

# ParaSport<sup>®</sup>

MAGAZINE

SUMMER 2024



**PARASPORT**  
ONTARIO

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## John Azlen

### *Leading the Rose City Riot*

Three in One  
*with Paratriathlon*

Countdown *to the*  
Paralympic Games

Township  
of King  
*Courtship with  
Community*





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Photo courtesy of Canadian Paralympic Committee

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# WELCOME

## Parasport on the World Stage

*With the Paralympics in Paris on the horizon, we await the opportunity to watch the world's best competing at the highest level in parasport. With unprecedented coverage on both Canadian and American media networks, we will get to witness our Canadian para-athletes strive for the podium and also learn more about them in interviews showcasing their years of training and dedication to become a Paralympian.*

As they should, these Canadian para-athletes will be showcased for their success at reaching the highest level, which also serves as a platform to inspire new generations. Through them, younger athletes will not only see what is possible for themselves if they want to, but they'll also see all the different parasports that exist and how almost any sport can be adapted to include everyone aligned with the correct mindset.



It is not always about every person with a disability participating in parasports to become a Paralympian. It is about participation and being part of a community to improve your quality of life through the benefits of sport. It is about educating and showcasing parasport opportunities that exist for all. It is about increasing the profile of all parasports to become more mainstream and to exist alongside able-bodied sports in communities and clubs across Ontario.

With more people tuning in to watch, and para-athletes being showcased for their incredible talents and abilities, inevitably this will leave a lasting impact for all viewers to translate a more inclusive mindset back to their day-to-day lives, work and play. This is always proven in the months leading up to the games with more schools and groups looking to showcase parasports for their students and staff, and members, and utilizing ParaSport Ontario's Try-It program to experience parasports as a vehicle for inclusive thinking and understanding.

As the light shines on all of the Canadian para-athletes in Paris we will be cheering them on, celebrating their achievements and supporting the next generation of para-athletes with opportunities for participation through our Parasport Resource Hub & Support Centre and Try-It Sessions. ParaSport Ontario® will also be supporting regions and municipalities across the province in building new parasport programming to support people with disabilities who need and want to participate for years to come.

James Murphy  
Executive Director, ParaSport® Ontario

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# ParaSport® MAGAZINE

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- ✦ Ontario Parasport Collective
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## HEALTH IS AT THE HEART OF INCLUSIVE TRAINING CENTRE

**The popular Brock Functional Inclusive Training (Bfit) Centre, which offers exercise programs aimed at improving the health and quality of life of older adults and those experiencing a wide range of health situations, officially opened its new, state-of-the-art facility this spring.**

Located at the Walker Sports and Abilities Centre at Canada Games Park near Brock University in St. Catharines, Bfit's 13,000-square-foot facility includes modern equipment for supervised community exercise programs that benefit older adults, cancer patients and survivors, cardiac patients and individuals living with multiple sclerosis, amputations, Parkinson's disease and spinal cord injury.

Bfit offers a welcoming, accessible and safe space for physical activity with peers and guidance from professional kinesiologists and students studying Kinesiology, Medical Sciences, Recreational Therapy and Gerontology. "A lot of our members enjoy coming to the facility because they feel like they're part of a community," said Deborah O'Leary, Bfit Centre Director and Acting Associate Vice-President, Research, Brock University. "They make friends with people who have experienced similar life situations... and are inspired by members who make the time to prioritize their fitness and health."

Members receive support through individualized activity plans and supervision that ensures they are using the equipment and performing exercises correctly. Students have the opportunity to work one-on-one with seniors and people living with injury or disease, which prepares them for future careers in health care.

Jim Davis discovered Bfit more than a decade ago when he was looking for a gym that could provide the assistance he needed as a person with cerebral palsy. "Having the students here has been excellent," he said. "My wife and I come here five days a week and stay here for three hours a day, and we get all the help we could possibly need."

In addition to helping people in Niagara live healthy and active lives and providing students with meaningful experiential learning opportunities, Bfit also contributes to multi-disciplinary research that is advancing the understanding of human health and aging.

The Centre's SeniorFit program is supported in part by the Government of Ontario's Seniors Community Grant. "Brock University is showing leadership when it comes to ensuring everyone has the opportunity to participate," said Daisy Wai, Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister for Seniors and Accessibility. "Bfit and Brock University's SeniorFit classes are so important for seniors. The Centre will help more seniors be able to stay fit, healthy and socially connected."

---

**For more information on Bfit's programs and initiatives, visit the Centre's website at [brocku.ca/bfit](http://brocku.ca/bfit).**

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Photo courtesy of Brock Functional Inclusive Training Centre



Photo courtesy of Brock Functional Inclusive Training Centre







## Phys. Ed. Resource for Teachers

A registered provincial charity, it is the vision of Ophea (Ontario Physical and Health Education Association) to ensure that children and youth value and enjoy the benefits of healthy, active living. Since 1921, Ophea has worked in partnership with school boards, public health, government, non-government organizations and companies to develop groundbreaking programs and services.

With funding support provided by the Ontario Parasport Collective and the Ontario Trillium Foundation for the development and delivery of a resource focused on students with a disability, Ophea is offering its *Disability-Centred Movement: Supporting Inclusive Physical Education* as a free online resource.

It was created to provide support to educators in designing a physical education program for students with disabilities, with suggested instructional approaches for physical activity providers to engage students with disabilities and physical skill development.

**Learn more at [ophea.net](https://ophea.net).**

## ..... IT'S ..... **CLASSIFIED**

Classification for parasport competition can be complicated. For Wheelchair Rugby for example, players are awarded points based on the amount of movement they have available to them. In swimming, athletes are grouped into “sport classes”, combining various disabilities such as limb loss, cerebral palsy, spinal cord injury and other disabilities across classes. There are 14 classes in total. Volleyball classification, in general, uses one or more of the following criteria: level of amputation, muscle strength, joint range of motion, and limb length differential. It’s different for most parasports, but ParaSport Ontario can help you sort it out.

**Visit [parasportontario.ca/classification](https://parasportontario.ca/classification) to learn more.**





Photo: Jeff McIntosh/Canadian Press

# GOLD FOR CANADA

After losing to the United States in three straight World Championship finals, as well as the last two Paralympic Games finals, Canada halted the U.S. dominance in para ice hockey with a 2-1 victory on home ice in Calgary to take the 2024 World Championship title in May.

Canada claimed its first para hockey world title since 2017, and first-ever on home ice. “It’s been seven years for many of us since we’ve won a world championship and to be quite honest, I’ve been bearing the weight of that,” said Canadian captain Tyler McGregor. “It is a relief.”

The World Para Hockey Championship was held in Canada for the first time in 2023 in Moose Jaw, Sask., where the U.S. defeated Canada 6-1 for the title. The first world para hockey championship was held in 2008. Canada’s gold in Calgary is its fourth World tournament gold-medal performance.

## Fun Photo Call for All

ParaSport® Ontario is putting out the call for images of you in action in any parasport or adapted recreation activity to help promote the fun and variety of parasports to others.

Before submitting, be sure you are a ParaSport Ontario member (it’s FREE), and you have the rights to use the image. Photo releases are available if needed. Send a parental release for subjects under 18. Amateur and professional images are welcome.

**To upload images, log in to your Member account at [parasportontario.ca](https://parasportontario.ca) and click the Photo Call link. Add as many photos as you like.**



Photo by Barb Elliott

Yasin Rehmanji, getting air at Beaver Valley.



