds and six pairs of sticks, a donation that will play a significant role in assisting the organization in welcoming new young athletes to the sport and expanding its junior program.

Founded in the early 1990s, the Hamilton Sledgehammers have steadily grown into one of the most



active sledge hockey organizations in Ontario. Featuring four teams competing at various levels within the Ontario Sledge Hockey Association, the Sledgehammers have a team in the Intermediate A and Intermediate C divisions, the Open Division, and in the Junior Division with athletes between the ages of 5 and 15. This multi-team structure not only provides competitive opportunities for players of all skill levels but also creates a pathway for young athletes to develop and advance within the sport.

Allen Hierlihy, the Sledgehammers' Vice-President, Head Coach of the Intermediate C division team, and dad to one its players who is now in his 10th season, emphasizes how impactful the donation is. "It's hard to even describe how much it helps," says Allen. "We work hard to ensure that every new player is equipped with a proper sled and sticks for the season, a commitment that can be challenging given the cost of specialized equipment," he explains.

The Sledgehammers have recently partnered with Bauer's First Shift program, an initiative designed to help new youth players experience sledge hockey in a supportive environment. The organization will welcome five players between the

ages of six and nine who will be trying sledge hockey for the first time, and will be among the first to benefit from the newly donated equipment.

The Sledgehammers' roster currently includes approximately 50 players ranging in age from five to 49. The club features women's national team players, Paralympians, and individuals with aspirations of competing at the highest level.

Community involvement remains as one of the Sledgehammers' strongest pillars. The club regularly participates in various Hamilton-area events. From friendly scrimmages with able-bodied hockey teams to hosting Try-It sledge days, Allen notes that the organization "gets involved with everything they should get involved with", a contributing factor to its ongoing growth and visibility.

ParaSport Ontario is proud to support the continued development of the Hamilton Sledgehammers and is excited to see this donation help shape the next generation of athletes. For more information on the organization, visit hamiltonsledgehammers.ca. To learn more about the Play to Podium Fund, visit parasportontario.ca/play-to-podium-fund.

Photo courtesy of Angela Burger, Canadian Paralympic Committee

Mark Ideson

Wheelchair Curler



Interviewed by Jeff Tiessen, PLY

When Canada's wheelchair curling team was named for the Milano Cortina 2026 Paralympic Winter Games, Mark Ideson's nod was no surprise to the curling community. What may be a surprise is that the now four-time Paralympian was only introduced to wheelchair curling in 2010, at the age of 33.

Ideson is a returning member of Canada's bronze-medal winning squad at the Beijing 2022 Paralympic Games. In Italy in 2026, Canada will compete in the mixed team tournament, where it will be aiming for a sixth consecutive podium appearance (three gold, two bronze). Canada is the only nation to have medalled in each Paralympic Winter Games wheelchair curling competition since the sport made its debut in 2006.

Born in Parry Sound, Ontario, and now living in London, 49-year-old Ideson is married and has two children,

a son, 16, and a 20-year-old daughter who curls on Team Ontario and has reached the Nationals three times to date. Ideson has lived with quadriplegia since 2007, when the helicopter he was piloting crashed into a field near Cambridge, Ontario, on a maintenance flight.

An avid multi-sport athlete before his injury, during his hospital time after the crash Ideson made a promise to himself that he wouldn't play any sports that he had played before his injury. "I didn't want to compare my old abilities to my new ones," he shares.

But as an able-bodied athlete, Ideson was involved in a variety of sports, and in his new life he began to miss the sense of community and belonging that came with it. A friend had been asking him to try wheelchair curling. Ideson said "no" because he played curling prior to his injury.

A Spinal Cord Injury Ontario peer support volunteer who Ideson says was instrumental in his transition to living with spinal cord injury mentioned wheelchair curling a few times. "I didn't really want to," Ideson explains. "There was a lot of self doubt there. I didn't know if I would have the strength to get the rock down the length of the ice; it's a heavy rock and a long way."

But something obviously changed Ideson's mind about the sport and that something was watching a TV interview with charismatic Olympic skeleton champion Jon Montgomery during the 2010 Olympic Games. Ideson found inspiration in Montgomery's story and decided to give curling a try.

PO: What was it about Montgomery's story that really resonated with you?

Ideson: His path to his sport didn't start until his 20s. It wasn't a sport that he really knew much about and hadn't grown up playing. It was just like, "Okay, this is a cool sport, and I'm going to use my athletic abilities to maybe represent Canada." It was kind of the same for me. Maybe I could find a new sport that I could represent Canada in. I'd been playing wheelchair rugby, and I loved it, but it's a sport dominated by younger people. I was in my 30s when I had my accident, and I wasn't fast enough on the court to compete at a national or international level. When Montgomery spoke of taking up a sport that he could excel at and represent Canada in, I knew I needed to find my sport.

PO: What would you say about wheelchair curling, its challenges, that the casual fan might not understand?

Ideson: There's no sweeping and that definitely adds a challenge. But even prior to that, the delivery of the stone is just an arm's length. You have an arm's length to get the weight correct, get the line correct, and get the rotation. Three feet to get all that done. And it happens really fast, and there's no fixing it after it's gone.

PO: What is it for you personally that has been the greatest challenge in the sport?

Ideson: Adaptability was a big part for me because I live with quadriplegia. I don't have very good hand function and I don't have chest and triceps muscles. I've had to modify. I have a support post on my chair that I use for leverage so I can throw harder and for balance. I also adapted the delivery sticks used for wheelchair curling. When I started curling there wasn't anything commercially available that was lightweight enough for someone

"I know there's resistance after an injury, fear of the unknown. Just find community in whatever it is... art or sport or whatever. Find people who are living the same life."

like me. I made a delivery stick for myself out of carbon fibre, then for my teammates and now for essentially everyone in Canada and I'm selling into the United States and Korea.

PO: You've said that one of the things you love about curling, aside from the competition, is the sense of community and belonging in the sport. Explain.

Ideson: Yeah, there's so much to learn after spinal cord injury, transitioning from living on your feet to not. It's challenging. There's a lot that goes with that. It's good to be around like-minded people who have been living in chairs a lot longer than I have just to learn little things about maneuvering curb cuts and opening doors and getting dressed and other day-to-day activities. With teammates in chairs, there's this mutual understanding of what we go through. The wheelchair curlers that I joined at the Ilderton Curling Club were very welcoming, happy to share what they learned over the years.

