

SPORTS 'N SPOKES

September 2024

PUMMELED WITH PAINT

Adaptive paintball packs in hardcore fun

UP TO THE HYPE

High energy at NVWG in New Orleans

Going The Distance

Luke Bowman named 2024 S'NS Junior Athlete of the Year



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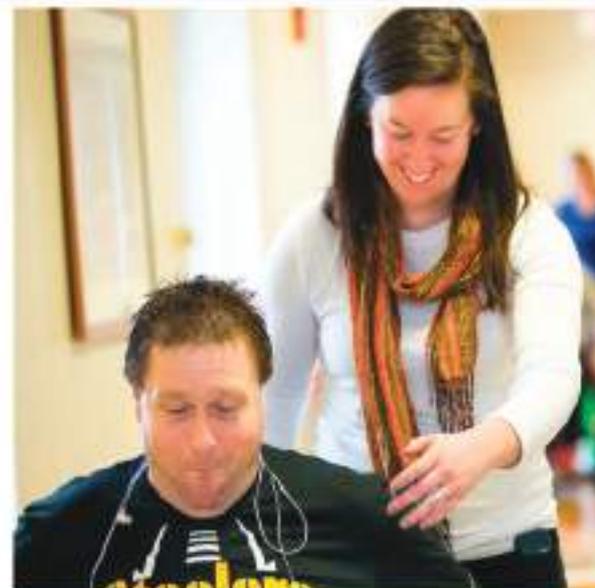
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For additional information, contact:
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Digital Highlights on sportsnspokes.com

GOING LAX

Check out highlights, photos and more from mid-August's Wheelchair Lacrosse USA Nationals in Mequon, Wis., on our Facebook page (facebook.com/sportsnspokes). We'll also have video interviews from the event on our website.

PARALYMPIC TIME

Now that the Paralympics are in full swing, visit the *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* website for updated highlights and photos from the Paris Games.

Scan This!

Or go to sportsnspokes.com



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On the cover: Luke Bowman is the 2024 *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* Junior Athlete of the Year and received the honor at July's The Hartford Nationals in Birmingham, Ala. Photo by Christopher Di Virgilio.



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Ottawa, Ontario K2E 8A9
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International Wheelchair Basketball Federation
5 Route Suisse
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iwbf.org

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Colorado Springs, CO 80907
(719) 266-4082
nwba.org

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Las Vegas, NV 89178
jdolezal@verizon.net

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(785) 893-6398
wheelchairbodybuilding@gmail.com
wheelchairbodybuilding.com

BOWLING

American Wheelchair Bowling Association
c/o Gary Ryan, AWBA Secretary
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Houston, TX 77040
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gryan210@sbcglobal.net
awba.org

FENCING

U.S. Fencing Association
1 Olympic Plaza
Colorado Springs, CO 80909
(719) 866-4511
usfencing.org

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freedomswings.org

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Universal Wheelchair Football Association
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Disability Services Office
9555 Plainfield Road
Cincinnati, OH 45236-1096
(513) 792-8625
john.kraimer@uc.edu

GOLF

U.S. Golf Association
1631 Mesa Avenue
Colorado Springs, CO 80906
(719) 471-4810, ext.15
usga.org

National Amputee Golf Association
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(800) 633-6242
info@nagagolf.org
nagagolf.org

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info@sledhockey.org
usahockey.com/sledhockey

HORSEBACK RIDING

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Berkeley, CA 94703
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info@borp.org
borp.org

United States Wheelchair Rugby Association
4000 Ridgeway Drive
Homewood, AL 35209
(205) 999-3092
uswra.org

RACQUET SPORTS

International Tennis Federation (Wheelchair Tennis Department)
Bank Lane, Roehampton
London SW15 5XZ, England
(011) 0044-(0)208-878-6464
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wheelchairtennis@itftennis.com
itftennis.com

United States Tennis Association
70 W. Red Oak Lane
White Plains, NY 10604
(914) 696-7000 / 696-7029 (fax)
usta.com

RECREATION

Turning POINT (Paraplegics On Independent Nature Trips)
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Terrell, TX 75160
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point@turningpointnation.org
turningpointnation.org

SHOOTING

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Rockville, MD 20850
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National Wheelchair Shooting Federation
102 Park Avenue
Rockledge, PA 19046
(215) 379-2359 / 663-0102 (fax)

NRA Disabled Shooting Services
11250 Waples Mill Road
Fairfax, VA 22030
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SKIING

Move United
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Rockville, MD 20850
moveunitedsport.org

Ski for Light, Inc.
1455 West Lake Street
Minneapolis, MN 55408
(612) 827-3232
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sfl.org

SOFTBALL

National Wheelchair Softball Association
13414 Paul Street
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(402) 305-5020
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wheelchairsoftball.org

TABLE TENNIS

American Wheelchair Table Tennis Association
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Port Chester, NY 10573
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TRACK & FIELD

Adaptive Track & Field USA (ATSUSA)
https://www.atfusa.org

WATER SPORTS/RECREATION

American Canoe Association
7432 Alban Station Boulevard
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Springfield, VA 22150
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americancanoe.org

Handicapped Scuba Association
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hsa@hsascuba.com
hsascuba.com

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My Opinion



SPORTS SPOKES

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Where Have All The Wheelchairs Gone?

The National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG) have concluded in New Orleans, and aside from the sultry weather, “street gravy” and a few regretful hangovers, it seems like it was a great event.

While co-presenters Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) delivered on their promise for a good time to be had by all, there was one thing that bugged me — there were no track events this year and they haven’t been offered since 2019.

I was deeply disappointed when I learned PVA and VA leadership had agreed to forego the track events again at this year’s NVWG. I was introduced to adaptive sports 30 years ago via wheelchair racing. That steered me on a new trajectory in life, and some of my fondest memories of the NVWG are of the times

I spent on the track with some of the greatest legends in the sport’s storied past.

The NVWG launched in 1981 with just seven events and 77 athletes. It quickly became the premier annual event where veterans with spinal-cord injury and disease (SCI/D) could be introduced to a plethora of adaptive sports. Furthermore, for many ambitious veterans with a SCI/D like me, the NVWG served as the starting line for a career in international competition, including the Paralympics.

However, in recent years, I’ve noticed newly injured veterans gravitating toward handcycling, as racing chairs, once piled high in every

recreational therapist’s inventory, approach extinction. Is this a sign of the times, or have I stumbled upon some kind of conspiratorial plot to prevent veterans from competing on the track at the NVWG?!

I reached out to PVA Director of Sports & Recreation Fabio Villarroel to get a better understanding of the situation. Fabio says PVA and the VA are consistently evaluating sports offerings for the NVWG as a way to meet the needs and wants of the participants. He went on to say that the track events were discontinued due to a significant decline in interest.

I have to admit, traveling with all the equipment required to compete on the track can be cumbersome, and when a veteran considers the always-evolving menu of sports offered at the NVWG, it makes more sense to leave the racing chair safe at home and simply enjoy a game of billiards or bocchia instead.

Is the fate of wheelchair racing at the

NVWG the canary in the coal mine?

If our newest generation of veterans thinks racing on the track is passé and if the sport has become obsolete at the Games, will we see veterans on the

track at higher levels of competition such as the Paralympics? I fear the answer is no.

It wasn’t long after the NVWG ended in New Orleans that the 2024 Paralympic Games began in Paris. I spotted only 10 athletes in wheelchairs representing Team USA in the track events, and a quick search on the internet confirmed my suspicions. Not only has there been a significant decline since I was on Team USA in 1996, but there also were no veterans competing on the track in Paris. This is both perplexing and disappointing considering the history of the Paralympics.



NATIONAL VETERANS WHEELCHAIR GAMES

COURTESY OF DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Now in its 49th year of publication, *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* is the nation’s premier magazine for wheelchair sports and recreation primarily for those with spinal-cord injury, spina bifida, amputation and some congenital defects. Not responsible for unsolicited material. *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* neither endorses nor guarantees any of the products or services advertised. © 2024 Paralyzed Veterans of America. All rights reserved. Reproduction of the whole or any part of the contents without permission is prohibited.



Wheelchair racing helped steer PVA Publications Editor-In-Chief and Paralympian Al Kovach Jr., to a new trajectory in life. And he hopes the sport returns to the National Veterans Wheelchair Games and that it keeps going strong at the Paralympics.

