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Wheelchair Basketball all about 'picking and rolling'

West Point, New York — Joey Gugliota, the 24-year-old former New Yorker now living in Chicago, has been confined to a wheelchair since age five. Gugliota has been hooping it up on wheels since he was first introduced to wheelchair basketball at age nine. He, along with three other professional coaches, is at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York, teaching Soldiers and Marines the art of the "pick and roll" of wheelchair basketball in preparation for the 2014 Army Warrior Trials, June 15-19.

More than 100 wounded, ill and injured service members and Veterans from across the United States are at West Point competing in the Warrior Trials where athletes from the Army, Marines and Air Force face off in archery, basketball, cycling, track and field, swimming, shooting, sitting volleyball and wheelchair basketball. Participants in the trials include athletes with spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, visual impairment, serious illnesses and amputations.

Developed by World War II veterans in the mid 1940s, wheelchair basketball is one of the premier events in the Paralympic Games, which are for athletes with physical disabilities and held in conjunction with the Summer Olympics. Rules are similar to able-bodied collegiate ball, but are modified to include the wheelchair.

"In essence, the chair is part of the body," said assistant coach Lee Montgomery, 57, who first started playing 37 years ago after watching a local team during his stay at a rehab hospital. "If I'm shooting and someone hits me hard, that's a foul. If he hits my arm, that's a foul, too."

Other actions that are fouls include flipping someone out of the chair or backing up into an opponent.

"It's all in the intent," added Rodney Williams, 63, who has been playing since his college days 41 years ago at San Jose State University in California when one of his college buddies in a wheelchair kept on bugging him to play. "I had never used a wheelchair because I walked with crutches and braces, so to get him off my back; I decided to go to a practice. I thought it was fun, so I've been playing ever since."

Other rule modifications include no dunking, no double dribbling and 30 seconds to shoot the ball instead of 35 seconds.

One question the coaches are often asked is goal height.

"People think it's amazing that it's the same height," said 37-year-old head coach Jermell Pennie who has been confined to a wheelchair since age five. In 1995 he began playing wheelchair basketball, and in 2004 was on the U.S. Paralympics Wheelchair Basketball team representing Team USA in Athens. "I never knew about wheelchair basketball, but I did know about the Paralympics."

Pennie, who coaches the Dallas Junior Wheelchair Mavericks team, said he is impressed with the military teams that will compete against each other this week.

"The athletes here are like a sponge," he said. "They take our information and go with it. This is the first time some of them have ever jumped in a wheelchair and played, and they look really good. They're picking it up like they've been playing for a couple of years."



Shooting, Williams said, is different from able-bodied ball because "You don't have your legs."

"Most of the shots from the able-body players come from the legs, and they don't use so much of their arms," he said. "For us, it's all upper body, so you have to develop proper technique to put power in your shot."

Arm, hand and wrist position are also important for shooting accuracy.

"You have to keep the elbow in or someone is going to go behind you and grab the ball," the Californian said, adding that a player's fingers need to be spread out over the ball, unlike able-bodied ball. "You also have to keep your wrist cocked when you follow through. It's all about practice and doing the same thing every time."

The pick and roll, said Montgomery, big in wheelchair basketball and involves putting the chair in position to inhibit the opposing player and going for the basket.

"If I set a good pick on my opponent, they aren't going to get around me like an able-body player can," the Grand Rapids, Michigan, resident said. "Because the chair has this wide angle, you are able to set a great pick and leave the defender in the back. In defense, you want to be between the man and the basket. Now the defender is outside the play," adding that once the pick is set, the roll is turning the chair facing the basket and looking for the ball.

The pick and roll technique is new for Marine Sgt. Joel Hillner, Camp Pendleton, California, who has been playing just eight weeks. "I've learned a lot about it," he said, adding that it's a lot of fun, but his blistered fingers are really taking a beating. "I won't wear gloves because it affects my shooting."

Army Private 1st Class Kevin Szortyka, Fort Stewart, Georgia, who has been playing the sport for about eight months, also credits the pick and roll skill development as the most important technique he has learned from the coaches, who he calls "awesome."

"I didn't have a lot of team play," so this training has been really important," he said. The 25-year-old Army private who injured his back in a training exercise said the coaches are available after practice to work one-on-one with the players. "They truly have a genuine interest in us no matter what our skill level is. They just want us to grow as players whether or not we advance here."