PO: You're going to your fourth Paralympic Games. Is there a most memorable moment among them?

Ideson: I feel like it was off the field, my first Paralympic Opening Ceremony, in Russia. That's a feeling I'll never forget. It's hard to describe but while we were snaking our way toward the ceremony, someone breaks out in our national anthem, and we all start

singing O Canada as we're making our way through the tunnels. Then to roll up onto that stage in front of 50,000 people, with our flag on our backs, that's something I'll never forget.

PO: Tell me something that people would be surprised to learn about you.

Ideson: Well, I was a University of Western Ontario cheerleader. I loved it. I never knew anything about cheerleading coming from a small town. I played hockey but I got hurt and wasn't able to compete the way I used to. But when I went to my first Western Mustangs football game I saw these girls flying in the air. I thought, "That's cool." I joined because it was such a physical sport, the guys doing all the stunting and throwing.

PO: You compete on a stage that others aspire to. But not everyone wants to be, or can be, a Paralympic or elite athlete. Think back to your time when curling was grassroots for you and what advice can you give someone about giving it a try?

Ideson: I know there's resistance after an injury, fear of the unknown. But take the leap of faith because it's worth it. There's so much you can learn from people who have been there before. Like I say to everyone whom I've seen as a peer support volunteer: "Just find community in whatever it is... art or sport or whatever. Find people who are living the same life."



Wheelchair Curling

Finding the Perfect Path

By Jeff Tiessen, PLY

The pathway to any particular sport can be predictable for some and unimagined by others. The latter is more the case for three sport leaders who are taking wheelchair curling on a new trajectory not only provincially and nationally, but in venerable curling clubs across Ontario and the country, in communities big and small.

Kyle Paquette had spent the majority of his sporting life in golf. He'd competed and coached at a high level. He'd hoped that his Master's degree research would be on golf, but his supervisor suggested a winter sport – curling. Paquette had never played, but knew the game from avidly watching the Brier and Scotties Canadian Championships on TV. His research brought him to Curling Canada. Within two years he was the mental performance consultant for the wheelchair program and hooked on that side of the sport.

"I noticed immediately that it was a different group of athletes," Paquette remembers. "There is a purity to the sport that I hadn't experienced in working with dozens of other sports. There is something different about parasport that's so aligned with what I'm looking for." Today, Paquette is Curling Canada's National Program Director and Director of Wheelchair Curling.

Mick Lizmore on the other hand, was introduced to parasport at a young age. In high school he helped out in some recreation classes for students with disabilities. In his university days he volunteered with the London Blizzard sledge hockey team. His girlfriend's brother was on the team and her dad ran the London Blizzard sledge hockey tournament. He got to try sledge hockey a couple of times. "I'm a sport junkie, so I'm interested in all versions of any sport," Lizmore professes.

Fast forward to the University of Alberta in Edmonton where Lizmore

is doing his doctoral studies in sports psychology and a bit of coaching with a youth program. Looking for an opportunity in wheelchair curling, he was invited to a wheelchair curling camp and asked for his thoughts. "I woke up in the middle of the night to write down everything I liked about the program and things that it might benefit from. Wheelchair curling was exactly where I wanted to be." Today, Lizmore is the Head Coach of Curling Canada's National Wheelchair Curling program.

Erin Jarvis's story is different still. Jarvis is the Ontario Curling Council's Manager of Programs and Operations, a position she's held for about a year. With plenty of working experience

with other sports, she came to the role being new to curling. "I may have attended a curling event, but my very first experience with any kind of curling was at the Ontario Wheelchair Open," she admits.

Jarvis was working with the late Shauna Petrie, a multi-sport wheelchair athlete including curling, learning from one of the community's most formidable leaders. "Shauna told me that if I wanted to know the sport, come out and help. I spent the entire competition on the ice with the curlers. I learned so much about curling in general, and wheelchair curling specifically that, even after a year, that's one of my fondest memories. For me, it was 'Okay, now I get it.'"





Photo Credit: Ontario Curling Council/Vito Amati

An event five-years-in-the-making – with the idea of securing more opportunities for high-performance wheelchair curlers to train and compete on arena ice – came to fruition in the form of the 2025 GSOC Wheelchair Invitational. The impact of this integrated Grand Slam of Curling event is hard to overstate. “The exposure will have a huge impact on our sport,” predicts Lizmore.

The medal games were staged in front of crowds at London’s Western Fair Sports Centre alongside the GSOC AMJ Masters finals, a rare and welcomed spotlight for wheelchair curling on one of the sport’s biggest stages. For Chrissy Molnar, a bronze medalist, it was a milestone moment. “It was special having a cheering section during the game,” Molnar shares. “I was taking it all in... and hearing O Canada for us was so special!”

That spotlight extended beyond the competition itself. Several seasoned wheelchair curlers joined some of the world’s biggest names in curling – including Team Homan and Team Mouat – for short integration matches that blended able-bodied and wheelchair curling.

“The overall athlete experience was amazing,” says Lizmore, from inclusion in the event’s advertising, to the photo shoots and media day. But the integrated game was as meaningful of an opportunity as anything. It was a moment of acknowledgement that wheelchair curling has arrived.”

Wheelchair curling has arrived indeed, and according to plan, actually. That plan is Curling Canada’s newly launched and highly anticipated national Wheelchair Curling Pathway (WCP), designed to revolutionize athlete development.

With the aim of continuing to grow toward being a leader in parasport, the WCP is all about creating more opportunities for Canadian athletes to reach both personal and national performance goals.

It will source, support, and develop athletes who have the potential to compete on the world stage, but the pathway is also grounded in the belief that a strong, inclusive local community is essential to the sport’s future. By supporting participation at all levels, the plan is to inspire the next generation of wheelchair curling athletes, coaches, and supporters.

“Over the last four or five years we’ve realized that the national program is only as good as the pathway that supports it,” explains Paquette. “A big part of the pathway is the community’s journey, which is really where it all starts. We want to ensure that newcomers to the sport are supported too.”

Lizmore adds that growing participation also means identifying accessible venues, affordable adaptive equipment and sharing best practices with clubs to create integrated leagues so newcomers have a place to play.