# Aspire to Climb

The popularity of adaptive climbing is ascending quickly for enthusiasts with disabilities. At Aspire Climbing in Whitby, Ont., an adaptive climbing program allows for individuals with any type of disability to climb its walls. Specialized equipment and strategies make climbing accessible to everyone! A proud partner of the Canadian Adaptive Climbing Society, Aspire Climbing is certified to offer this program ([aspireclimbing.com](http://aspireclimbing.com)).

Rise Above Adaptive Climbing, in London, Ont., promotes itself as a casual indoor climbing meetup for all ages and abilities, and the only accessible climbing group founded and led by the disability community. First-timers welcome! Volunteers are always available to show you the ropes ([riseaboveadaptiveclimbing.org](http://riseaboveadaptiveclimbing.org)).



Photo: Rise Above Adaptive Climbing

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# CHAMPIONING Sitting Volleyball in Ontario

By Joe Millage

*There's no doubt that volleyball is a massive international sport. Para Volley (sitting volleyball) is big too, a Paralympic sport that demonstrates amazing athletic ability, focused team play and includes the world's tallest athlete Morteza Mehrzadselakjani who at eight-feet-one-inch is the second tallest man in the world.*

Canada is strong in Para Volley, with the women's team currently seeded as number one in the world going into the 2024 Paris Paralympic Games. The men's team is strengthening, ranked 13th internationally, and moving up after a strong performance in China this year.

At the provincial level, Ontario is represented by seven players on the national teams. More importantly, thanks to the continuing direction and support from the Ontario Volleyball Association (OVA) and program guidance from ParaSport® Ontario (PO), Brock Niagara Penguins and Variety Village, there are grassroots programs providing recreational opportunities where everyone is welcome to try the sport. In the coming year there will be more programs launching across the province.





Through OVA and PO support, and the use of a world-class facility at Variety Village, more than 1,000 players participated in games and practice sessions last year, welcoming everyone from beginners to high-performance athletes. EveryBODY is welcome.

One of those players is para-athlete Nicole Ferguson. Nicole started into Para Volley as a youngster through a program at Grandview Empowered Kids in Durham. She found a sport that she could enjoy with her sisters and friends (all abilities are welcome at sit-


ting volleyball sessions). Now a university student, PO is working with Nicole to encourage Toronto Metropolitan University to enlist an extramural team to participate in its developmental events. "Nicole gets as much joy out of sport as any athlete I have ever worked with," says coach Joe Millage.

Nasif Chowdhury has always loved sport and was a strong player on his high school volleyball team. Nasif, a lower limb prosthesis-wearer except when he's on the sitting volleyball court, was introduced to the parasport version of volleyball at a program

at Holland Bloorview Kids Rehab Hospital. Nasif adapted quickly to the sitting game and his hard work and talent have earned him a roster spot on the Canadian Team, and he's now an ambassador for the game too.

This year, with support from the Province of Ontario's Ministry for Seniors and Accessibility and its Enabling Change program, ParaSport Ontario is preparing a team of ambassadors to introduce and grow the game further, all across the province. For more information, contact Joe Millage at [info@parasportontario.ca](mailto:info@parasportontario.ca).

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# PLAY

## SITTING VOLLEYBALL

Ontario Volleyball offers programming and opportunities across the province for athletes of all abilities to play sitting volleyball.

Visit [ontariovolleyball.org/sitting-volleyball](http://ontariovolleyball.org/sitting-volleyball).



### Volleyball for Life



# John Azlen

LEADING THE  
Rose City  
Riot

By Jeff Tiessen, PLY



Photos by Reginald Tiessen



*There was a time when John Azlen felt forced to lean into a fist fight with antagonizing teens who were picking on him when embarrassingly explaining his disability wasn't enough. Those unhappy years are but a distant memory for him now. Much has changed about him since his tumultuous time as a teenager. Taking his fight from the streets to the courts, Azlen has accepted a much bigger, and more constructive, challenge. He's leading the Riot – the Rose City Riot, Windsor's wheelchair basketball team.*

Actually, Azlen is leading the Rose City Riot Para-Sports Club as its co-founder and President. He's a player on the club's wheelchair basketball team, its only team at present, which he coaches too. Serving Windsor and Essex County, the club is volunteer-run and founded by players from the now defunct LaSalle Lightning Wheelchair Basketball Team. Its basketball program is open to players of all ages and levels of experience, with or without a disability. And like most adaptive sports clubs in Ontario, the Rose City Riot has its own uniquely personal story of germination and growth.

The City of Windsor owns a rich history of "disabled sports" clubs as they

were once known, dating back four decades to the legendary Windsor Bulldogs Disabled Sports Club with its multi-sport program and partnership with the University of Windsor. But today, without John Azlen, likely there would be none. Yet, it was never his aspiration to bring wheelchair basketball back to the city. In fact, for most of his life he had zero interest in the sport. Then came a momentous life change for Azlen which led him to wheelchair basketball, at first as merely a means to solidify his new persona and provide him purpose.

Azlen is a bilateral above-the-knee amputee, and has been for all but six months of his life. As a youth, he had dreams of serving in the Canadian Armed Forces. That wasn't possible because of physical pre-requisites that Azlen could not achieve.

Now 41 years old, Azlen wore prosthetic legs exclusively until he was 29 when he gave them up for good. "I was wearing prostheses in college," he explains. "I was suffering a lot from pain from being a prostheses-wearer for 16 hours a day for all those years. "It just started to wear on my body, and mentally I couldn't tolerate it anymore. Trying to push pain down is mentally exhausting and I was a very irritable person."

But it was even more than that that pushed Azlen to the decision to abandon his life-long prosthetic legs in favour of a full-time wheelchair. He says that the constant pain ultimately brought on a relapse in the mental health struggles that he endured in high school. "I walked with a limp but

most kids didn't know that it was because I was walking on prosthetic legs. I always hid that," Azlen shares. "So, my peers saw that limp as swagger, as me trying to be 'gangster'. People tried to pick fights with me all of the time, and I figured that the only way to stop that was to lean right into it and embrace the gangster image."

So, adorning baggy clothes and a cap skewed sideways, Azlen adopted a new look and a new crowd, and the fights stopped. Mission accomplished on the fight scene, but Azlen found himself with a new predicament – he fell into a crowd that he really didn't fit with very well.

"In hindsight," he admits, "that probably wasn't the best choice. If I was more confident with my disability and myself and who I was, then I probably wouldn't have made that decision. I definitely had body image issues in high school."

Back to the momentous life change. "I decided that it was just time," Azlen remembers. "I knew throughout my whole life that there would be a day when I would have to make that decision. It was just a matter of when. I was prepared to make that decision, and in the moment, I was confident in it." He walked out of St. Clair College, and his program, at Christmas Break in 2012, and he wheeled into a new program in the new year to start a new semester and a new life. "I was confident with the decision in December but I was very self-conscious and anxious in January."

Azlen has never regretted his choice to be a wheelchair user.

---

*"When I transitioned to using my wheelchair full-time, there was no hiding anymore and I could actually be myself; be who I am now."*

---

He says that the decision freed up his body and his mind. "I wasn't in pain anymore. I was able to concentrate on school and friends. I was more mobile. One hundred percent, I became a very different person. My prostheses were a crutch. I would wear them to make me feel whole and hide my disability. I never wore shorts. When I transitioned to using my wheelchair full-time, there was no hiding anymore and I could actually be myself; be who I am now."