Szortyka, from Tallahassee, Florida, credits the Army's adaptive sports and reconditioning programs like wheelchair basketball a "blessing."

"It's allowed me to continue to compete," he said. "A lot of us, once we get these injuries, feel like our days of competition are behind us. Adaptive sports helps us continue with that competitive nature we are born with and that we've had throughout our military career."

For Coach Gugliota, who went to college on a partial wheelchair basketball scholarship, giving back to his military pupils has been wonderful.

"They've been through so much, and have done so much for us. I'm honored to be here. As far as the players, they're anxious and ready to play," he said. "I'm here to help them get better."

Gugliota also knows what it's like when an injury or an issue robs one of that competitive edge.

"I had just learned to ride a bike when a tree fell on our camper, so here I am adjusting to life as a little kid going from riding a bike to being in a wheelchair. I was the only disabled kid in school and had never been around anyone with a disability," he said. "Wheelchair basketball introduced me to other kids with disabilities, so it helped me get over my disability."



The coaches are eager to get the ball rolling to show off their pupils' skills and introduce others to the sport of wheelchair basketball.

"It's as physical as any sport out there," said Rodney. "This isn't a game of people in wheelchairs playing basketball. I guarantee you that once they start playing and you see their level of enthusiasm, you won't think these are wheelchair patients. These are wheelchair athletes."

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CUTLINE: Wheelchair basketball coaches from left Rodney Williams and Jermell Pennie demonstrate ball-handling techniques while Army Private 1st Class Kevin Szortyka, Fort Stewart, Ga., soaking in all the helpful hints. More than 100 wounded, ill and injured service members and Veterans from across the United States are at the U.S. Military Academy competing in the Warrior Trials, June 15-20. During the Army Warrior Trials athletes from the Army, Marines and Air Force face off in archery, basketball, cycling, track and field, swimming, shooting, sitting volleyball and wheelchair basketball. Participants in the trials include athletes with spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, visual impairment, serious illnesses and amputations. (U.S. Army photo by Gloria Montgomery)



CUTLINE: Coach Jermell Pennie fires up his military pupils during wheelchair basketball training in preparation for the 2014 U.S. Army Warrior Trials wheelchair basketball competition. More than 100 wounded, ill and injured service members and Veterans from across the United States are at West Point competing in the Army Warrior Trials where athletes from the Army, Marines and Air Force face off in archery, basketball, cycling, track and field, swimming, shooting, sitting volleyball and wheelchair basketball. Participants in the trials include athletes with spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, visual impairment, serious illnesses and amputations. (U.S. Army photo by Gloria Montgomery)



CUTLINE: From left, Coaches Joey Gugliotta and Lee Montgomery share chair-handling tips with Fort Stewart Soldier, front center Private 1st Class Kevin Szortyka. More than 100 wounded, ill and injured service members and Veterans from across the United States are at West Point competing in the Army Warrior Trials where athletes from the Army, Marines and Air Force face off in archery, basketball, cycling, track and field, swimming, shooting, sitting volleyball and wheelchair basketball. Participants in the trials include athletes with spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, visual impairment, serious illnesses and amputations. (U.S. Army photo by Gloria Montgomery)



CUTLINE: Fort Carson, Colo., Master Sgt. Daniel Hendrix, Warrior Transition Unit, Fort Carson, Colo., attempts a steal from Retired Sgt. 1st Class Charles Armstead, Needville, Texas, during wheelchair basketball training. More than 100 wounded, ill and injured service members and Veterans from across the United States are at West Point competing in the Warrior Trials where athletes from the Army, Marines and Air Force face off in archery, basketball, cycling, track and field, swimming, shooting, sitting volleyball and wheelchair basketball. Participants in the trials include athletes with spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, visual impairment, serious illnesses and amputations. (U.S. Army photo by Gloria Montgomery)

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Warrior Transition Command (WTC) is a major subordinate command under the U.S. Army Medical Command (MEDCOM). WTC's mission is to develop, coordinate and integrate the Army's Warrior Care and Transition Program (WCTP) for wounded, ill and injured soldiers, veterans and their families. For more information on WTC, visit the new WTC website, www.WTC.army.mil, follow on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/armyWTC> or join Facebook at <http://facebook.com/armyWTC>.

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