“The system we’ve had in place thus far has done a commendable job,

but we need a refresh,” says Paquette. “The sport has evolved and so have the athletes and the community. We’re committed to ensuring that every athlete, whether they’re just getting started or preparing for Paralympic competition, knows that there’s a clear and supported path forward.”

Curling Canada’s WCP aligns neatly with the goals of the Ontario Curling Council (OCC), the provincial sports organization for wheelchair curling. OCC’s Jarvis is intent on introducing more people to the sport and creating more access to it. “Ultimately,” she says, “my goal for the program in Ontario is a pathway where a participant can go from a Try It session to a club in their area that is accessible and has a coach who is comfortable with integrating a wheelchair curler into everyday curling.”

OCC has two member associations – Curling Ontario and the Northern Ontario Curling Association. Under their adaptive umbrellas, there are three curling disciplines: stick, blind, and wheelchair curling, plus a hearing impairment contingent. Stick is a subset of regular curling that players gravitate to when they can no longer slide.

“Most clubs don’t need our help to grow stick curling,” offers Jarvis. “We promote the Ontario Blind Curling Association, but with wheelchair curling we’re actively working with clubs that want to run an event for community members to try the sport.”

Additionally, the OCC runs the Ontario Wheelchair Open, a major competition for wheelchair curling, and supports coaching and provincial programs offered by its two member associations. “But if a club asks us for help, we will do whatever we can to help,” Jarvis assures.

Jarvis acknowledges that one major barrier that wheelchair curling faces, unlike most other sports, is inaccessible venues. “We’re out there talking to clubs and making sure that we know who’s got what with respect to accessibility because we want to connect newcomers to clubs that have accessible options for them.”



With respect to coaching, OCC and its members will soon benefit from Curling Canada's work with researchers and other leaders to refresh a coach consultant pathway for wheelchair curling. "Wheelchair curling's ebb and flow of participation and growth is often a direct reflection of leadership at the time... leaders pouring energy into the sport, or the sport losing leadership," describes Lizmore. "And 'leaders' means players too, moreso in this sport than in any other I've experienced," he adds.

Research from the University of Ottawa endorses the concept of a "community of practice"... bringing together people to support the growth of a sport. "These communities thrive with active, enthusiastic leaders of course," explains Paquette, "but with a community of practice in all cases almost, when those leaders leave, the communities continue supporting the sport."

This concept is not only important for an athlete pursuing a national program, but also for those who just want to participate for the sake of a good time in weeknight leagues or pick-up games with friends. Leaning into the community of practice approach, Curling Canada has begun hosting monthly online sessions for information sharing and community empowerment. "Our curling culture is unique in that clubs can benefit from efforts put in thousands of kilometres away," Paquette enthuses.

Another formidable challenge facing wheelchair curling, not unlike other parasports, is limited funding and budgets. Paquette notes that Curling Canada is trying to find ways to do exponentially more with the same budget that it has had for the last decade. "It's really tricky," he admits. "We're identifying small dominoes that will create chain reactions of big impact."

LeeAnn Cayer

The idea of going from mystery to mastery is very appealing to upstart athlete LeeAnn Cayer, a wheelchair curler in Curling Canada's Pursuit program which supports potential future Paralympians.

An instinctive problem solver, Cayer loves the sport's layers of data, the math and the angles that are inherent to the game. "It's like detective work," she smiles. "And I love the team aspect too, building camaraderie and investigating together whether 'the feel is the real'," she adds colloquially.

Another aspect of the sport that appeals to her is the equipment... minimal and inexpensive. "Nothing compared to the cost of a sport chair for wheelchair tennis or basketball, some of the other sports that I enjoy."

But most of all, Cayer loves to talk strategy... how to approach the rock, the ice, and which chair angle is best for every shot. "I'm sure it's true of all sports, but mastering those little things is what I need to do to be a great curler."

Ironically for Cayer, curling's structured game play – its planning and predictability – presents a big test for her. "I love the challenge, despite always being a spontaneous type, a risk-taking kind of person. But I like the structure. It's really helped me build self-trust and grow confidence in myself. I've always had introspective skills and better than average self-awareness," Cayer continues, "and this sport has deepened that even more."

She admits that she calls on that new confidence at times at her own club where she plays in an integrated league. "I feel very much part of the curling community, yet there are still whispers about wheelchair curlers slowing the game down or not sweeping... some are still stuck in old ways."



LeeAnn with husband Michael Brown

Cayer's only regret when it comes to wheelchair curling is, as she says: "I wish I would've been open to a relationship with the sport when I first discovered it four years ago at a Try It camp at the St. Catharines Golf and Curling Club.

Despite the delay however, wheelchair curling is a patient sport and has held a place for Cayer to fulfill her new aspiration of representing Canada on a world stage.

It's that challenge that makes the news of a first-of-its-kind partnership for Canada's wheelchair curling community even more exciting. Fitzrovia, Canada's largest developer of purpose-built rentals, is sponsoring Curling Canada's WCP. An appreciative Paquette says this about the partnership: "Their commitment to inclusivity, diversity, and excellence... creates an incredible opportunity for us to strengthen connections to the parasport community across Canada."

Wheelchair curling in Canada is rooted in culture and community. With a lens on creating inclusive and accessible opportunities through local clubs, coaching, leagues and events, Curling Canada and the Ontario Curling Council are determined to reduce barriers to the sport because wheelchair curling's perfect path starts on the community rink.



Photo Credit: Ontario Curling Council/Vito Amati



Photo Credit: Ontario Curling Council/Vito Amati



Photo by Katie Mak Photography



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Photos Courtesy of Abilities Ottawa

ENVISIONING A Dream Reality

Abilities Ottawa

By Max Warfield



When Todd Nicholson of Kinburn, Ontario, met Ottawa's Emily Glossop, they discovered their shared passion for creating a better community through sport. Soon after, they became a couple and a dynamic one at that. They married in 2007.

A dream can be a fanciful wish, a delusion or sometimes even a nightmare. Some may envision which celebrity they will become when they're grown-up, or crave an unattainable title, or secretly hold an ideal that they never actually labour towards. This is not in the nature of this couple.

Years ago, the couple toured two premier sport and fitness facilities in the Greater Toronto Area – Scarborough's Variety Village and the Abilities Centre in Whitby, just east of Toronto. They were smitten. They came to appreciate the need for a more inclusive, barrier-free environment in their own community of Ottawa – one that would support people of all ages and abilities on the path toward becoming what they dreamed to be.