His new mode of mobility brought even more. It brought Azlen to wheelchair basketball. "I was working in a factory and unhappy. So, I started college at 27 so I could be more competitive in the workforce. But I was still trying to find something. I thought that I'd try wheelchair basketball, something I never thought about before, and all of a sudden I'm meeting a bunch of like-minded individuals who are accepting me in their community."

He says the sport gave him direction and more purpose. "I started playing when I was transitioning from my prostheses to a wheelchair and I was still struggling. I was still very irritable. While things were getting better for me and I was feeling more comfortable, confident, and happier with less pain, I still didn't really know what I was doing with my life."

Then wheelchair basketball ended. The LaSalle Lightning basketball club, led by John Boyko – a man passionate about wheelchair basketball – folded in 2016. But as happenstance would have it, Azlen ran into former teammate Rob Bahry at a Windsor shopping mall and the two decided there and then that the time was right to bring back wheelchair basketball to Windsor.

"There was nothing for us, nothing," says Azlen. "So, as co-founders, we re-started the program in 2018 as the Rose City Riot Para-Sports Club which gave me the opportunity to learn more about the sport and coach-



ing – while also getting an opportunity to play and have fun." Two years later the team was ready to compete, but needed a coach to be eligible to play in tournaments by rule, and it had no takers. Azlen, as club President, felt obligated to assume the role.

There were some professional development modules available through the National Coaching Certification Program, and the Coaches Association of Ontario had just introduced a pilot peer mentorship program. Azlen enrolled.

As good fortune would have it, Azlen drew renowned wheelchair basketball player and coach Mike Frogley as his mentor. Frogley is highly regarded to be among the greatest wheelchair basketball minds in the world as a leader, mentor and innovator. He competed on the Men's Wheelchair

Basketball Team at the 1992 Paralympic Games and would later move behind the Canadian bench, serving as the head coach of the Men's National Team from 1996-2004. He guided Team Canada to Paralympic supremacy for the first time in program history with back-to-back gold medals in 2000 and 2004.

Azlen had never heard of him. "I jumped on Google and what I read about him made me think that I had landed a pretty good mentor," he confesses. "I was super excited."

Frogley – known to most as "Frog" – gave Azlen access to a tremendous amount of resources that otherwise he wouldn't have found when it came to specific wheelchair basketball skills. In his time spent working at the University of Chicago, where Frog developed a wheelchair basketball program, he recorded an entire video series on drills





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which the university was willing to share with Azlen. "The DVDs were probably 20 years old, but still so relevant and helpful. I broke down the different drills to formulate my own coaching plan."

Azlen admits that his inexperience was still in play, most evident in his ambition and attempt to share all of his new knowledge with his players. Frog's suggestion was "don't take on too much; break things down," which was great advice for Azlen who was not only overwhelming his players but was setting the bar of expectation for himself unreasonably high. "I thought 'let's not spend eight months working on one thing.' Apparently though, that is the right way to do it."

"I have really come to enjoy it [coaching]. Seeing the growth of my teammates means a lot to me," he smiles. "Since I started coaching, I've made friends with coaches across the province and their recognition has meant a great deal to me too, along with improving my knowledge." That recognition is well-deserved as Azlen is doing something that is rare, and something that is lacking across the country – that is, coaches with disabilities.

That element of lived-experience extends beyond the benefits behind the bench to the program overall. As Azlen explains: "Coaching basketball gave me something to focus my time and energy on, but not just for myself as an athlete, but for other people to have the opportunity too. I believe that if I didn't start playing wheelchair basketball, there probably wouldn't be a program here. That's not to be arrogant. That's just because I don't think anyone else from the club would've taken on the responsibility."

Looking to the future of the Rose City Riot Para Sport Club there are big plans and big barriers. With only a limited number of sports wheelchairs

available for members to use, adaptive equipment is a priority for the club.

"Ideally we'd like to be the parasport organization that represents Windsor and Essex County," Azlen tells. "We don't want to be exclusive to wheelchair basketball. If we have people who are interested in other types of parasports, we want to be the source for them, and provide them with the resources they need. Obviously, there are barriers to that. We need more athletes to be able to do that. And instructors and coaches. Currently, we rely on our members to recruit when they see or know someone with a disability. We also work with a couple of service providers in the area, mobility vendors and physical therapists, and hospital therapy departments. And we want more kids coming out to participate. It's great for confidence growth... this I know first-hand."

And then there's the money part. The Riot is not a registered charity or non-profit organization, which precludes it from funding grants. "We're a small club, right now, and everything we do is entirely grassroots," Azlen says. "We rely on our membership fees because it's really hard to raise money for anything in the Windsor area. Since 2018 we've been going year to year but we're still here," he emphasizes.

ParaSport® Ontario (PO) has recognized Azlen's efforts and needs by donating, in partnership with Sunrise Medical, a new sports wheelchair to Azlen through PO's Play to Podium Fund. "There are not a lot of John Azlens, who put in the effort to lead, coach and even play while still having to work through barriers that include adaptive equipment costs," admires James Murphy, PO's Executive Director. "He cares so passionately about what he is doing."

Azlen had been using a rental basketball wheelchair that wasn't properly fitted for him. "My new RGK chair from

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*"There are not a lot of John Azlens, who put in the effort to lead, coach and even play while still having to work through barriers that include adaptive equipment costs."*

**– James Murphy**  
**ParaSport Ontario**  
**Executive Director**

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ParaSport Ontario is fantastic," appreciates Azlen. "I'm incredibly happy with it. I noticed a tremendous change in my reaction time when the chair moves. My game is greatly improved. I'm faster and more agile than I ever could've been in the rental."

Outside of his basketball world, Azlen works in the eyewear business, selling prescription glasses as his day job. By night, he teaches accessible yoga, putting his yoga teacher training to work virtually with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

He loves the outdoors. With Jenn, his partner of 10 years and now fiancée, camping, kayaking and hiking are recreational highlights for them. Although wheeling in the woods may not be appealing to all, Azlen offers, "I don't expect Mother Nature to be wheelchair accessible. It's not the most convenient of activities, but I adapt with ground mats around our tent and in sandy areas, and I go into the woods as far as I can. It's about being disconnected from technology for a while."

But all the while, Azlen's thoughts are never far from presiding over his dreams for new connections for the Rose City Riot, and the growth and development of its members too, present and future.



# EVERYONE SHOULD HAVE THE CHANCE TO PLAY!



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Natalia Deebo  
(on left) and  
Sophie English,  
Kenora  
Torpedoes

*ParaSport® Ontario was proud to award two organizations with new sledge hockey sleds through its Play to Podium Fund to continue to evolve their programs.*

The City of Kenora is located near the Manitoba border, about a 20-hour drive from Toronto. A small town with a population of 15,000, there are limited opportunities for adaptive activities. Yet, because of the dedication of some of its community members, Kenora now has a sledge hockey team that provides everybody with the opportunity to play.

The Kenora Torpedoes were founded seven years ago by two families who were making the 400-kilometre-round-trip drive to Winnipeg so their daughters, who have cerebral palsy, could play an adaptive sport. They decided that it was time to make their own team in Kenora. It took three years to launch the team, and often they were the only two families on the ice. Undeterred, the team expanded and is now mandated under the governance of Lake of the Woods Minor Hockey Association. It welcomed 12 registrants this past year, players of all abilities aged 8-18 years old.