In 1948, Ludwig Guttmann, MD, organized the first competition for wheelchair athletes, all of whom were veterans, and named it the Stoke Mandeville Games. In 1960, this event became the first Paralympic Games, where all 400 athletes representing 23 countries competed in their wheelchairs.

Seeking an explanation, I called Bob Molinatti, who has competed at the NVWG numerous times and is a two-time Paralympian. Currently, Bob is the host of *Detours*, which produces videos covering the world of adaptive sports for *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* and our YouTube channel (youtube.com/user/sportsnspokes).

Bob and the *Detours* crew were at the 2024 U.S. Paralympic Team Trials this past July in Miramar, Fla., and had the opportunity to interview several of the wheelchair athletes before they headed to Paris.

Bob tells me there are a number of contributing factors as to why we see so few athletes competing on the track.

“Generally speaking, most people

wanting to get into this sport will discover that racing chairs have become cost-prohibitive, access to a track for the purpose of training is a big challenge and knowledgeable mentors and coaches are tough to come by,” he says. “And, let’s face it — it’s a brutal sport.”

Our conversation then shifted to the representation of athletes in wheelchairs at the Paralympics.

“In the beginning, all of the athletes were using wheelchairs to compete, but six decades later, we have 10 disability categories, including various physical, visual and intellectual impairments, so our piece of the pie has gotten smaller,” Bob says.

Honestly, the insights provided by Fabio and Bob make sense. From the start, be it a veteran going to the NVWG or a kid attending his or her first local adaptive sports camp, aspiring athletes will discover seemingly boundless challenges.

Unfortunately, programs that have the capabilities to develop competitive wheelchair racers for the track are few

and far between. Thankfully, the University of Illinois, University of Arizona and others have established student-athlete curriculums that include racing on the track. But if going to college isn’t an option, buying a secondhand racing chair and begging the local high school to allow you on the track will have to suffice.

There’s no denying the starting lines have become quite sparse, but with athletes receiving \$37,500 for each Paralympic gold medal, \$22,500 for a silver and \$15,000 for a bronze, I have to admit the competition has never been so elite.

With that much money being doled out for every race, we’re almost guaranteed to witness great drama and hopefully some record-setting times on the Paralympic track. I’m sure NBC can sell it to their sponsors, and the Paralympic organizers will be happy, too.

As always, let me know your thoughts at al@pvamag.com.

In The Game

POWERLIFTING

Four World Records Set

Jordan's Abdelkareem Khattab, China's Feifei Zheng, Nigeria's Folashade Oluwafemiayo and Egypt's Rehab Ahmed each set world records at the June 20–26 Tbilisi World Cup 2024 in Tbilisi, Georgia.

A reigning Paralympic and world champion, Khattab set a world record in the men's up-to 97 kilograms division with a 260-kilogram lift.

Meanwhile, three women set the other world records.

Zheng won gold in the women's up-to 86 kilograms division with a 159-kilogram lift, beating her world record from last year by 1 kilogram.

Oluwafemiayo recorded a world record in the women's over-86 kilograms division with a 165-kilogram lift. And Ahmed won Egypt's lone gold and set a world record in the women's up-to 55 kilograms division with a 235-kilogram lift, besting her previous world record by 1 kilogram.

China recorded an event-high nine gold medals, while Nigeria, Iran and Jordan recorded two golds each.

Brazil took the women's team event, while Cuba won the men's team event and Chile won the mixed team event.

For full results, visit paralympic.org.

WHEELCHAIR TENNIS

Hewett Accomplishes Major Feat

Not only did Great Britain's Alfie Hewett earn his first Wimbledon men's wheelchair singles title, but he finally recorded a men's wheelchair singles and doubles Grand Slam in July in London.

The 26-year-old and second-seeded Hewett defeated the No. 4 seed Martin de la Puente (Spain), 6-2, 6-3, to capture his elusive men's wheelchair singles title. After losing to Japan's Shingo Kunieda in 2022 and Tokito Oda last year, Hewett broke through this time around.

It marked Hewett's ninth Grand Slam men's wheelchair singles title overall.



Great Britain's Alfie Hewett celebrates winning the championship point against Spain's Martin de la Puente in the men's wheelchair singles final at Wimbledon 2024 at All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club on July 14 in London.

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Israel's Guy Sasson, shown in this Australian Open file photo, won the UNIQLQ Wheelchair Tennis Tour's French Riviera Open in mid-June in Biot, France.



© GETTY IMAGES/JULIAN FINNEY

In men's wheelchair doubles, the top-seeded Hewett and Great Britain teammate Gordon Reid recorded their sixth Wimbledon title together, defeating No. 2 seeds Takuya Miki and Oda (Japan), 6-4, 7-6 (7-2). The pair earned their 21st Grand Slam doubles title overall.

Japan's Yui Kamiji and South Africa's Kgothatso Montjane took the women's wheelchair doubles title and claimed their first Wimbledon title as a team. The top seeds knocked off the Netherlands' and No. 2-seeded pair of Diede de Groot and Jiske Griffioen, 6-4, 6-4, avenging their championship loss to the Dutch duo last year.

De Groot, though, won the women's wheelchair singles title, defeating Dutch teammate Aniek van Koot, 6-4, 6-4, in the championship. It marked her 15th consecutive women's wheelchair singles title.

In quad singles, the Netherlands' Niels Vink hung on to defeat fellow Dutch doubles partner Sam Schröder, 7-6 (7-4), 6-4. For Vink, it was his fifth Grand Slam quad singles title.

It also marked his second Wimbledon title in two days, as Vink and Schröder won the quad wheelchair doubles final. They defeated Great Britain's Andy Lapthorne and Israel's Guy Sasson, 3-6, 7-6 (7-3), 6-3.

Sasson Nets A Championship

Israel's Guy Sasson added a new title to his list — UNIQLQ Wheelchair Tennis Tour Super Series singles champion.

Sasson defeated No. 6 seed Ahmet Kaplan from Turkey, 6-3, 6-2, in the quad singles final at the mid-June French Riviera Open

Super Series at the Mouratoglou Tennis Academy in Biot, France.

Kaplan upset top-seeded Niels Vink (the Netherlands) in the semifinals to advance to the finals.

Vink, though, earned one title, as he teamed with Great Britain's Andy Lapthorne to earn a 6-7 (1-7), 6-2, (12-10) victory over Australia's Heath Davidson and Kaplan in the men's quad doubles final.

It was Vink and Lapthorne's first tournament partner pairing and title together.

Japan's Tokito Oda upset Great Britain's Alfie Hewett, 7-5, 6-3, for the men's wheelchair singles title. For the 18-year-old, it was his first win there.

The Netherlands' Tom Egberink and Maikel Scheffers defeated the Netherlands' pair of Ruben Spaargaren and Maarten Ter Hofte, 6-1, 6-4, in the men's wheelchair doubles final.

It was the pair's second title as a duo ever, coming 12-plus years after the first.

The Netherlands' Diede de Groot earned both women's titles.

In women's singles, she defeated Japan's Yui Kamiji, 7-5, 6-4, in the championship. In doubles, de Groot partnered with compatriot Aniek van Koot for a 6-2, 6-3, win over China's Xiaohui Li and Zhu Zhenzhen.

De Groot Sets Big Record

After her latest French Open women's wheelchair singles title, the Netherlands' Diede de Groot surpassed countrywoman Esther Vergeer's career Grand Slam total and now has the record outright.

The 27-year-old de Groot defeated China's Zhu Zhenzhen, 4-6, 6-2, 6-3, June 8 for the women's wheelchair singles title at Roland-Garros in

The Netherlands' Diede de Groot celebrates winning over China's Zhu Zhenzhen in the women's wheelchair singles final June 8 at Roland-Garros in Paris.



© GETTY IMAGES/TIM GOODE

In The Game

Paris, recording her 14th straight Grand Slam women's wheelchair singles championship and passing Vergeer's record of 21 women's wheelchair singles titles.

De Groot knocked off three Chinese players, including Xiaohui Li, who ended her 145-match winning streak, in the first round, and Ziyang Wang in the quarterfinals.