Not wishing upon a pipedream, they both knew how to work diligently toward a worthy goal. Nicholson had overcome life-altering injuries from an auto accident in the 1980s to become a world champion para ice hockey player, earning bronze, silver and gold medals across five Paralympic Winter Games. The Canadian Paralympic Committee refers to him as a "Hall of Fame champion on and off the ice."

Glossop worked for almost 20 years as a paediatric Recreation Therapist, supporting children and youth with disabilities to find their passions. She was also a guide for one of Canada's top blind skiers on the National Para-Alpine Ski Team.

As their dream developed, the husband and wife team pivoted on the plan for a bricks and mortar building, realizing that it wasn't necessary to pursue that vision. What they chose to do instead is bring their traveling parasport education program to schools under the banner of their organization, Abilities Ottawa.

"Emily and her team travel with our equipment trailers over a wide radius of about 150 kms – all over the Capital region and the Ottawa Valley," Nicholson shares. "We've gone all the way from Madawaska Valley to Petawawa, to Kemptville, to Cornwall. Our focus is to ensure that there are community programs supporting inclusion and accessibility. We discovered that we can do that without walls."

Abilities Ottawa has received the majority of its funding from the Canadian Tire Jumpstart Program. As Nicholson explains, "It [the Jumpstart

charity] has been instrumental in supporting us and taking our vision on the road. We do what we can do with what we have."

Adds Glossop, "We work with schools. We work with communities. We have two trailers, one filled with our indoor parasport equipment – wheelchairs for wheelchair basketball, sledge hockey sleds on wheels, cross country sit-skis on wheels and other sports equipment. The other trailer is filled with sleds, sticks and protective gear for para ice hockey. And we just entered into a partnership with Tennis Canada as we try to create more wheelchair tennis in the community."

Across various schools and communities, the Para Sport Education program takes over the school gym for the day and runs all of the day's Phys. Ed. classes. "We talk about the inclusive nature of sport," Glossop says. "We offer a variety of different parasports opportunities including wheelchair basketball workshops which students really enjoy. It's an activity that the phys. ed. teachers aren't able to easily do considering equipment needs. We offer sitting volleyball which can be done quite



easily by teachers themselves. A lot of teachers don't realize that it can be easily included in their own volleyball curriculum."

The goal of the program is to create awareness in and around parasport – the importance of physical activity for all, how anyone can play, and that you don't have to have a disability to play parasports, specifically at the recreational level. "We're teaching educators that there are ways to make their programs accessible so that kids with and without a disability have the opportunity to be physically active together," shares Glossop.

A modest but mighty team, the entire program is run by Glossop and a contracted program facilitator, and on occasion with Nicholson and Abilities Ottawa's other athlete ambassadors. The organization is guided by a six-member Board of Directors.

"We are a small outfit," Glossop states. "It is a lot of travel, a lot of hauling equipment around school to school but we love it. We are fortunate to have great relationships and connections to our community sport organizations that support us with equipment for events like the Sled N' Ed Para Ice Hockey Tournament. We

couldn't pull off those large events without these local programs."

"It's a lot of work!" Nicholson interjects. "I was a recreation therapist at the children's treatment centres here in Ottawa," resumes Glossop. "Todd and I focus on ensuring that children with disabilities have the opportunities to play with their peers, their siblings and even their parents."

The Abilities Ottawa team is in schools two to three days a week, which represents bookings at capacity. Typically, people find out about its programming through word-of-mouth. They don't advertise. "The demand is there," Glossop reports. "Our schools, our teachers, are so unbelievably supportive. We just finished hosting Sled N' Ed, a para ice hockey tournament for high school students in collaboration with local Athletic Leadership students. We had two rinks going all day long with six schools participating. Two tournaments a year supporting a total of 12 schools is what we do."

In the spring, the program hosts wheelchair basketball tournaments which has grown from 12 schools to 16 thanks to collaborations with the schools, particularly John McCrae Secondary School and its Grade 12

Athletic Leadership class. Over the last three years, the class's main project has been to work with Abilities Ottawa in hosting the tournaments.

"We hope that the students will go out into the world with new understandings and compassion toward others in their community," reflects Nicholson. "In all of our tournaments we encourage fully inclusive teams. All teams have student-athletes with and without disabilities and a few leadership students. They're taking on the concept of supporting those who have never had a chance to put on a school jersey, never been part of an athletic team, or never been included in an awards banquet."

The work of the Abilities Ottawa team is, as shown, to ensure that there are opportunities for everybody to participate in some sort of physical activity, but it extends beyond that too. "To be included in society in whatever they hope to do," states Glossop. "It is helping people and organizations build relationships and form connections."

"Emily and I found our passion in sports and pushed our focus in that direction, but we realize that sport is not for everybody," Nicholson qualifies. "Part of our presentations emphasizes

"They're taking on the concept of supporting those who have never had a chance to put on a school jersey, never been part of an athletic team, or never been included in an awards banquet."

finding passion in something, then devoting time and energy to it... whether it's reading, writing, music, drama or art. Ideally, we want to ensure that there is an avenue for everybody to find their passion in something."

As if a full slate wasn't enough for the duo, Abilities Ottawa has adopted another focus. Along with partner organizations and community members – inclusive parasport organizations – Abilities Ottawa launched the Ottawa Inclusive & Para Sports Expo several years ago. The Expo brings sport organizations and the community together in one place to find out about programs in the Ottawa area. There are demonstrations. There are opportunities to try different sports and meet staff and volunteers to make important connections.

This past year, a new collaboration was formed with an organization that hosted an adaptive living expo. Joining forces, it's now the Adapt Expo and the Ottawa Inclusive & Para Sports Expo together hosting adaptive equipment vendors, service providers, inclusive organizations and local artists. "In previous years we would see 500 people; this year, with the collaboration, there were thousands," Nicholson enthuses.

The Ottawa Inclusive & Para Sports Expo relies heavily on an "amazing organizing committee,"

as Glossop describes it, a committee made up of individuals from, essentially, Ottawa's sports, rehab and recreation communities. They all share a passion for inclusion, access and awareness to sport and recreation in their community.