As the program continued to grow, the team needed sleds for new players and for current ones too with most of their sleds made for smaller players. Hockey dad Chad English, one of the founding members, serves as head coach and stresses the importance of proper equipment to the sport of sledge hockey for its evolution. He noted that the sleds "not only help improve the players' skills and take their game to the next level, but improve

# Impacting Communities On and Off the Ice

By Daniel Vieira  
Community & Events Manager, ParaSport Ontario





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their self-esteem on the ice too. This translates to more confidence off the ice in their everyday lives.”

Not only will the new sledges improve the players skills and give them confidence, added English, but the new equipment will also teach responsibility and accountability. “Players will learn how to take care of the sledges, and how to adjust it to properly fit their needs.”

Sledge player Natalia Deebo shared that “the sleds are very much a motivating factor for people with a disability because with sledge you feel like you fit in.”

The City of Kenora has been very supportive of the team and leans on it to learn how to be more inclusive of people of all abilities. The Kenora Torpedoes are more than just a sledge hockey team, now becoming a pillar for inclusion in their community. It starts with English who preaches a coaching philosophy of “respect yourself, respect others and have fun”, key components to inclusive programming. And his players are appreciated on the same level as their able-bodied hockey peers, with hopes that they too will continue to grow as leaders for inclusion in their community.

As the Torpedoes look to the future, they plan to continue to grow their organization by bringing the new sledges to rinks in Indigenous communities in their area and offer

workshops to give more people the opportunity to try the sport. ParaSport Ontario is proud to support the Kenora Torpedoes through its Play to Podium Fund and congratulates the team on its commitment to participation for all, and its community impact.

Community Living Renfrew County South (CLRCS) is another recent well-deserved Play to Podium Fund recipient and the beneficiary of new sledges for their weekly sledge hockey program. Celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, CLRCS supports adults with developmental disabilities through independent living support, community respite and community participation programs.

The Icepickers, CLRCS’s sledge hockey team, also celebrated a milestone year in 2024 with its 20th anniversary. Started by Dave Kenopic in 1994, with the first four sledges built by Glenn McFarlane, the makeshift equipment served a small budget – seats from plastic chairs were used as buckets and used skate blades were acquired from the Salvation Army. The sledges were shared among anyone who wanted to try them out, often sharing ice time alongside typical skaters.

CLRCS’s group of weekly players are led by their enthusiastic coordinator Nicole Riopelle who reports on the program’s progress over the years from playing on half-ice to three-quarters ice to now using the whole rink. The program is open to people of all abilities, and open for anyone to come out and try, but it is geared toward adults with developmental disabilities. The sessions are cen-

tred around inclusivity and having fun while improving player skills on the ice.

The organization needed new sleds to replace their aging equipment. Although the program is currently in its off-season, Tina MacLaren, CLRCS’s Manager of Supports and Services, said the arrival of the new sledge hockey equipment from ParaSport Ontario “was like Christmas and they are so grateful. We’ll use the new sleds to keep growing sledge hockey in the community to support healthy lifestyles and promote inclusion.”

The organization shares its love of sledge hockey at events with partners that include Wounded Warriors, 4H Sports Clubs and the Frewfest Family Day Winter Carnival.

The County of Renfrew supports the program by helping it grow in the community through Try-It sessions and by storing the sleds at its rinks. Reciprocally, the CLRCS sledge hockey program has had a major impact on the community of Renfrew itself. The town constructed an accessible ice pad for sledge hockey in response to advocacy by the team, which for the County, could lead to hosting sledge hockey tournaments. The new sledge hockey equipment donated through ParaSport Ontario’s Play to Podium Fund will support the team’s continued growth and community advocacy.





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## ONTARIO BLIND SPORTS ASSOCIATION

The Ontario Blind Sports Association (OBSA) promotes and sanctions events and activities designed to assist the development of sports programs for blind/visually impaired athletes in Ontario.

### Programs and Activities

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- Regionals Open Goalball Tournament
- Provincial/Eastern Canadian Goalball Championship
- Equipment Loaning Program
- OBSA Sports Days
- OBSA Outreach Programs

# *Countdown to the*





# Paris Paralympic Games



Photos and graphics courtesy of Canadian Paralympic Committee

*The 2024 Paralympic Games will take place August 28 to September 8 in Paris, France, with Canada expecting to send a team of approximately 140 athletes.*

Although a number of teams had qualified as this publication went to press – men's and women's wheelchair basketball, men's wheelchair rugby, women's goalball and women's sitting volleyball – prior to being officially named to the Canadian Paralympic Team, all nominations are subject to approval by the Canadian Paralympic Committee. That roster will be announced closer to the start of the Games.

That makes the athletes on the swim team, who competed at the Olympic and Paralympic Swimming Trials in Toronto in May, the first to be nominated to the Paris 2024 Canadian Paralympic Team. The 20-member Para Swim Team includes seven from Ontario: Katie Cosgriffe (Burlington), Alec Elliot (Kitchener), Mary Jibb (Bracebridge), Tess Routliffe (Caledon), Abi Tripp (Kingston), Emma Grace Van Dyk (Port Colborne) and Aly Van Wyck Smart (Toronto).

After missing the Tokyo 2020 Games due to injury, Tess Routliffe is set to make her return to Paralympic action. She is a silver medallist from the Rio Paralympic Games in 2016. "It's pretty amazing for me to be going back to the Paralympic Games," said Routliffe. "I'm looking forward to Paris after missing Tokyo; it was a tough road to come back from my back injury. I can't wait. I was never hungrier than to qualify for Paris."

*Josh Vander Vies*



*“Paris is going to be a marvel of Canadian pride, disability pride, and sport pride, showcasing the best we have to offer...”*

*– Josh Vander Vies, co-chef de mission,  
2024 Canadian Paralympic Team*

Alec Elliot, Aly Van Wyck Smart and Abi Tripp are all returning members from the Tokyo 2020 squad. Katie Cosgriffe, Emma Grace Van Dyk and Mary Jibb are among eight swimmers who will be making their Paralympic debuts.

“This is a team with an incredible amount of experienced, successful Paralympians who will be joined by a new generation of talented swimmers representing Canada with pride this

coming summer in Paris,” said Wayne Lomas, Swimming Canada’s Associate Director of High Performance and the Para Swimming National Coach.

Said Josh Vander Vies, co-chef de mission of the 2024 Canadian Paralympic Team: “We can’t wait to welcome all the athletes to the team as they are nominated, and the hype is only going to build through the summer. Paris is going to be a marvel of Canadian pride, disability pride, and sport pride,

showcasing the best we have to offer... I encourage all Canadians to throw their support behind this team.”

Championing the stories and successes of high-performance athletes with disabilities, the Canadian Paralympic Committee inspires Canadians to embrace inclusivity and actively engage in sports.

**For more on the 2024 Team,  
visit [Paralympic.ca](https://Paralympic.ca).**

## Paralympic Pit Stop

*As a long-standing partner of the International Paralympic Committee, Ottobock is once again providing technical services before and during the Paralympic Games so athletes need not worry about their device’s performance in competition.*



As an Official Supplier to the Paralympic Games, the worldwide prosthetic and mobility devices manufacturer sends its own international team of technicians. Ottobock sets up Technical Repair Service Centers close to the Athletes’ Village and in select training facilities

and venues. The team also has a fully-equipped mobile Technical Repair Service Center.