De Groot also teamed up with the Netherlands' Aniek van Koot to take the women's wheelchair doubles title, defeating Japan's Yui Kamiji and South Africa's Kgothatso Montjane, 6-7 (7-6), 7-6 (7-2), (10-4). That gave her 19 women's wheelchair doubles titles and 41 championships overall.

Israel's Guy Sasson made his debut appearance at Roland-Garros one to remember, as he captured his first Grand Slam title. He defeated the Netherlands' Sam Schröder, 6-2, 3-6, 7-6 (10-7), in the men's quad singles final in a nearly three-hour match. Schröder defeated Sasson in the Australian Open earlier this year, but Sasson avenged the loss in Paris.

Schröder, though, picked up the quad doubles title, as he teamed with the Netherlands' Niels Vink to defeat Great Britain's Andy Lapthorne and Sasson, 7-6 (11-9), 6-1. It was Schröder and Vink's second team title.

Meanwhile, in men's wheelchair singles, Japan's Tokito Oda defended his French Open crown, defeating Argentina's Gustavo Fernandez, 7-5, 6-3, in the championship match. The world's No. 2-ranked player, Oda has won four of the last five majors back to last year's French Open.

The top-seeded men's wheelchair doubles team of Great Britain's Alfie Hewett and Gordon Reid recorded their fifth Roland-Garros title together, defeating Japan's Takuya Miki and Oda, 6-1, 6-4, in the final. It marked their 20th Grand Slam title overall, tying them with able-bodied U.S. players Martina Navratilova

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and Pam Shriver as the most successful doubles partners ever.

Vink Records First 2024 Title

The Netherlands' Niels Vink finally captured his first wheelchair quad singles title of 2024, defeating Turkey's Ahmet Kaplan, 6-1, 6-3, at the late-May Tram Barcelona Open on the 2024 UNIQLO Wheelchair Tennis Tour.

The 21-year-old world No. 1-ranked player had won four wheelchair singles titles in the quad division by this time last year, but he has had a rougher start this year.

In men's wheelchair singles, Argentina's Gustavo Fernandez avenged a three-set loss to Spain's Martin de la Puente in last year's final, taking a 6-2, 4-6, 7-6 (10-8) victory and rallying in a tight third-set tiebreak. Trailing 8-7 in the third-set tiebreaker, Fernandez recorded the final three points for the win.

Meanwhile, in men's wheelchair doubles, the U.S.' Casey Ratzlaff and the Netherlands' Ruben Spaargaren won via a walkover over the top-seeded team of Belgium's Joachim Gérard and de la Puente. It was their first International Tennis Federation (ITF) 1 title together and first ITF 1 title for Ratzlaff, as well.

Finally, in the women's division, Japan's Yui Kamiji doubled up on titles. She sweated out a 6-1, 6-7 (6-8), 6-4 victory in women's wheelchair singles, and then teamed with South Africa's Kgothatso Montjane for a 6-0, 6-3 victory over the Netherlands' Aniek van Koot and Great Britain's Lucy Shuker.

WHEELCHAIR TRACK

All Peachy For Scaroni, Romanchuk

Two United States wheelchair racers rolled to titles at the July 4 Shepherd Center wheelchair division of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* Peachtree Road Race in Atlanta.

Susannah Scaroni won the women's open division, finishing the 6.2-mile course in 21 minutes and 39 seconds — recording her fourth overall win in the event. Scaroni finished well ahead of the U.S.' Jenna Fesemyer (24:52) and Kendall Gretsich (25:10).

beating out the U.S.' Fidel Aguilar (Mesa, Ariz.; 23:58) and Mexico's Alfonso Zaragoza Solorio (24:44).

The U.S.' Gary Brendel (Sterling, Mass.) took the men's grand masters title, finishing in 27:44, beating Great Britain's Steve Montgomery (29:47) and the U.S.' Rodger Krause (Wyomissing, Pa., 30:56.)

In the men's quad division, the U.S.' Isaiah Rigo (Cheney, Wash.) took the title with his 26:55 time, defeating Spain's Santiago Sanz Quinto (28:10) and Great Britain's Rob Smith (32:27).

U.S. racer Scott Stokes (Roswell, Ga.) took the men's T1 division in 59:11.

The U.S.' Ricardo Aranda (Mableton, Ga.) won the men's push



The U.S.' Daniel Romanchuk, shown in this Desert Challenge Games file photo in May, won the July 4 men's open division of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* Peachtree Road Race in Atlanta.

CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO

Daniel Romanchuk captured the men's open division, finishing in 19:37 — beating out Paralympic teammate Aaron Pike (20:22) and the Netherlands' Geert Schipper (20:25).

The U.S.' Harry Houg-Lee (New York City) won the junior men's title in 38:50. The U.S.' Krige Schabort (Rome, Ga.) took the men's masters division (21:30),

assist division in 37:04, ahead of the U.S.' Dale Robinson (Atlanta; 40:42) and Kyle Pease (Atlanta; 41:01), while the U.S.' Bentley-Grace Hicks (Atlanta) won the women's push assist division in 40:01, ahead of U.S. racers Erika Northrop (Acworth, Ga.; 44:53) and Catherine Reed (Atlanta; 52:33).

S'NS

Air Guns

Winter Air Gun National Tournament	December, 2024	Colorado Springs, CO
Central Florida Air Gun Tournament	February 8-9, 2025	Orlando, FL
Wisconsin Air Gun Tournament	March 21-22, 2025	Racine, WI
Texas Air Gun Tournament	May 31-Jun 1, 2025	San Antonio, TX

Bass Fishing

Okie Open Bass Tournament	September 13-15, 2024	Eufaula, OK
Southeastern Challenge Bass Tournament	September 27-29, 2024	Appling, GA
Bayou Gulf Coast Bass Tournament	October 11-13, 2024	Westwego, LA
Citrus Slam Bass Fishing Tournament	April 4-6, 2025	Kissimmee, FL
Bluegrass Bash Bass Tournament	April 11-13, 2025	Kuttawa, KY
Location TBD	May 2-4, 2025	TBD
Capital Clash Bass Tournament (Year-End)	June 6-8, 2025	La Plata, MD

Basketball

PVA Basketball Camp	August 8-11, 2024	Lawrence, KS
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Billiards

Great Plains Billiards Tournament	September 19-21, 2024	Omaha, NE
Mid-South Billiards Tournament	October 11-12, 2024	Memphis, TN
Mid-Atlantic Billiards Tournament	March 14-16, 2025	Midlothian, VA
Mid-America Billiards Tournament	April 10-12, 2025	Oklahoma City, OK

Boccia

West Virginia Boccia Tournament	November 1-2, 2024	Charleston, WV
New England Boccia Tournament	November 16-17, 2024	Brockton, MA
Bayou Gulf States Boccia Tournament	February 1-2, 2025	Gulfport, MS
Long Beach Boccia Tournament	March 29-30, 2025	Long Beach, CA
Puerto Rico Boccia Tournament	May 3-4, 2025	San Juan, PR

T SCHEDULE



Bowling

West Virginia Bowling Tournament	August 9-11, 2024	Kanawha City, WV
Nevada Bowling Tournament	December 5-8, 2024	Las Vegas, NV
Florida Gulf Coast Bowling Tournament	January 16-19, 2025	Tampa, FL
Texas Bowling Tournament	April 30-May 2, 2025	San Antonio, TX
PVA Bowling National Championship	June 26-29, 2025	Omaha, NE

Paracycling

PVA High Performance Racing Camp	August 12-21, 2024	Crested Butte, CO
Off-Road Handcycling Championship	August 18-20, 2024	Crested Butte, CO
Pocahontas Off-Road Fall Camp	September 11-15, 2024	Chesterfield, VA
Adaptive Off-Road Cycling Adventure	October 23-27, 2024	Bentonville, AR
PVA Racing High Performance Racing Camp	January 25-31, 2025	Tampa, FL
Pocahontas Off-Road Spring Camp	April 9-13, 2025	Chesterfield, VA
PVA Off-Road Classic	April 12, 2025	Chesterfield, VA

Pickleball

California Pickleball Tournament	October 19-20, 2024	Long Beach, CA
Texas Pickleball Tournament	November 9-10, 2025	San Antonio, TX
Colonial Pickleball Tournament	June 14-15, 2025	Perry Point, MD

Trapshooting

North Central Trapshoot Tournament	September 6-8, 2024	Sioux Falls, SD
Vaughan Trapshoot Tournament	May 23-25, 2025	Elburn, IL
Iowa Trapshoot Tournament	June 20-22, 2025	Cedar Rapids, IA
Wisconsin Trapshoot Tournament (Year-End)	June 27-29, 2025	Green Bay, WI
Trapshoot Tournament	TBD	TBD

Rugby

PVA Rugby Invitational	Feb 14-16, 2025	Louisville, KY
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National Veterans Wheelchair Games

43rd National Veterans Wheelchair Games	July 25-30, 2024	New Orleans, LA
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The Extra Point

Smokin' With The Georges

by John Groth

Josh George can still smoke out. The 2008 Beijing Paralympic gold medalist and wheelchair marathon racer now has a new career — co-owning a restaurant.