"I think the community is looking for ways to improve, be more inclusive," says Nicholson. "When Emily is not at a school, she's attending meetings and working with other organizations here in Ottawa that are looking to expand their footprint by creating accessibility in their facilities so that when people show up at the door they can get in and feel welcome. In some instances, we don't have the answers but can direct an issue to the right person. We try to ensure that whatever is built within the city takes inclusion and accessibility into consideration."

The couple's connections in their community and beyond are plentiful, with Nicholson's sporting community and Glossop's sports, healthcare and school communities, all of which have supported their organization's mission and impact immeasurably.

Glossop explains: "I see it as a triangle. There are three key elements. One is healthcare, another is community, and the other is schools. With our programs, we make sure those in healthcare know what is

available in the community. It's also important to know what's available in the school system because that's where our kids are every single day. So, we need teachers and health-care providers to also be aware of what's available in the community... making sure that everyone is aware of one another."

Despite imagining, at first, a physical building, Nicholson and Glossop view that unfulfilled dream as "maybe for the best." With a singular focus on the community, they've created some great connections and are seeing results from those relationships. "We're seeing kids in school getting introduced to different sports and excelling to higher levels," Nicholson observes. "We support them along the journey of their dream. Some go all the way to a podium, which is amazing, while others who we see every week are active with friends and peers and family. Everyone finding their passion."

The Abilities Ottawa community continues to grow thanks to the passion of its leaders. And with the desire and design of the greater community, many dreams are now being realized in the Ottawa region, including Nicholson and Glossop's.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Max Warfield was born in Ridgefield, Connecticut, now making his home on the southern shores of Lake Ontario.

A correspondent for the *Lockport Union Sun & Journal* and the *Niagara Gazette*, Warfield has also written and published numerous novels.



WindReach Farm

By Layla Guse Salah

In 1985, Paralympic equestrian Sandy Mitchell opened WindReach Farm in Ashburn, Ontario. Born with cerebral palsy, Mitchell recognized the immeasurable impact and value of an accessible natural environment for people with disabilities of all ages. And so, he created a barrier-free environment filled with animals and fresh air to benefit his community's health and well-being.

Mitchell's vision was to empower and inspire, turning the ordinary into the extraordinary. By the end of the 1990s, WindReach had welcomed 16,000 visitors and a short time afterwards, Mitchell was named a Member of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II. Over thirty years later, it's safe to say that his vision continues to be a success.

Today, WindReach offers a wide variety of programs to all age groups and abilities – therapeutic riding and equine assisted learning, summer camps, adult day programming, overnight accommodations, small animal visits to local retirement communities, schools and more, just to name a few.

Ross Ste-Croix is WindReach's Executive Director, bringing to the position his extensive background within the sports world, particularly with Special Olympics Canada. He knew nothing about WindReach before coming on-board. "I grew up in suburban Montreal and didn't know a thing about farming," he shares. His friend pointed out to him that "... they don't want you to feed the cows... they want someone to bring

WHERE THE
ORDINARY IS
Extraordinary



WindReach Founder Sandy Mitchell

leadership in program development and government relations.” Ste-Croix was up for a change and made what he calls his “biggest career leap to this point.”

Therapeutic horseback riding and equine assisted learning is WindReach’s focus, thanks to the passion and leadership of its founder. In the late 1970s, when Mitchell was looking to get involved in horseback riding, he heard “no” a lot. Determined, he thought, “if you don’t want to help me, I’ll figure it out on my own.”

What started as a hobby quickly became deeply meaningful work. He made it his mission to share the farm and provide opportunities for horseback riding to as many people as possible of all abilities – those with physical or developmental disabilities.

“He built his Equestrian Centre so anyone could come and participate in the riding program,” says Ste-Croix. “It’s become a staple of WindReach. Sandy passed away seven years ago, but you can see his picture here everywhere, particularly in the Equestrian Centre, to keep everybody focused on what he wanted. Sandy wanted us to find a solution for anybody who wanted to ride a horse, and anybody who wanted to access the farm.”

Ste-Croix spoke about a recent expansion of the farm’s programming to include Equine Assisted Learning. “Some people are nervous around horses. There are a lot of reasons people don’t get on top of horses, but Equine Assisted Learning allows them to engage with the horse on the ground.”

The benefits of therapeutic riding and Equine Assisted Learning are numerous. Core strength, posture and spinal alignment are some of the obvious benefits of riding. At WindReach everyone is treated equally, on the same level with their group of peers. What was evident to Mitchell, and now Ste-Croix, is that social anxiety decreases around horses.

“We’ll test a horse to make sure that if someone slips off, if somebody has a seizure, if somebody has a difficult day and they let out their emotions, that it won’t spook the horse and cause a safety incident,” Ste-Croix explains. “From an emotional, psychological standpoint... it’s intimidating for some to interact with other people. We all can experience that. The base expectation of an animal is,

‘Don’t hurt me’. That’s a much easier entry point for a lot of individuals who are anxious. We hear from individuals in the program that they’re very anxious in social situations, but they’ll approach an animal, they’ll sit with an animal or be in the presence of animals for as long as they’re allowed. We’ve had individuals who have been nonverbal, but after the riding program started to speak.”

WindReach Farm is now in its 36th year. While fundraising and awareness are always top of mind to keep the farm running, the facility has been embraced by the communities of Ashburn, Whitby, and surrounding areas. Many local businesses have been valued corporate sponsors for many years.

For anyone on the fence about getting involved (farm pun fully intended), Ste-Croix’s message is simple: “Come out to the farm. Someone will show you around and answer your questions. We want to stop hearing ‘we didn’t know you were here,’ because it means we’re missing people who we could be helping.”

**For more information,
visit windreachfarm.org.**





ATHLETE CHAMPION

CAN Fund Founder Jane Roos

By Jeff Tiessen, PLY

For the majority of the best athletic talent in Canada, the ability to afford the resources they need to reach their full potential is one of the biggest hurdles that they face. The need, in fact, is paramount. This year alone, 905 athletes from communities across Canada applied to CAN Fund for direct financial support.

Since 2003, CAN Fund – Canadian Athletes Now Fund – has been helping make athletic dreams achievable. “We believe in giving an opportunity to everyone who has the courage and fortitude to dream big,” says the charity’s founder Jane Roos. “When our athletes wear the maple leaf, they unite a country and inspire us all.”