The Service Centers are often buzzing with activity, and have been compared with motorsport pit lanes. But unlike pit stop mechanics, Ottobock’s team of technicians carries out repair and maintenance work for thousands of top athletes who use custom equipment to compete. Fulfilling this task calls for specialist knowledge and the ability to work under high pressure. Just like the pit stops in Formula One, technical support is provided as a united effort in each Center.

Experienced O&P professionals, wheelchair specialists and welders ensure that equipment is professionally repaired and maintained – regardless of





As part of the lead-up to the start of the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games, the Canadian Paralympic Committee (CPC) has launched a new newsletter for fans and supporters of the Canadian Paralympic Team. CAN Crew is CPC's first fan-focused newsletter, creating a new community to celebrate Canadian Paralympic athletes and Para sport across the country. CAN Crew is the place to learn about all the latest news on the Canadian Paralympic Team. Discover incredible stories about the athletes and the people behind-the-scenes who are advancing Para sport in Canada. And, receive exclusive content and opportunities to connect with the team and CPC's partners.

**Sign-up at [CANCrewCommunity.ca](https://CANCrewCommunity.ca).**



Photos courtesy of Ottobock

the athlete's nationality or the brand of their prosthesis, orthosis, or wheelchair. Before the events even begin, the Technical Repair Service Centers work flat-out to ensure that the athletes' sports equipment have not been compromised during transport.

service team is indispensable at the Paralympic Games. Athletes access the services for free.

The partnership with the Paralympics began in Seoul in 1988. Ottobock has been at every Summer and Winter Paralympic Games

Many athletes at the Paralympic Games use equipment and devices that are exposed to extreme stress and strain during their competitions. Wheelchairs in particular are often damaged during intense contact sports. This can potentially put athletes out of the game. And this is why a technical

ever since, paving the way for optimal performances for all athletes.

At the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio, a 100-strong team made up of members from 29 countries provided technical services that totalled over 10,400 hours of work, and 2,408 repairs for 1,667 different athletes from 134 countries. For Paris, Ottobock is sending a 164-member team from 41 nations with 31 languages spoken among them.

And as part of its commitment to the Paralympic Games, Ottobock trains O&P professionals for sports-related services, improving the availability of equipment to athletes in developing countries and raising public awareness of Paralympic sports.

**More at [paralympics.ottobock.com](https://paralympics.ottobock.com).**

# ParaSport Ontario Alumni



*After sustaining an incomplete spinal cord injury, Kevin Rempel's pathway to Paralympic sport began with the Niagara Thunderblades sledge hockey team in 2008. Then came Team Ontario in 2009 and the Canadian Para Hockey Team at the 2010 Vancouver Paralympics. He retired five years later with a gold medal from the 2013 World Para Hockey Championships, a silver medal at the Worlds in 2015, and a Paralympic bronze medal from the 2014 Games in Sochi, Russia.*

## KEVIN REMPEL Paralympian 2014

**PO:** *Your greatest accomplishment in sport?*

**Rempel:** My proudest accomplishment in sport is what I did after sport, creating the Sledge Hockey Experience team-building program to grow the game and to bridge the gap between people with disabilities and the able-bodied population. I've created over 40 instructional sledge hockey videos, on YouTube and for free, which the entire world is learning from. That's by far my proudest accomplishment in Paralympic sport – not what I did on the ice but what I've been able to accomplish off the ice.

**PO:** *Why is that so important to you? To grow the game?*

**Rempel:** I want to give back to the game that gave me so much. Sledge hockey completely changed and transformed my life after acquiring my disability. The game gave me the opportunity to travel the world, meet our community, paid me as an athlete and improved my physical and mental health. So many people helped me along my journey in sport. To now be able to help guide other people who



are new to the sport, new to having a disability, is important to me. Sledge hockey is the medium to do that. I love entrepreneurship and so I love that sledge hockey gives me an opportunity to build a business and life after sport.

**PO:** *Your start in parasport... did you start at the recreational level or go directly to the competitive side of it?*

**Rempel:** Well, I started recreationally but within a couple of weeks I felt that I was ready for competition. I knew I wanted to play recreationally to start, but within a month I discovered that Team Canada existed. And as soon as I found out about that, it immediately became competitive. I was a competitive athlete prior to my injury. But actually, the reason I got involved was wheelchair basketball at Brock University. And then I found out about sledge hockey.

**PO:** *Are you still active or involved in any sport or recreation?*

**Rempel:** The only recreational activity is hiking, and I do that consistently. I go for walks and I go to the gym.

**PO:** *Sport and recreation. How has it impacted your disability?*

**Rempel:** Significantly. My walking is significantly better because I played sledge hockey. And I know that to be true, because when COVID took away rec and sport, the years of my life since COVID have been the most physically demanding because I stopped getting on the ice in the sled. Despite how active I can be in the gym or on a hike, nothing gives me a workout like sledge hockey does. When you're in a sled it's a constant core workout. Plus, when I'm in the



gym and on the trail, it taxes my legs and despite me being able to walk, it creates a lot of pain in my legs and my lower back. So, sledge hockey gives me the ability to exercise for an extended period of time at the highest level without causing back pain or leg pain. In fact, it always increases my strength and decreases my pain. It's a sitting sport yes, but it's pumping the blood because with a spinal cord injury, from the nerve damage, nothing works properly. So, it sounds crazy, but playing sledge hockey makes my legs work better even when I'm not using them.

**PO:** *Similar question on the mental and social health front. How has sport and recreation impacted you mentally and socially?*

**Rempel:** Sport brings you together with a community of like-minded individuals or people who are going through similar physical or mental challenges. And as a result, you don't feel alone. It's not just for you, but it's for your family members too. It creates connection. It provides you with solutions from other people who have gone through what you're going through and they're sitting right beside you. It gave me a purpose to improve my nutrition, sleep and exercise. I had a goal to strive for.

**PO:** *What skills or expertise do you think, in general, can high-performance Paralympic athletes share with newcomers?*

**Rempel:** Of course, I think about what you could share on the field of play. The things that I want to share, beyond the sport performance, are business opportunities and understanding what it looks like to build a brand, to build a reputation, and how to compete in sport with a business mind. How can you share your story or your message or connect with the right people to help further a philanthropic endeavor that you want to pursue? I know that not everybody wants to be a keynote speaker [kevin rempel.com]. I know athletes, for example, who want to support youth. Well, how can you build relationships while you are competing to connect with the right people? Of course, the mental health component to transitioning from sport is important... challenges when it comes to things like identity, and habits and routines and goals and priorities in life. When transitioning into life after sport, some experience sadness, depression or a sense of loss. Often, the fastest way to help yourself feel fulfilled again is to go out and serve other people.



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# JOANNE BERDAN

Paralympian

1984 • 1988

1992 • 1996

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**PO:** *Greatest accomplishment in sport, on or off of the field? What would you hold in highest regard?*

**Berdan:** My gold medals, in three events in Barcelona. It doesn't get much better than that. The atmosphere in Barcelona too. My second would be being the flagbearer for the 1990 World Games in Holland, especially with my Dutch background. And from the standpoint of the advancement of sport, being the first female athlete with a disability to be nominated for the Velma Springstead Award which is for Canada's female amateur athlete of the year.