A five-time Paralympic medalist, Josh George now co-owns a restaurant called Smokin J's with his brother, Jeremy, and Jeremy's wife, Mackenzie.

Instead of racing on courses across the country, he's talking to customers, developing media displays and working the front of the house at Smokin J's BBQ restaurant in downtown San Diego.

Three years ago, he joined his brother, Jeremy George and Jeremy's wife, Mackenzie, in the ownership deal. They own three Smokin J's restaurants in California (smokinjsrealbbq.com). Over the last four years, they've opened locations in Poway, Miramar and San Diego.

A five-time Paralympic medalist, Josh says running a restaurant is nowhere near as stressful as the buildup and wait to start a major marathon or Paralympic Games race.



Smokin J's barbecue restaurant has three locations, including one in Poway, Calif., one in Miramar, Calif., and one in downtown San Diego, shown above.

He says customer service issues are similar to dealing with the media. After finishing a grueling, exhausting 26.2-mile wheelchair marathon, he had only a few moments to compose himself before speaking to reporters afterward.

"And that's sort of you get a similar experience in restaurants, where you're doing a million things, especially as an owner. We're wearing 50 different hats, and our headspace might not always be right in that customer service



Customers dine inside Smokin J's in downtown San Diego in October 2023.



JOHN GROTH



JOHN GROTH

Josh George, above left, talks with a customer in October 2023 at Smokin J's BBQ restaurant in downtown San Diego. Smokin J's menus, inset, have designs on them by his former University of Illinois coach Adam Bleakney.

zone. But all of a sudden, if something goes wrong, like that ability to flip the switch and immediately talk to the customer and be able to come out of one zone and into a communicative zone, like, again, that was something I didn't realize, but we're trained to do that as athletes because you have to do that at the end of these exhausting events," Josh says. "You immediately have to talk to people about it right after that,

and you have to switch your headspace over quickly. And that kind of worked the same here. And it was kind of cool."

FAMILY PUSH

But without a push from his brother, Josh wouldn't have thought to go down the path — one that focuses on family, close friends and food.

The 2002 *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* Junior Athlete of the Year award winner attended the University of Illinois, graduating in 2007 with a degree in journalism, before turning pro as a wheelchair racer.

Josh, who sustained a spinal-cord injury when he was 4 years old after falling out of a 12th-story bedroom window in Falls Church, Va., made his first U.S. Paralympic team when he was 20 and stayed on the U.S. national team for 18 years. He won gold in the men's T53 100 meters and earned a silver medal in the men's T53 800 at the 2008 Paralympics in China, and bronze medals in the T53 800 at



Josh George was the 2002 *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* Junior Athlete of the Year award winner.

PVA PUBLICATIONS FILE PHOTO



JOHN GROTH

JOHN GROTH



Smokin J's BBQ restaurant in downtown San Diego has wider spaces and more accessible seating for customers.

the 2012 London Paralympics and in the men's T53 100 and men's T53 400 at the 2004 Athens Paralympics. He's also a four-time Chicago Marathon men's wheelchair division champion (2003, 2004, 2006 and 2014) and took the 2015 London Marathon men's wheelchair division.

However, after he was done racing, he didn't know what to do. While living in Australia, Josh, 40, had just broken up with his girlfriend and wasn't sure what to do next. So, 37-year-old Jeremy convinced him to move to San Diego to help. Their 30-year-old sister, Jennifer, has helped out at times, too.

"He basically started working out with the front of the [house] booth, coordinating all the events. He just learned all of everything he needed to learn," Jeremy says. "He started learning web design, all this stuff. Whatever we needed, he learned how to do it and did it."

STARTING OUT

Smokin J's originally started as a food truck business, with Jeremy running a

6-foot barrel smoker on a trailer. Then, Jeremy and Mackenzie decided to expand and go the restaurant route.

Each location has a different vibe. The Miramar location features all patio seating, while the Poway spot has more of a family-oriented feel, and the downtown location is geared more toward young professionals with more open space, a bigger bar and outside views.

Smokin J's features a barbecue mix between Texas and Kansas City. Most of the recipes are Jeremy's and stem from his cooking background and his visits to Nashville, Tenn., Memphis, Tenn., Kansas City, Mo., as well as the state of Texas. But the equipment they use more closely resembles what's used in Texas barbecue.

"We're trying to just bring out the flavor of the meat. We don't overpower it with anything too strong. It's more than just a salt and pepper rub, but it is heavily salt and pepper," Jeremy says. "The barbecue sauce is not too sweet, it's tangy. It's not too thick and is kind of a lighter sauce that pairs well with the meat and enhances it. As for style, the reason I say we're more Texas-style is because we cook it in the big 1,000-pound offset smokers."

The menu also has some racing ties to it. University of Illinois wheelchair track and field coach Adam Bleakney design-

ed more than a handful of the animal characters and created the inspiration for artwork out front.

His featured comic called *The American Dream* — an old guy who walks around in his underwear and carries a 1980s-style TV around with him — makes an appearance on the menu, too.

"It's fun to get him integrated with Josh's other logos," Bleakney says. "It's just a hobby. I was always sketching growing up. I'm a big fan of comic books. I'd draw my own comic books growing up. I didn't have a TV growing up, probably until I was almost out of high school."

Bleakney has known Josh since 2002 and coached him for years, starting when he was a freshman at Illinois. He's happy for Josh's success outside the sports realm.

"That really, to me, demonstrates he's taken what he learned in process of training for a goal and, in many cases, goals at the highest level of performance, and he's taken the process and methodology necessary to achieve a high performance and applied that to his professional life," Bleakney says.

S'NS

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GOING SPLAT



If you're looking for an action-packed, quick-thinking and messy sport, take a shot at adaptive paintball.

by John Groth

Playing paintball in a wheelchair isn't for the faint of heart. The growing adaptive sport includes wheeling across dirt and grass fields, finding unique ways or having help to load a paintball gun, all while somehow trying to avoid getting hit and splattered with tiny balls which pack plenty of paint.

"It's something different. It's something probably most people in the street would think somebody with a disability would never do. It's action-packed," says Pete Gagliardo, adaptive sports and recreation coordinator at Helen Hayes Hospital in West Haverstraw, N.Y.

North Carolina resident Chris Alnazer sure loves that part and the physical, mental and adrenaline-packed challenges that come along with it. Finding a way to play paintball adaptively transformed his world.

Born with cerebral palsy, which affects his walking, speech and left hand the most, the 34-year-old admits he spent too many years just watching others and dreaming about playing his favorite sport with his friends.

Then, he found ways to make it happen.

Alnazer started out having a referee help carry him to a spot before games. Then, he used his regular wheelchair and had some





ILLUSTRATION BY KERRY RANDOLPH
PHOTOS: TASS SPENCER & RYAN ARNOUCCI
© GETTY IMAGES/BOHDAN FETUSHOV/SHOOTINGDOM

friends push and help him. Now, Alnazer uses an Action Trackchair, and it's changed his life. He can independently move around the field, rather than relying on his friends.

Alnazer actually enjoys getting hit — and yes, he feels it, too.

“When I first started playing, people would take it easy on me. I absolutely hate that. I want to be played as if I were a normal-bodied player,” Alnazer says in an email. “To combat that, I started playing ‘mean.’ If you hit people enough, they’ll eventually get tired of it and start dishing it back. It’s a two-way street, though. If you dish it out, you have to also be able to take it. It can also be part of the strategy.”

Chris Alnazer, pictured left and above right, has cerebral palsy and plays adaptive paintball by wheeling around an outdoor course in his Action Trackchair. Brian Sawlsville, right, also uses an Action Trackchair to play.