CAN Fund was created to provide financial support to athletes directly to offset the costs of new equipment, coaching, proper nutrition, extra physio and travel to training camps and competitions. And with no government funding, CAN Fund is building a community for its athlete recipients through not only corporate and individual donations, but personal connections between them.

"Every athlete relying on the generosity of CAN Fund donors has a courageous story of resilience and determination," shares Roos. "We encourage the athletes to tell their unique stories and use our platform to do that. I, myself, have a unique story in that the worst day of my life is probably the reason why CAN Fund exists."

Roos was a promising track athlete before a devastating car accident took that and the life of her best friend away. She was just 19 at the time. Despite such tragedy, the crash stands as the impetus for CAN Fund. With her best friend and her athletic and modelling careers gone, the Grade 13 student was soon to "hit rock bottom," as Roos describes it. That's when she began to look for something bigger to come from her loss.



"I was in a Toronto hospital for a second back surgery when I started raising money," she explains. "I got the nurses involved and we started contacting companies basically saying: 'we have no idea what we're raising money for, but we'll do something great with it.'"

Roos's first fundraiser, at Toronto's Bohemian Café, raised \$40,000 and forced her toward a cause. "I thought, 'why don't I help some athletes who want to compete for Canada?'"

And so she did, in the beginning by way of athletes coming by her Toronto apartment with receipts that she'd reimburse. This was the 1990s and since becoming a bonafide organization twenty-plus years ago, CAN Fund has directly supported 80 percent of Canada's athletes who have competed at Olympic or Paralympic Games, raising over \$40 million to date.

"Athletes don't want handouts," Roos qualifies, "but they need someone to be there to champion them and what we do differently than most in the sports system is fund the athletes like they're our clients."

That mindset has not gone unnoticed. At the 2006 Olympic Games, Roos was honoured with the Live Olympic Award, an international honour given to only 19 people. For the past seven years, she's been recognized by Canadian Women & Sport as one of the most Influential Women in Sport and she is a Canadian Sports Awards recipient of the Leadership in Sports award.

Paralympian Katie Combaluzier can attest to that influence. "CAN Fund made me feel part of something bigger than myself," shares the Para Alpine skier from Toronto. "It meant



Jane Roos receiving the Athlete Support Award, 2025 Canadian Sport Awards

feeling the impact of generosity in a system where support can be hard to find. It reminded me that there are people willing to invest in athletes and their dreams."

Oakville's Greg Westlake, a four-time Paralympian and former captain of Canada's Para Ice Hockey Team, agrees. "CAN Fund has been a consistent supporter. Chasing sponsorships can be exhausting and difficult to be successful. It can be discouraging. CAN Fund understands that every athlete deserves help. It was incredibly helpful to have them in my corner. I wish that more people knew how integral that organizations like CAN Fund are for amateur sport in Canada to be successful."

And, as Wallacetown, Ontario's James Dunn readies himself for the 2026 Winter Paralympic Games Para Ice Hockey competition, he shares that "CAN Fund's support gives me the opportunity to chase my dreams of gold in Italy... to do everything I can to be my best version."



specific female athlete and join a national network of women which now totals over 5,000. There are events, giveaways and classes that are all part of helping female athletes as part of a community. "The cool thing with

CAN Fund too," says Roos, "is that with every donation you know which athlete you helped and likely get a personal call to say, 'Thank you'."

CAN Fund is not all about the podium, which Roos feels is respected by the athletes. "We want to help athletes feel

empowered. We teach athletes how to build their brands so that they can work on their business, and not just in it." And what's been a really big thing for Roos is witnessing athletes wanting to help each other.

Two-time Paralympic gold medal thrower Greg Stewart raised \$15,000 for CAN Fund through his network. Paralympic kayaker Brianna Hennessy raised money for her fellow

CAN Fund athletes in the spirit of the organization's "no one gets left behind" mantra. When Trinity Lowthian returned home from the Paralympics she needed surgery related to her disability. She put a poster on her hospital door about supporting female athletes through CAN Fund's #150Women initiative. "I had people calling me saying they are at a hospital in Ottawa and there's a poster on a door about my charity and wanting to know more," Roos remembers. "That's what really lights me up. Getting people to care and show up for other people.



We all have incredible opportunities to help each other, right?... whether it's musicians or academics, or whatever the talent. For me it's the athletes."

Roos is also a successful artist, the owner of the Jane Roos Gallery in downtown Toronto, selling her paintings globally. She has created numerous commissioned paintings for corporate Canada and many charities. Every year, Roos selects 10 charities to which she donates a painting to support their fundraising efforts.

While she doesn't cross over to CAN Fund too often, she does present a stylized Maple Leaf painting to each CAN Fund athlete who becomes an Olympian or Paralympian. "Donors buy them," she says, "to essentially say: 'This part of the journey has been achieved. Congratulations. You are going to compete for Canada at the Paralympic or Olympic Games.'" Roos has painted about 900 of them and counting, an ongoing reminder of the remarkable achievements of CAN Fund as well.

To learn more or to donate, visit www.MyCANFund.ca. @CANFund. @150Women. @JaneRoosGallery.



Roos elaborates by confirming that the organization always puts the athletes first but wants donors to feel the impact too. Her and her team do that with connections to the CAN Fund community. "What's the benefit for a donor? There are 86,000 charities in this country. Why should one care about these athletes that we see only every two years at the Games? That's the biggest issue. That's the problem."

As one way to increase women donors, CAN Fund launched CAN Fund #150Women in 2017. For donations of \$150 or more, members support a

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Photo courtesy of Canadian Adaptive Climbing Society

"Climbing is a community." That's what Terry Hoddinott and his wife Patti lead with when asked to talk about their history with para-climbing. Terry is blind and has been climbing for seven years. He is currently ranked fifth in the world.

What Terry talks about first is not his many international competitions or his hopes to qualify for the 2028 Paralympics. It's the welcoming community of the sport itself that resonates with him the most.

Terry and Patti work as a team, both in life and in the climbing gym. Blind climbers rely on callers – a sighted person to map the climber's route and call out the various moves and holds as the climber ascends the wall – and for Terry, that's his wife Patti.

"The caller's job is just as hard as the climber's," Terry says. "When I'm climbing the wall we both have a head-set on; she's looking at the climb as I climb, and tells me 'right hand out' or 'left foot out'... or whatever the next move will be. You have to be totally confident in your caller, and your caller has to be very precise on where he or she is directing you."