**PO:** *Are you active in any sport or recreation now?*

**Berdan:** Some wheelchair curling, but not really. I have physical issues related to aging and disability. Basically, I came home from the Atlanta Paralympics in 1996, pivoted my focus to my career and didn't know sports afterwards. No time. Then having a child, even less time. So, it's only now that I'm doing some sports again.

*Track & field athlete Joanne Berdan (née Bouw) won 10 Paralympic medals over the span of four Paralympic Games. She's an inductee in the Canadian Paralympic Committee Hall of Fame and the Canadian Disability Hall of Fame. In 1992, at the Barcelona Summer Games, she won gold in all three of her field events, completing her triple with world records in the shot put and discus events. As one of the world's most recognized athletes with a disability, Berdan was the first to be a finalist for Canadian Female Athlete of the Year honours. She ended her sports career in 1996 to begin a career in pharmacy.*



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**PO:** *Where did you begin? Was there a person, a place, or an experience that got you involved in parasport?*

**Berdan:** I have no idea. I had zero support as a kid with CP [cerebral palsy] growing up. My parents got a phone call. How they got my parents' number, I have no idea. It was about adaptive skiing. I met people there who suggested I try swimming. As a kid, I hated my swimming lessons but there were no adaptive sports. The lifeguards didn't have much knowledge about disability. But that's how I started; it was through skiing and swimming. So, you think of life's certain moments, going to Track 3 skiing, then swimming and then track and field. It all just morphed into this opportunity of mind-blowing proportions. It's an important story because those kids who get pigeon-holed in a sport may never find their sport.

**PO:** *How was your disability impacted by your participation in sports and recreation?*

**Berdan:** My parents put me in house league baseball. Put a glove on my left hand. I can't throw a ball with my CP. I couldn't catch. With no adaptive sports, whatever my friends did, I did it too. I didn't take Phys. Ed. in high school. Didn't have any adaptive sports in public school. It was, dribble a ball with two hands, but nobody saw how strong my left side was. Whereas parasport showed how strong my left side was, and how my right side had capabilities because we would adapt things. Because of this, I have zero team experience. On my baseball team, I was a benchwarmer. I still struggle to this day with being on a team and understanding team dynamics, and not letting my wheelchair curling teammates down.

**PO:** *Do you remember if, or how, parasport impacted you from a mental health standpoint?*

**Berdan:** I was isolated in a small community where I knew nobody else with a disability. So, to meet other like-people, it was very freeing for me to really be me. In parasport I wasn't trying to hide my disability. I wasn't trying to keep up with my able-bodied peers. In school, to find my niche as that kid with a disability I focused on academics. So, I was a school nerd. I couldn't do sports. I had a good core group of friends. But I never truly shared my disability story with them.

Only about five years ago, I went through some therapy around accepting my CP. I always had to pretend I could keep up with my disability. In my profession as a pharmacist, and as a mom with no support for women with disabilities at that time, I was always having to overachieve to prove a point. And then my body broke down. So, mentally while I was an athlete, I felt great. But then, I reverted back to that academic overachiever trying to prove a point that I can do everything. I never really addressed it until recently. Mental health was never addressed. I had to seek that out.

Regarding the impact of sport on our disability, physicians aren't used to high-performance athletes who have disabilities. They don't know how to treat us. They don't know the dark part that I deal with. I'm more blessed than other athletes in the sense that I have my medical background and can advocate for myself. But I'm still frustrated with trying to find my care. Was shotput and discus a good sport for somebody with a fused ankle? And javelin? I don't know. So, you know, maybe some conversations to inform decision-making now that can have an effect on your long-term health... like, here are some tools for your toolkit and your future that you need to think about. I had no physiotherapy



during my sport. There was no advice on what we were doing to our bodies with disabilities.

**PO:** *What was available to you to help with that transition following your retirement from sport?*

**Berdan:** I did get well recognized. I'm in the Paralympic Hall of Fame. I was probably recognized more than others who had similar accomplishments to me. I was one of the more fortunate ones who had a career after the Paralympics. Those who are completely enveloped in that athlete identity and see themselves holistically that way, seem to have trouble finding an identity in work or in family. They're just stuck. That's what I've heard from fellow athletes who say there just wasn't anything there for them after sport.

Athletes with a disability can be a great resource for one another in many aspects of life. Without parasport I would not have had the confidence to participate in my career the way I did, and end up being on boards of directors, and doing governance work. Support from ParaSport Ontario changed my life.





Rouzain Hakim



Starla Hilliard Barnes



Andrea Dalzell



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# Three's a Charm





# JOIN THE CLUB

## Paratriathlon Ontario

By Jeff Tiessen, PLY

*If you're a fan of biking, swimming and running, and love the idea of combining all three into one sport, there's a new club in Ontario just for you.*

*The newly-minted Paratriathlon Ontario, a club under the umbrella of Triathlon Ontario, is empowering para-athletes across the province through inclusive teamwork and training, in-person and with online platforms. The club also offers aspiring para-triathletes with personalized coaching, support in sourcing equipment, and connections with local training facilities.*

Are you thinking “Ironman or Iron-woman?” Think again. “That’s one of the biggest myths around triathlon,” says Jenn Flemke, who works with the club’s founder Sasha Beck. “People right away assume that triathlon means competing for 10 straight hours and incredible amounts of training,” shares Flemke, who is working to shift that dialogue and educate the disability community to the fact that there are many different ways to participate. As Beck explains, there is a variety of distances for each discipline [bike, swim and run] and in some events you can just swim and bike, for example. “It’s about educating athletes with disabilities that they can do this if they try,” Beck emphasizes.

Granted, participating in paratriathlon is not without its challenges and that’s why Flemke and Beck established Paratriathlon Ontario. The partners are passionate about breaking down barriers to the sport through educating race directors and community event organizers for starters, but athletes too through self-advocacy and allyship.

“Some of the difficulty lies in the fact that we have three sports to

accommodate,” explains Beck, “and we’re not in a closed environment like a swim meet. We’re outside, in lakes and on terrains like country roads or gravel paths or wooded trails, and on courses with hills and differing ability levels for non-disabled participants, which present very unique challenges for integration in this sport.”

Add to that, the diversity in paratriathlon athletes with respect to varying disabilities and equipment needs like running blades possibly for amputees, handcycles for wheelchair users or tandem bikes for those with vision loss, for example.

Says Flemke, “when it comes to barriers to this sport, equipment is priority number one for us. There’s no club, if there’s no equipment.” Ideally, Paratriathlon Ontario would love to own its own equipment to transport to events, and that’s one of its goals, but in the meantime Beck and Flemke are sourcing equipment on loan or trade for their coaching services wherever they can.

“We hear from athletes who might want to participate, but the equipment they need is too expensive,” says Beck. “But we’ve been lucky so far. We

received tandem bikes from the CNIB to use in our program. That said, one visually impaired athlete who would love to participate has no means to transport a tandem bike to events. But we’re working on solutions to equipment problems so that our athletes don’t have to.”

The duo is doing so by covering as much of the province as possible. Flemke lives in Ottawa, Beck in Kitchener, serving as eastern and western hubs. Paratriathlon Ontario is a product of Flemke and Beck’s past parasport experiences and passion for it. Beck was a guide for paratriathlon athletes and the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games in Brazil. “I came back to Ontario and realized that we have nothing in Ontario for triathlon para-athletes,” she remembers. “I thought, ‘we need to have this’ and so I stayed really connected with the national coach and kept saying ‘I will come back; we will figure out a way to grow the sport.’”