Spraying Lots Of Paint

Paintball's first official game occurred more than 40 years ago, on June 7, 1981, in a woodsy area of New Hampshire. Twelve players competed in that game, which was played in a 125-acre area.

Adaptive paintball came around nearly a decade later. One team, the Paraplegic Turtles Paintball Team based out of Utah, competed in the early 1990s, and the United Kingdom's only disabled and adaptive paintball team, Team Unlimited, formed in 2013.

Now, it's played throughout the United States and overseas.

There are three main types — capture the flag, speedball and woodsball.

Capture the flag is the most common paintball game, with teams squaring off to try to take their opponent's flag and return it to their own station or across the field to their opponent's station. Speedball involves inflatable bunkers placed in different configurations on a grass or flat turf field like a soccer field, giving players the chance to hide. Woodsball features teams competing in a wooded or outdoor en-

vironment. Additionally, some people play paintball scenario games featuring role-playing and weaving in storylines like war or military events.

Gagliardo has played them all over the years, though mainly when he was able-bodied. In 2006, the 39-year-old Tenafly, N.J., resident sustained a level T5 complete spinal-cord injury (SCI) in a motorcycle accident in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

"Before I got injured, I was very into paintball. I played speedball. I prefer that style," Gagliardo says. "It's action-packed compared to hiding in the woods, taking the occasional shot. You're seeing the target, knowing which bunker they're behind, laying for cover, firing, having fun and spraying lots of paint."

But his job now is to help other paralyzed or SCI patients participate in athletic activities they want to try. So, when one suggested paintball, he pushed to make it happen.

He reached out to some local facilities and found one in the area that could host an adaptive paintball game. It featured in-

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD BY ZAC ARBUCKLE



In paintball, you can hide behind different objects or, as Brian Sawlsville shows here, use objects like a car as a blocker.

Brian Sawlsville wears not only a mask, but gloves, long pants, a hat, sunglasses and camouflage gear as part of his adaptive paintball apparel.





ZAC ARBUCKLE

flatable bunkers, which he describes as carnival bounce-house-like shapes like a nacho chip, triangles or cylinders, for people to take cover near or hide behind. Wheelchair users and hospital patients donned the traditional paintball gear, transferred into sports chairs and prepared for battle. They wheeled through the grass, trying to find hiding spots, shooting each other and splattering people with paint.

"The overall consensus was like, 'Holy s---, that was hard! But it was a lot of fun at the same time,'" Gagliardo says. "Thank God we didn't use our everyday chairs. They'd be covered in paint, dirt and everything else. We're definitely happy to use the sports chairs."

Making It Work

It took years for Alnazer to finally find the gumption to discover his own way to play.

Alnazer still remembers getting a pump paintball marker, or gun, when he was a little kid. He'd practice shooting trees, trash cans and other items by himself and with friends. He'd even watch an instructional VHS

Nick Pagonis, left, uses a strap on one of his forearms to help him hold his paintball gun independently.

THREE PHOTOS: BY GEORGE MATTE / HELEN HAYES HOSPITAL



tape about the sport when he was bored. But

when it came to playing paintball outside on a field or in the woods, Alnazer thought it'd never happen.

"I would think to myself 'Dang, that looks fun, but I can't run, so I'll never be able to experience that,'" Alnazer says in an email.

A few years later, that all changed.

In 2014, Alnazer's parents bought him the Greg Hastings' Tournament Paintball video game for his Sony PlayStation as a Christmas present. That same year, they bought him a green Spyder Imagine paintball marker for Christmas. A few months later, spurred by those two items and a push from his friends, he finally committed and found a way to play at Gold Diggers Paintball (now BOSS Paintball) in Locust, N.C.



Pete Gagliardo, an adaptive sports and recreation coordinator at Helen Hayes Hospital in West Haverstraw, N.Y., has taken some athletes to play adaptive paintball in the area.



"My friends and I were pretty scared and didn't know what to expect. Waiting in line to pay, we saw players who looked like they were pros carrying around fancy markers and gear, heard players playing in the woods with markers that sounded super fast. It was pretty intimidating," Alnazer says. "The staff assigned a ref to help me out with everything. That ref was the real MVP. He carried me on his back all day because I can't walk too good. He carried me out before the games would start and set me up in a good spot. It was scary, but after I got my first elimination, I was hooked."

He credits his teammates and friends for helping him, though. Alnazer says one of his good friends and teammates started a GoFundMe page to help get him a track chair, and his teammates, friends and family donated a majority of the money so he could get one instead of playing with his regular wheelchair.

As for his paintball marker or gun, Alnazer plays with a normal marker without any modifications. The only difference is he can't shoot or pull the trigger with his left hand because he doesn't have as much control with it. So, he uses his right hand and fingers to pull the trigger.

"It's not always pretty, but it gets the job done," Alnazer says.

Avoiding the paintballs coming at him is paramount, too. But they have to hit his body, not just the wheelchair, to count.

"The biggest challenge for me is not being able to move and shoot at the same time," Alnazer says. "Being able to move and shoot at the same time is pretty crucial in paintball, but I make it work — or at least I try to."

Amazing Humans

Childhood memories helped 41-year-old Nick Pagonis develop his love for the sport, too.

Pagonis was born prematurely and has cerebral palsy and hearing loss. But he got hooked on shooting sports early.

When he was about 10 years old, Pagonis and his grandfather started target shooting with darts or BB guns. Later, Pagonis' grandfather bought him his first paintball gun, and he fell in love with the sport.

"I like that it's challenging, fun, competitive, and it's a sport that I can play independently with little assistance," says Pagonis, a Darien, Ill., resident, in an email.

Whenever Pagonis plays, he has an assistant or asks one of his teammates to serve as his assistant by helping him get prepared before the game starts, filling his paintball gun with balls and adjusting it when he needs it. If the assistant is hit during play, it does not count against Pagonis or his team.

Pagonis' father and grandfather used to have to help him hold the paintball gun, but now the guns are much lighter. Pagonis also uses a strap on one of his forearms to help him hold the paintball gun independently.

"I'm very grateful how far technology has come because I'm able to be involved in a sport that I love," Pagonis says.

Meanwhile, Alnazer is grateful for the community. He likes the people even more than the game and competition.

"I've met many amazing human beings through paintball. I know people from pretty much all over the world because of paintball," Alnazer says. "A majority of my best friends are friends that I've met through paintball — friends that I consider family. The bonds and friendships paintball creates [are] like no other."

S'NS

Symphony of Success

**Champion, musician, academic
and mentor all describe this
year's *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* Junior
Athlete of the Year.**

by Christopher Di Virgilio

For Luke Bowman, his days are a carefully orchestrated symphony of academic study, athletic readiness and musical expression — a testament to a spirit that refuses to be defined by limitations.

As Anchor Bay High School's (Fair Haven, Mich.) first adaptive athlete and this year's *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* Junior Athlete of the Year award winner, he had his work cut out for him. The New Baltimore, Mich., native is relatively new to the sport of adaptive track and field, and in 2023, he made his high school team debut competing alongside his able-bodied classmates.

"No one knew what to do with this kid in

a wheelchair — how to coach him, how he might fit in with the rest of the team or what he was capable of," says Monica Aho, co-founder of I Am An Athlete, Too, a nonprofit that helps schools integrate adaptive athletes into public school sports programs. "His first [track] meet, the announcer asked the crowd for silence to pay attention to 'a very special race.' Luke was mortified. He did not want to be an exhibition, nor an inspiration to others. He simply wanted to race, race fast, and be the best he could be, like everyone else on the team."

But people's attitudes quickly changed the moment Bowman crossed the finish line, and just like that, the "poor kid in a wheelchair" was starting to make an impression.

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID HOSTETLER
© GETTY IMAGES/KRÄTZE/LEONELLO CALVETTI

2024

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A Multi-Sport Phenomenon

Bowman's athletic résumé is nothing short of impressive. As a member of both his high school track and field team and the Great Lakes Adaptive Sports Association (GLASA), he has excelled in a wide range of events. Bowman competes in sprints (100, 200 and 400 meters), middle-distance races (800 and 1,500) and field events (shot put and javelin).