Being a caller is not an easy job. "One of the things I do before Terry gets on the wall is read the route," Patti explains. "In a climbing gym, you typically have two routes on the same rope, and you have to avoid the ones you're not supposed to be climbing."

Each climb is designed to be just one colour. In a competition, climbers only get the one route. In climbing gyms, it's quite a challenge to stay off the one you're not supposed to be on. "I look at the kinds of holds," shares Patti. "I read it in terms of what the

Hitting THE Wall

Adaptive Climbing Welcomes All Abilities

By Layla Guse Salah

hands are going to do first and then try to think about the body position required for the feet as well. There's a lot going on between what the hands are doing, what the feet are doing, the body position, the type and position of the holds. I try to get as much data as I can before he gets on the wall and that can save him energy and us some time."

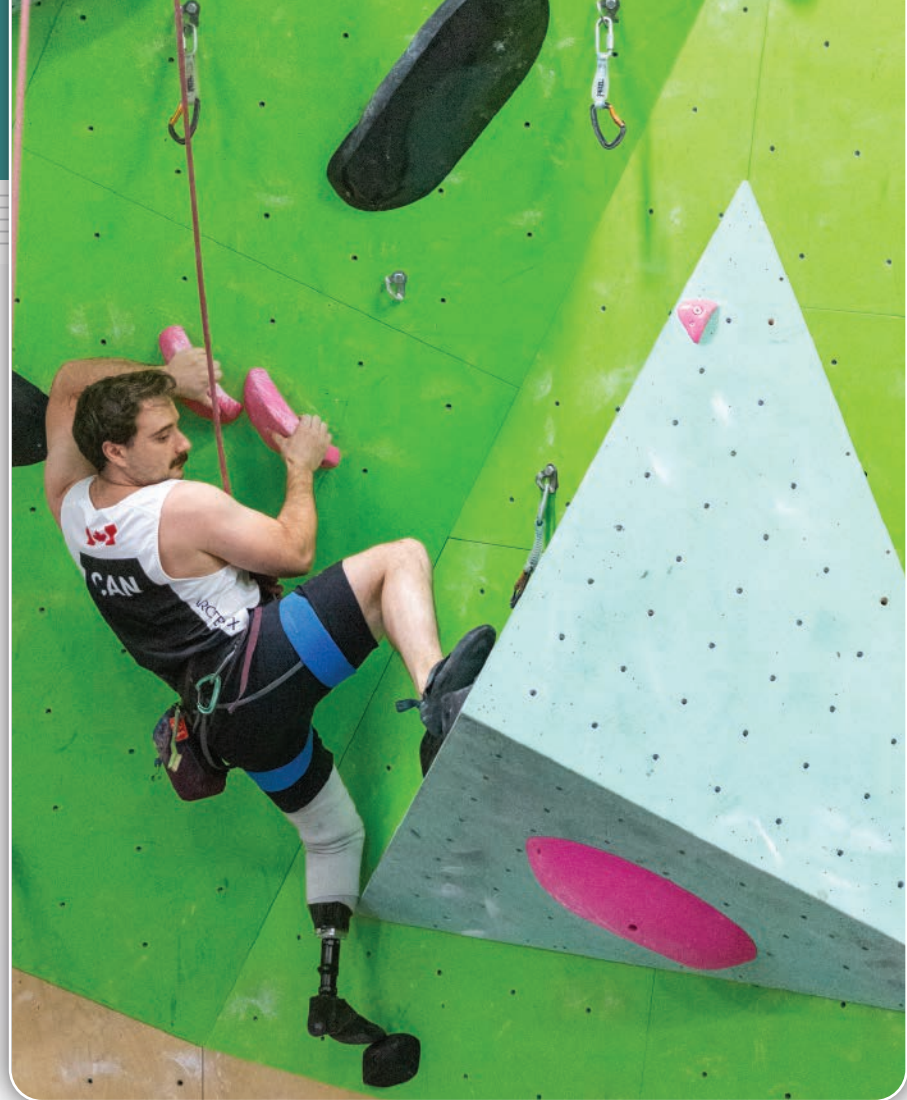
Patti's "beta" is very different from Terry's climb; she's five feet tall, whereas he's five-foot-ten. She can't examine the wall as though she's climbing it – she must beta from Terry's perspective, which is an extra layer of challenge.

When Terry is climbing, communicating with Patti through his headset allows him to "block out the world" and concentrate on what she's saying and on the feel of what he's holding. "It's all about touch and listening," he tells as a way of explaining his experience to sighted climbers.

For her own part, Patti has participated in "climb like a paraclimber" events which allow her to experience climbing with a variety of limitations – using one hand, one leg and so on. But the hardest of all, she says, is the blindfolded climbing. "It's so much trust, and it's so scary. It really feels like you're going to fall at any time and you're just waiting for instructions."

Aspire Climbing in Whitby, Ontario, offers adaptive climbing with a simple process of meeting people's needs: "Our team of staff and volunteers work individually with each climber to provide support on or off the wall," shares Sarah Kostadinov, Aspire Climbing's owner and marketing manager. "Whether it be their first visit, or their tenth, our goal is to understand their needs and comfort level and then modify the experience as necessary."

Aspire uses a variety of adaptive systems, including harnesses, ropes, and pulleys, to support a wide range of levels and abilities. "We take the time



to understand their individual needs and help them build confidence on the wall," assures Kostadinov.

Each session begins with an introduction, and a one-on-one conversation to determine how instructors can best support climbers with a disability. The systems and approach are modified as participants grow stronger and more confident.

While there is no certification required to offer paraclimbing, Kostadinov explains what gives Aspire Climbing a strong foundation for their adaptive climbing programming: "Our staff and instructors are certified by the Canadian Adaptive Climbing Society (CACS) to work with participants with disabilities and adaptive climbing systems. Our training from CACS, combined with practical experience, sets our team up for success. We have a dedicated Adaptive Climbing Manager as well as climbing instructors who support this program on a regular basis."

Rock wall climbing can be intimidating to some with disabilities. It's easy to assume that many might lack the coordination, strength and body control that is required to climb up a wall. But if there's one thing above all else when learning about climbing, it's the camaraderie and community one finds in the gym and among fellow climbers.