Flemke is equally as ambitious and passionate about growing the sport and championing the message that “athletes with disabilities can do it.” Her connection to adaptive sport

dates back more than three decades when she was the head coach at a “disabled riding program”, today better known as therapeutic riding.

Later in life, after an ankle injury, her physiotherapist cautioned against running and promoted cycling and swimming instead, and soon after, triathlons ensued. She has been a volunteer para-swimming coach, and only about a year ago at a Triathlon Ontario coaches workshop is where she first heard about paratriathlon. She did a Parasport mentorship with the Coaches Association of Ontario, and quickly applied her coaching skills to paratriathlon, and now holds the position of Certified National Technical Classifier for Triathlon Canada.

The growth of paratriathlon in Ontario is very much linked to education. To that end, Flemke and Beck promote a package produced by Triathlon Canada for race directors to serve as a guide to meet challenges – perceived or real – to inclusion of paratriathlon athletes at events. Simultaneously, they are educating athletes. “We’re trying to facilitate athlete skill development when it comes to being their own advocate when they’re showing up to races,” says Beck. “Things they need to know and do, particularly when it comes to transition zones and the course, and their safety.”

The goal of their new club is to eventually see para-athletes, at least at the grassroots level, being able to just go and do a local community event free of barriers or reservations from race organizers. With that of course, race directors would be able to invite everybody to these community events. “They would be knowledgeable about differences between able-bodied and para participants,”



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“It need not be about elite high-performance. We’re just trying to get people into the sport. Paratriathlon can be accessible.”

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Flemke hopes, “so those existing barriers are not barriers anymore, and they’d have solutions or strategies to challenges like getting in and out of the water, off the beach and into transition zones and into a handcycle. Solutions like friends or trained volunteers to help. Solutions like buoyant shoes for those lacking core strength, so they can participate.”

Another goal for Flemke and Beck is developing their online coaching packages and facility programs to a point of success in Ontario that catches the interest of other provinces so paratriathlon grows Canada-wide. It’s hoped that more awareness across the country will help with recruitment of new athletes in all provinces.

“Finding the equipment that we need is difficult and so is finding the athletes,” Beck asserts.

“We want to encourage everybody in the disability community to participate in sports,” Flemke inserts. “We’ve seen the mental health benefits of it. And yet, a big part of this population doesn’t even know about parasports, let alone paratriathlon. It need not be about elite high-performance. We’re just trying to get people into the sport. Paratriathlon can be accessible. There are a lot of different disciplines within it, and the flexibility for what a para-athlete can participate in. And it’s fun and can be a sport to participate in for life.”

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**For more information, contact Sasha Beck at [sashaboulton1@gmail.com](mailto:sashaboulton1@gmail.com) (289-242-0306) or Jenn Flemke at [flemkejenn@gmail.com](mailto:flemkejenn@gmail.com) (613-203-0525).**

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## 2024 PROGRAMS

### Paratriathlon Training Days

DATES: June 22, July 27, August 24 (10 a.m. - 2 p.m.)

LOCATION: Cherry Beach, Toronto

### Paratriathlon Development Camp

(Triathlon Canada)

DATE: June 27-30

LOCATION: Montreal

### Paratriathlon OPEN Race (Triathlon Canada)

DATE: June 30

DISTANCE: Sprint

LOCATION: Montreal

### Paratriathlon

(200-300 metre swim, 6-9 km bike, 1.5 km run)

DATE: August 4 (10:30 a.m.)

LOCATION: Milton, ON

### CNIB/Paratriathlon Ontario "I Can Tri & Du" Program

(ages 10-29, with visual impairment)

DATES: June-August

LOCATION: In person in Ottawa, online across the province.



## ONLINE COACHING PACKAGES

*In-person coaching fees are determined by location and requirements.*

### 1 Entry into Paratriathlon (\$80/month)

For athletes new to the sport, this program introduces and develops technical skills in swimming, biking, running, and transition, including assistance with setting up a daily training environment and procuring equipment.

### 2 Developing in Paratriathlon (\$120/month)

For athletes looking to get zone-based (power/heart rate) training to further develop technical skills and training intensity. This program includes custom periodization with strength and conditioning, nutrition, mental training, and recovery modalities.

### 3 Rising Star Paratriathlon (\$160/month)

For athletes looking for high-performance training. Building off the Developing in Paratriathlon package, this program offers detailed goal-setting for training and racing.

# King Holds Court *with Community*



By Allan McCarthy

***A small township nestled just north of Toronto and west of Newmarket is doing big things to make its recreation programs and camps accessible and inclusive to individuals of all abilities to better support the community's needs.***

With a population of just over 28,000, the Township of King is not a large municipality, which comes with advantages and disadvantages. There are budget restraints and sometimes fewer participants in recreation classes and programs than is ideal. But King's Community Services department benefits from meaningful engagement opportunities with the community. In fact, it utilizes that strength to bolster its inclusion efforts.

"We look for feedback," states Jason Ballantyne, the township's Communications Officer. "We work with our connections with community groups to identify those who need accessible programs. We ask them what they want because, frankly, we're not the experts in this space. We want to give everybody in the Township, whether it's a child or an adult, the opportunity to do the same things that everybody else does."

Ballantyne adds that, that approach extends to new programming ideas too, by proactively seeking out feedback from specific segments of the community. "If we're going to offer a new program, we're going to find out what the community thinks about it first," he shares. "A smaller population allows us to get real-time feedback for our learning. We see the emails from parents of our participants who, because we're smaller, might feel more comfortable reaching out to us."

Dori Wilner is the Township of King's Lead Hand for Aquatics and Inclusion Services. She's overseeing the municipality's new recreation centre and its first indoor pool, scheduled to open later this year. Wilner speaks to the challenges with supply and demand for the Township, particularly with its summer camp inclusion programs which she oversees as well. "We have so many families wanting to register their kids with disabilities but because we offer one-on-one support for these campers, having enough staff to keep up with those requests is difficult," Wilner explains.

Truly inclusive, Wilner's camps are not specialized, meaning that the Township does not offer individual adaptive camp programming. "We embrace everyone together and find that works really well," she emphasizes. "If a camper isn't able to participate in a general activity, we always have options, like going on a walk or going to our sensory room if needed. Everyone contributes to the camp community. We encourage everyone to do all the activities, but no one sits and watches."

Wilner also talks about lessons learned on the job for her and her camp staff. "In the classroom you learn about the general idea of different



exceptionalities and what one may experience, but when you actually get into the workplace and work one-on-one you realize that what you've learned doesn't apply to everyone," she says. "Everyone is so unique and so different; what may work with one individual may not work for another, so being able to pivot and adapt and learn while you're working is really important."

Some of that learning comes from partnerships with community leaders too. The Township of King received a grant several years ago from the Ontario Sport and Recreation Community Fund. With that support 16 sledge hockey sleds and 16 sport wheelchairs for wheelchair basketball were purchased. "With all of this equipment I really wanted to give back to the community and have everyone try these different sports because they're so unique and so fun," Wilner offers. "We invited ParaSport® Ontario to join us at a couple of events as experts to lead the sessions and share expertise with people who wanted to try these sports."