He currently holds the adaptive division's 200, 400, 800, 1,500 and shot put state records in Michigan. These accomplishments alone would be noteworthy, but Bowman's athletic pursuits extend beyond the track.

In addition to his track and field success, Bowman is an accomplished wheelchair basketball player and adaptive soccer athlete. This multi-sport approach has allowed him to develop a well-rounded skill set and compete at a high level across various disciplines.

"I'm going into my ninth year of wheelchair basketball," says Bowman. "I started off on the Motor City Wheelz and now roster for the



CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO



Grand Rapids Mary Free
Bed Junior Pacers.”

Unfortunately, Bowman

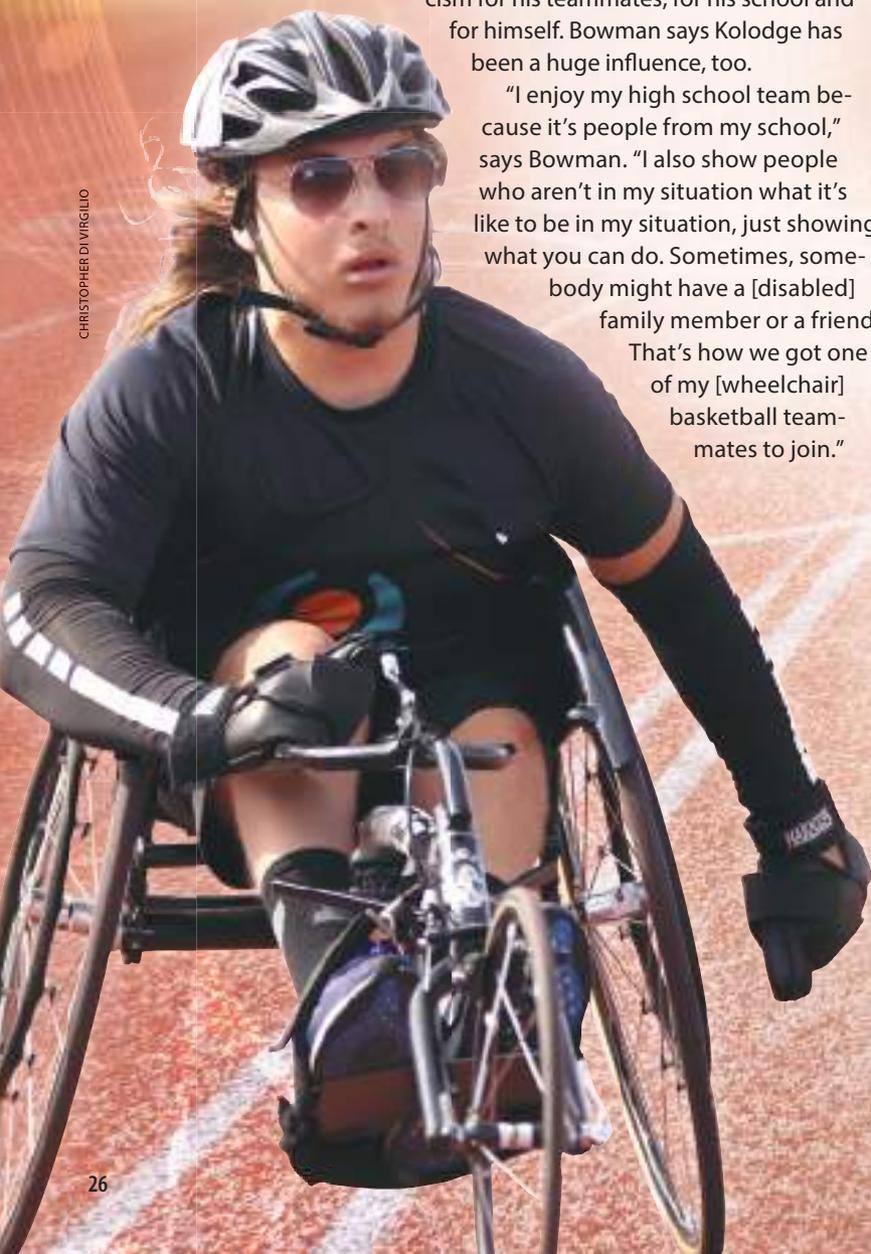
missed the 2024 National Wheelchair Basketball Association Wheelchair Basketball National Championships Junior Varsity NIT Division, opting to perform at a jazz concert scheduled for the same time. His team went on to place fifth in Richmond, Va.

Adaptive athlete or not, Bowman's speed is remarkable and his athleticism undeniable. He isn't just participating, he's excelling. Impressed by his natural talent, Bowman's coach, Sean Kolodge, volunteered to provide him with one-on-one training over the summer, and with each meet, he redefined athleticism for his teammates, for his school and for himself. Bowman says Kolodge has been a huge influence, too.

“I enjoy my high school team because it's people from my school,” says Bowman. “I also show people who aren't in my situation what it's like to be in my situation, just showing what you can do. Sometimes, somebody might have a [disabled] family member or a friend. That's how we got one of my [wheelchair] basketball teammates to join.”

The 2024 *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* Junior Athlete of the Year, Luke Bowman wheels a warm-up lap at July's The Hartford Nationals in Birmingham, Ala.

CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO



Luke Bowman, sitting, plays at a jazz weekend at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, Mich.

A Well-Rounded Individual

Bowman's interests extend beyond athletics and academics. As a member of his school's band program, he has earned a spot in the honors band, demonstrating his musical abilities and commitment to the arts.

“I've been playing [trumpet] since the fifth grade,” says Bowman. “At the time, it was before school for about an hour, once or twice a week and was a way for me to get involved in the fundamentals and the techniques, and I just took that and aspired to do even more.”

Bowman has played all through middle school and high school, and he participates with the school district's top two band programs. Inspired by his grandfather's love of music and musicians such as Freddie Hubbard, Donald Byrd and Louis Prima, Bowman has played venues from the Detroit Opera House to the Aretha Franklin-inspired Aretha's Jazz Café in Detroit.

Born with spina bifida, a condition that affects the spine and can cause physical disabilities, Bowman has faced numerous challenges throughout his life. He has undergone 28 corrective surgeries, each representing its own set of obstacles, recovery periods and potential setbacks. However, he refuses to let these challenges define him or limit his goals. In-



PVA Publications web content manager Christopher Di Virgilio, above left, presents Luke Bowman with a \$2,500 check as part of his 2024 SPORTS 'N SPOKES Junior Athlete of the Year award during a special presentation at July's The Hartford Nationals in Birmingham, Ala.



CHRISTOPHER DIVIRGLIO

stead, his perseverance and positive attitude have become his greatest strengths.

Training & Practice

The dedication and versatility of Bowman's training regimen are impressive. His commitment to maintaining peak performance throughout the year demonstrates a deep passion for his sports and personal growth.

During the competitive season, he engages in structured team practices for both track and wheelchair basketball. These sessions, primarily held outdoors on the track or in the gymnasium, focus on sport-specific skills and team dynamics. The occasional indoor weight room sessions add variety and strength training to his routine, allowing for a balanced approach to fitness.

"Training with GLASA, it's fun because everybody there is in a similar type of situation," Bowman says. "You can really gauge your abilities and share similar stories of what you've gone through and just have a fun time relating to each other and, you know, work hard at what you do. Having people who specialize in what you do and give you pointers on what they've done in the past."