"Fellow climbers want you to succeed, and you can feel that when you walk into the gym," Terry says with a smile. "It's just a very nice place to go."

Perhaps being intimidated by climbing isn't how one should look at it at all. Maybe the point is to look at the challenge and think: Maybe I can do this. Maybe I want to do this.

To learn more about adaptive climbing programs in Ontario, visit canadianadaptiveclimbing.com/ontario. Visit Aspire Climbing at aspireclimbing.com/whitby. Terry and Patti climb at Rise Above Adaptive Climbing in London: riseaboveadaptiveclimbing.org/.



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Volleyball for Life



HASSAN Mirzahosseini

By Joe Millage

In sports, some pathways extend beyond athletic ability, determination and the mental strength needed under extreme duress. As we saw with the 2025 Toronto Blue Jays, athletic energy can inspire a community and create amazing opportunities for others. That is the stuff that legends are made of and that is what Hassan Mirzahosseini delivers.

Hassan's journey is a testament to the power of determination and resilience. Before the age of 19 he was a rising star in gymnastics and football [soccer]. But when diagnosed with cancer, resulting in the loss of his left leg above the knee, the landscape changed.

Rehab took years of hard work and Hassan was constantly investigating what was possible and where opportunities could be found to express his passion for sport.

"My goal was not just to participate but to push my abilities to the maximum of disabled sports," he says.

In his home country of Iran, he made history by establishing the nation's first national para-climbing team. He joined Iran's first disabled ski team, and started playing sitting volleyball.

His turning point came in 2019 when, while visiting family in Canada, he crossed paths with the legacy of Terry Fox, an encounter with a fellow cancer survivor and athlete that left an indelible mark on Hassan. Terry Fox's unwavering spirit fueled Hassan's aspirations. Now living in Richmond Hill, Ontario, he goes out of his way to pass through a park that has a statue of Fox. "I pass by it almost every day, and it gives me motivation every time I see it."

Hassan hopes his story resonates with others, the younger set especially. With a vision to leave an enduring legacy for future generations, he proudly mentions that he now works in the construction industry (thanks to training from LIUNA). He is literally building a future for others.

A proud ambassador with ParaSport® Ontario, Hassan endeavours to demonstrate to others that physical limitations can be eclipsed by determination and a staunch commitment to inspire others to reach for their own dreams.



OneAbility Games

Redefining Accessible Sport

A unique sporting event will premiere at the Richmond Olympic Oval in British Columbia in 2026 that promises to impact the adaptive sporting community in Ontario as well.

The OneAbility Games is a response to a long-standing gap in Canada's sport system: a fragmented and often inaccessible pathway for athletes with disabilities. Despite national and provincial commitments to equity and inclusion, accessibility too often falls short in sport planning – leaving many individuals, especially youth, without the opportunity to participate, compete, or connect through sport.



The OneAbility Games offers a meaningful solution – an inclusive, multi-sport, multi-disability event that provides space for both participation and performance. With integrated programming, students of all abilities will come together to compete, learn and grow, to break barriers and build community in the process.

Inspired by the powerful model of Défi sportif AlterGo that has been successfully running in Quebec since 1984, the OneAbility Games is more than a moment – it's a movement.

"We are working to redefine what accessible sport looks like in British Columbia and beyond, fostering a future where everyone has the opportunity to thrive through sport," says Andrea Carey, the event's Director of Games.

Carey emphasizes that the OneAbility Games team believes that sport is for everyone, and the right

tools can make all the difference. Those tools include the PLAY Resource Hub, a go-to space for adapted sport resources designed for Physical Education classes, lunch or after-school programs, community recreation, or even home-based training.

"In schools," starts Carey, "students with disabilities frequently miss out on playing alongside their peers, contributing to social isolation and missed developmental opportunities. At the same time, Canada is facing a youth mental and physical health crisis."

The PLAY Resource Hub will support teachers, parents, sport program coordinators, physiotherapists and other dedicated allies with practical, beginner-friendly resources to increase participation in adapted sports for kids and teenagers of all abilities.

Each activity plan featured in the Hub includes an overview of the sport, required equipment, activities designed for targeted skill development, teaching cues for movement skills, and flexible adaptations to enable participants of all abilities to learn, play, and thrive.

The May event will offer two streams for participation. The PLAY stream, focused on school-age participants (grades K-12), is designed to provide supportive programming to develop the skills and confidence to play soccer, wheelchair basketball, athletics, lacrosse, and SuperHEROS Hockey. The ACHIEVE stream, in collaboration with provincial and national sport organizations, will see high-performance competitions in blind hockey, and the Goalball Nationals and Wheelchair Basketball Nationals which will welcome para-athletes and teams from Ontario.

To learn more about the OneAbility Games and to access its PLAY Resource Hub, visit <https://www.oneabilitygames.com>.



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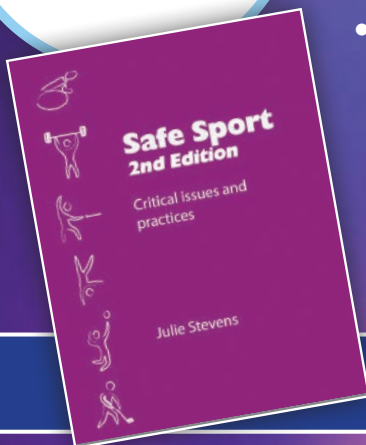


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Photo courtesy Wheelchair Basketball Canada

Markham, Ontario's Tracey Ferguson was a member of seven Paralympic teams, a key member of Canada's gold medal-winning women's wheelchair basketball teams in 1992, 1996 and 2000. She knows what it takes to reach the podium.

Always a competitor, Tracey grew up playing street hockey and competing in everything she did, including Easter egg hunts. A wheelchair user since the age of nine, resulting from spinal surgery, she discovered wheelchair basketball at Variety Village in Scarborough even though she was there looking for a place to swim.

Always up for a new challenge, Tracey qualified for Canada's 2008 Paralympic Team as a wheelchair track athlete too.

A four-time recipient of the Ontario Wheelchair Sports Association's Female Athlete of the Year award, Tracey has also been honoured with a YMCA Young Women of Distinction award and the Terry Fox Humanitarian Award.

Photo courtesy Canadian Paralympic Committee

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