Ballantyne says that consultation extends to regular programming too. "Maybe we've tried everything we can think of with a participant who needs adaptive services and we don't know what else to do. We look for help from their families on what works best for them. We're very open to those conversations because they are the experts and we want to work together to give families the best recreation experience in our programs. Again, being a small municipality, we can have those conversations."

"When we think about our inclusion strategy it's quite simple: we don't want anybody left behind."

The Township also leans on its Accessibility Committee for direction, specifically with its communications to the community regarding accessibility and inclusivity. "We want people to see that we're walking the talk," Ballantyne says. "When we think about our inclusion strategy it's quite simple: we don't want anybody left behind." Ballantyne adds that the Township's Council is very supportive as well. "In my time here, I've never heard Council, or any Councillor, ask 'Do we really need to spend this money on this project?' at the budget table. That's just not the mindset."

Both Wilner and Ballantyne agree that inclusion can be complicated at times with so many things to consider and things that they might not know. "Our ability to get feedback by talking to the people who are in the programs and services to make sure that we're meeting their needs takes time," sums Ballantyne. "Actually seeing the impact that these programs can have for participants with disabilities puts a smile on my face... they should have the opportunity to just do what everybody else does, right?"



# Nasif Chowdhury

## Leads By Example

By Daniel Vieira, Community & Events Manager, ParaSport Ontario

*Nasif Chowdhury is a men's national team sitting volleyball player and a member of the U23 national wheelchair basketball team. The multi-sport athlete is a prosthetic user, born with a limb difference in one leg.*

Nasif grew up playing able-bodied sports. He only got involved in parasports a few years ago. He was encouraged by multiple people in his life to explore parasport. "Eventually," he says, "the possibility of being on the national team sealed the deal to begin competing in parasports." Nasif has already made that a reality on the volleyball court.

Nasif currently plays wheelchair basketball with two clubs, the Twin City Spinners in Waterloo, and the Burlington Vipers. At just 21 years old, Nasif has goals of playing NCAA wheelchair basketball and becoming a medal-winning Paralympian.

Parasports have had a major impact on Nasif. "It really shaped who I am and how I am, and gave me a sense of competition, learning and enjoyment," he explains, emphasizing that "I would not be who I am today without parasport."

The highlight of his young parasport career was competing for the first time on the national sitting volleyball team at the "last chance" Paralympic Qualifier in Germany for the 2020 Tokyo Paralympic Games.

Outside of sport, Nasif is studying Recreation and Sports Business at the University of Waterloo. He envisions himself becoming a director in the adaptive sports and fitness field in the American collegiate system, or even becoming a teacher. He also aspires to start his own volleyball club one day.

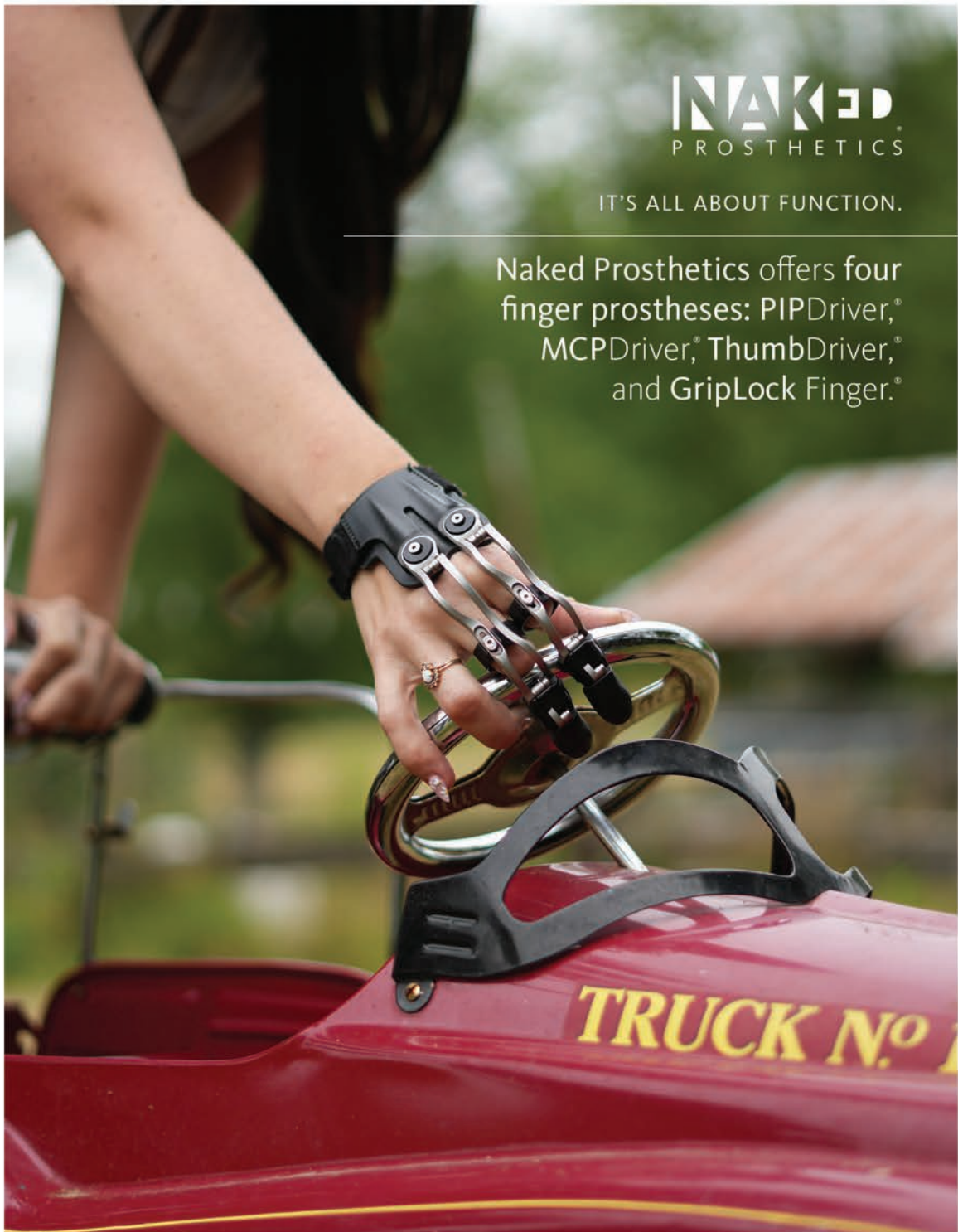
Nasif has been a ParaSport® Ontario Ambassador for two years, now leading Try-It sessions in wheelchair basketball and sitting volleyball and proving to be an excellent advocate and leader in the parasport sector. This includes his most memorable event, which took him back to his high school, Harbord Collegiate Institute in Toronto, to teach parasports to students at his alma mater.

An enthusiastic and knowledgeable athlete, he has a keen knack of keeping his participants engaged and amazed by his skills during events. Nasif maintains that participants are always more willing to try adaptive sports

when the ambassador is truly passionate about the sport they're playing. He adds that being an ambassador gives him the opportunity to highlight the sports he loves with hopes of getting someone else into the sport. "If just one from any event joins parasports, then it's so worth it!" And just recently, a Nasif-led Try-It event with Mohawk College's Recreation Therapy program produced a newcomer to Nasif's Burlington Vipers wheelchair basketball sessions.







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