More Than An Athlete

What sets Bowman apart is not just his athletic success, but his commitment to excellence in all areas of his life. As an exemplary student, Bowman

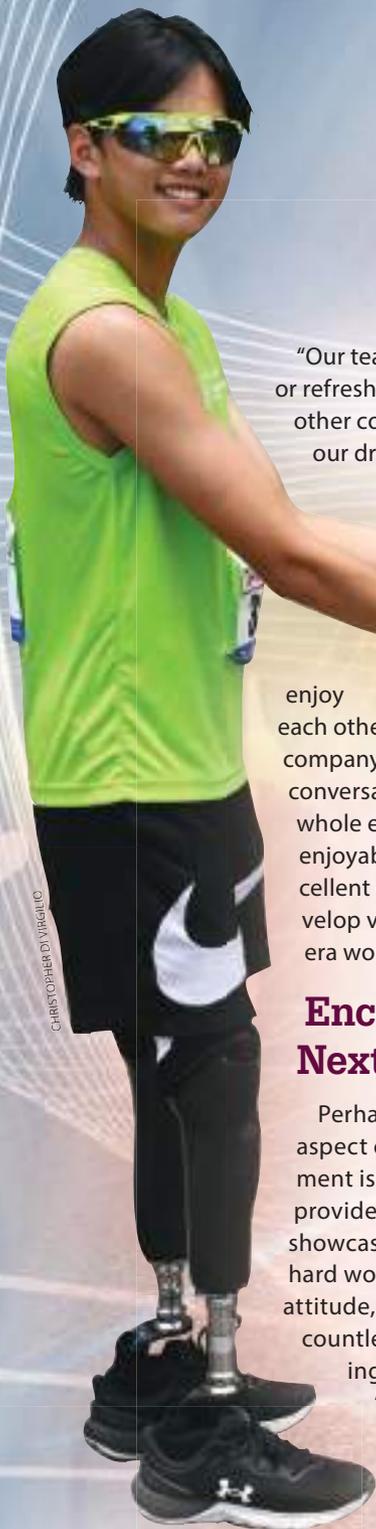
maintains a rigorous academic schedule, taking honors and advanced placement classes. His intellectual curiosity and drive mirror the determination he shows on the field of play.

Beyond academics, he has demonstrated a strong commitment to community service and leadership. As a member of Key Club, a student-led service organization, he regularly participates in volunteer activities that benefit his local community.

His involvement as a peer-to-peer mentor, working with cognitively delayed students, showcases his empathy and desire to make a positive impact on others.

"The students with cognitive challenges are similar to those of us with physical impairments," Bowman says. "We all need assistance with certain tasks, though their needs are more mental than physical. Like us, they desire inclusion, and I enjoy spending time with them — they're incredibly friendly, and we always have a great time together."

Bowman's service extends to his faith community, as well. He dedicates eight hours each week to the video production team at his church, utilizing his technical skills to enhance worship services and events. This commitment to his faith is further exemplified by his participation in a Christian student group, where he engages in spiritual growth and fellowship with his peers.



CHRISTOPHER D'VIRGILIO

“Our team is always ready to help, offering breaks or refreshments when needed. We support each other constantly,” Bowman says. “For instance, our drummer brings homemade meals for everyone. It’s a community where we

enjoy each other’s company and conversations. The whole experience is enjoyable, and it’s an excellent opportunity to develop valuable skills in camera work, technology and electronics.”

Encouraging The Next Generation

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Bowman’s achievement is the encouragement he provides to other young athletes. By showcasing what is possible through hard work, dedication and a positive attitude, he serves as a role model for countless individuals who may be facing their own challenges.

“It doesn’t matter where we go — to the mall, a restaurant, even in Buc-ee’s. If Luke sees a [young] person in a wheelchair or on crutches, he’s telling them all about adaptive sports and encouraging them to play,” says Sarah Bowman, Luke’s mother.

Luke petitioned the Michigan High School Athletic Association, lobbying them to make their pilot adaptive track category permanent. His continued advocacy encourages schools and communities to invest in adaptive sports programs, knowing that they can produce athletes of Luke’s caliber.

It also sends a powerful message about the importance of inclusivity in all aspects of life, from the track to the classroom to community service.

A Bright Future Ahead

As the 2024 *SPORTS ‘N SPOKES* Junior Athlete of the Year, Bowman joins an impressive list of past winners, such as Paralympians Anthony Lara (1988), Sarah Castle (2001), Josh George (2002), Steve Serio (2005) and Raymond Martin (2012).

As part of his award, Bowman received a \$2,500 cash prize, a custom-made engraved plaque and is featured in this issue of *SPORTS ‘N SPOKES* magazine.

In the past, *SPORTS ‘N SPOKES* has awarded educational scholarships to be used for higher education goals, but winners, some of them many years away from college, had a long wait to put that money to use. So, *SPORTS ‘N SPOKES* amended its prize pack this year, moving forward to offer it as a cash payout.

Bowman is the first to receive a cash

award and plans to put it to use soon.

“I want to modify my wheelchair with hybrid carbon fiber on the edges to be able to make it go faster and, you know, help with aerodynamics,” Bowman says. “And then for travel expenses, because sometimes going out of state and far off places isn’t the cheapest thing, and for some grooved gloves to be able to switch from soft gloves to hard gloves.”



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Luke Bowman, in photos, plays wheelchair basketball, competes in adaptive field events and wheelchair tennis, studies and is shown with friends and coaches. He's the 2024 *SPORTS 'N SPOKES* Junior Athlete of the Year.



ALL PHOTOS THIS PAGE COURTESY OF THE BOWMAN FAMILY



SOUTHERN

“The Big Easy” hosted big numbers of seasoned and new participants during the 2024 National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

After a big bang in New Orleans, the National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG) are back in full form.

by John Groth

For late-July’s 43rd NVWG in “The Big Easy,” wheelchair athletes came out in droves, with 529 competitors, including the most novices (129) in the event’s history.

Adaptive bass fishing and corn-hole made their debut as medal sports, along with wheelchair football as an exhibition event. Adaptive fitness was a grueling and intense workout; wheelchair softball featured an all-star game pitting this year’s all-star team against a lineup of NVWG all-star alumni; and one veteran defended his title in the advanced obstacle course known as “Super G,” while another longtime veteran athlete captured the title in the advanced motorized wheelchair obstacle course known as “Super M” for the first time.

Adaptive Fitness’ New Twist

After competing in the Games’ adaptive fitness event July 25, novice NVWG athlete and Army veteran



Darnell Calahan didn’t even have enough strength to get back to his hotel room.

New changes and event exercises left some athletes, including the PVA Nevada Chapter member, that gassed — in a good way.

This year, Class 1A, 1B and 1C wheelchair athletes had three minutes to do a Buy In 100-meter SkiErg, followed by as many repetitions as possible of 12 lap-to-overhead presses (1As having no load/arms only and 1B/1C having 10 pounds/7.5 pounds), eight Russian twists and three box jump/U-turns with their wheelchair in a rectangular area before getting a 30-second rest. Class 2/3 and 4/5 had to do a Buy In of 200 meters on the SkiErg, and then 12 lap-to-overhead presses (Class 2/3s having 25 pounds/15 pounds and Class 4/5 having 35 pounds/25 pounds), eight Russian twists and three box jump/U-turns with their wheelchair in a rectangular area before getting a 30-second rest and then having to repeat the process.

SUCCESSSES



CHRISTOPHER DAMIGLIO

Army veteran Darnell Calahan competed at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games for the first time this year, winning gold in wheelchair softball and exhausting himself in adaptive fitness in New Orleans.

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GAMES
2024

6



PHOTO COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA

Army veteran Anthony Martinez performs a seated deadlift, a new part of the adaptive fitness event this year.

Calahan, who sustained a level T11/T12 spinal-cord injury (SCI) in 2019 in Georgia, says the workout left him so exhausted he couldn't even lift his arms to attach his SmartDrive assist to his wheelchair. Someone else had to put it on for him and then push him back to his room.

"Oh man, that was really hard. It was really hard," Calahan says. "I think it was as hard as it was because on the first round, I was like, 'Crank it up and give me the max resistance.' That way every pull gets you farther. That made sense the first time. But the second time I told the fella, 'Hey, can we turn it down a bit?' before the time started, but they didn't get it. So, they kept me at the same position. And I'm going to tell you right now, that took me out. I didn't have enough energy for nothing else after that."

Later, before the powerlifting event, athletes also had to do a seated deadlift to complete the event.

Count Army veteran Anthony Martinez among its fans. Martinez served from 2005 to 2008 as a

parachute rigger and was injured March 17, 2013, in Lemoore, Calif., in a single-car accident and is an above-the-right-knee amputee. He started powerlifting at the Games in 2019 and has done adaptive fitness the past couple years.

"I'm all about that. I loved it. I loved it," says Martinez, a Lemoore, Calif., resident. "I mean, for me, that is the ultimate test for us wheelchair athletes. 'Cause, I mean, we're in a wheelchair all day. We push, push, push ... a benchpress is pressing. But the seated deadlift, a strong back, strong everything, you really need to be strong for that lift."

Fishing Reels Anglers In

Energy was also in good supply for anglers and boat captains during the NVWG's inaugural adaptive bass fishing event. Up early in the morning

and into the early afternoon July 23, they not only caught fish but saw some alligators lurking near their boats, too.

An Air Force veteran and New Orleans resident, Johnny Vanderson and his boat captain and Walker, La., resident Scott Boyd won the adaptive bass fishing title at Bayou Segnette State Park in Westwego, La.

The event was run much like the PVA Bass Tour, but with a few tweaks.

For the team-style tournament, boat captains and disabled anglers could catch a maximum of five bass, with each being at least 12 inches long. There were two divisions — open team and individual bank.

The 83-year-old Vanderson and 62-year-old Boyd teamed up to catch five fish totaling 5.85 pounds to earn the open division title, as vet-

eran James Tipton and boat captain Austin Plaisance finished second with three fish totaling 5.19 pounds and veteran Scott Smith and boat captain Kevin Vidrine placed third with five fish totaling 4.92 pounds.

Boat captains' catches counted towards their disabled angler's catch total. So, a boat captain could catch all five fish, a disabled angler could catch all five fish or they could split it up.

Vanderson and Boyd caught the full allotment of five fish between them, including one by Vanderson.

"It was wild. I had something at the end of my line that was pulling back," says Vanderson, an amputee. "It wasn't easy. It was kinda hard. It was different."

After trying out adaptive fishing, he's now hooked — especially after catching his first fish — and he's planning to attend the PVA Bass Tour's fishing event there in October.

Boyd, a local resident and tournament fisherman, noticed the fish weren't as active and that the water had changed midway through, so he suggested Vanderson, along with PVA veteran angler Paul Stewart, who also fished on Boyd's boat, switch up baits. They went from plastic baits to a wacky worm, a soft plastic or rubber worm that's hooked through the middle to dangle freely, and a damiki rig, which is a singular jighead and straight tail minnow.

Tipton and Plaisance earned the tournament's Big Fish award with their 3.12-pound catch.

None of the four adaptive fishers who competed in bank fishing caught a fish, so there was no bank

Air Force veteran and New Orleans resident Johnny Vanderson, in front, along with boat captain Scott Boyd, standing, won the National Veterans Wheelchair Games' inaugural adaptive bass fishing event.



CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO

Gators lurked in the water during the adaptive bass fishing event at Bayou Segnette State Park in Westwego, La.



CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO



CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO

Navy veteran Angela Walker, seated, fished off the bank during the National Veterans Wheelchair Games' first adaptive bass fishing event.

division winner. But Navy veteran and PVA Wisconsin Chapter member Angela Walker had a blast. The Waukegan, Ill., resident who sustained a SCI after a fall in 1988 just started doing adaptive fishing two years ago with the PVA Wisconsin Chapter.

She was originally going to go fishing from a boat, but after she heard about the alligators, she decided to fish from the bank.

"I think it's very calming. It also tests your endurance because, you know, you have to reel it in. And sometimes that can be a little challenging. But I like the challenge and I like ... I like the joy of fishing. If you actually do catch something, OK, it's really nice to be able to see it. And even if it's a catch and release or if it's a catch and take home, it's still gratifying," Walker says. "And then, it's being out in nature, which is important. And being with other veterans like myself, of course, it makes it very important because we get a chance to talk to each other, hear each other's ideas."

Softball All-Stars

Meanwhile, in the inaugural NVWG All-Star Wheelchair Softball game, the 2024 NVWG All-Star team made a statement by shutting out the NVWG All-Star Alumni team.

NVWG 2024 All-Stars player Nakia Merritte hit an RBI first-inning double, MVP and Army veteran Gene Calantoc had a single and a walk and pitcher and Navy veteran Joe Wittcamp had an RBI single and didn't allow a run in a 4-0 victory July 29 over the NVWG All-Star Alumni team at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in New Orleans.

An Army and Iraq War veteran and San Antonio resident, Merritte served from 1999 to 2015 as an infantryman.

But in 2007, he sustained multiple injuries, including a bulged spinal cord, his left foot being fused at the ankle and post-traumatic stress disorder, after an improvised explosive device went off during a tour in Iraq.

He only found out that he'd made the 2024 All-Star team just after finishing a wheelchair basketball game, less than three hours before the all-star wheelchair softball game.

"I was shocked. I'm glad I got picked. I enjoyed it,"



CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO

Banding Together

COURTESY OF DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Merritte says. "What was fun about it, you know, playing with some of my basketball players, teammates. Gene, he got MVP.

Me and him are from the same chapter, San Antonio. And we held the all-star team from last year to zero, so that was fun."

Tied 0-0 with one out in the bottom of the first inning, Wittcamp, who two days before pitched Team Gumbo to the wheelchair softball title despite battling some health issues, singled home a run. Then, Merritte added an RBI double and Air Force veteran Ryan Lindstrom added an RBI groundout to give the 2024 NVWG team a 3-0 advantage. Army veteran Terrence Green wheeled home on an error in the bottom of the sixth to finish off the scoring.

Wittcamp pitched all seven innings, allowing just four hits and recording one strikeout.

NVWG Alumni player and Army veteran Jimmy Green had two hits and Air Force/National Guard veteran Robert York and Navy veteran Jackie Jones had one each.



The Grammy-nominated Hot 8 Brass Band performed during the July 24 opening ceremony of the 43rd National Veterans Wheelchair Games at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in New Orleans.



Novice athlete and 2024 National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG) All-Stars team member and Army veteran Kathleen Boumans swings at a pitch from NVWG All-Star Alumni team member and Army veteran Lee Sexton during the NVWG All-Stars wheelchair softball game. The 2024 All-Stars won the inaugural game, 4-0.



Army veteran Russ Norris uses his "bunny-hop" method in the sand, gravel and rock pit during the obstacle course known as "Super G" final.

Norris Defends "Super G"

In the obstacle course known as "Super G," Army veteran and PVA Northwest Chapter member Russ Norris actually hoped he'd be dethroned as the champ.

On the last run of the morning, Navy veteran, PVA Mountain States Chapter member and NVWG novice Cody Smith nearly did it.

But Norris' time was just good enough, as he won by a couple seconds, finishing in 3 minutes and 28 seconds during the NVWG's final day (July 30) at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in New Orleans.

This year's event featured a couple of new speed bump areas, which gave competitors, including Norris, some trouble early in the course.

"The speed bumps at the very beginning, those kind of tripped me up there. Well, they're higher and the face of them is much steeper, so you really got to get up on it and muscle through it," says Norris, who served from 2002 to 2008 and sustained a level L1 incomplete SCI after a 2008 four-wheeler accident.

Then, the Tacoma, Wash., resident worked his way through other areas, including the sand, gravel and rock pit, which he moved through by doing multiple bunny hops with his wheelchair.

"The more I do it, the better I get at it," Norris says. "I call it my signature move."

Hendrickson Delivers Title

After just missing out on the "Super M" motorized slalom obstacle course title last year, William "Willie" Hendrickson has it this time around. It's a first for the longtime NVWG participant.

CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO



Army veteran William Hendrickson won the "Super M" motorized obstacle course title at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games.



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New Exhibition Sport

Athletes participated in wheelchair football clinics at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games at the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in New Orleans. Wheelchair football was an exhibition sport at this year's Games. Since there weren't helmets for interested athletes, organizers hosted instructional skills clinics about the sport instead.

The 58-year-old Army veteran and PVA Cal-Diego Chapter member won the title in 3 minutes and 8 seconds, defeating seven other competitors in the July 30 championship during the Games' final day.

Hendrickson served from 1984 to 1986 as a cavalry scout and sustained level C4/C5/C6 incomplete SCIs in 2005 from a motorcycle accident in California. He has won the motorized slalom 18 out of 19 years — with his only loss coming to Rene Peterson in 2021 in New York City — although this was just the second year for the "Super M" at the Games.

Hendrickson made the "Super M" last year, but too many cone penalties cost him. This time around he stayed more patient. He also competed in a new power wheelchair — an Invacare TDX SP2 — which

he received earlier this year. Both helped.

Hendrickson says he checked out the course at 7 a.m. — three hours before the "Super M" — to memorize it. But he says the hardest part of the "Super M" was the board that you had to keep one wheel on.

"That was my idea — to put a board on the floor and make you put a tire on it ... You need everyday stuff that we deal with," Hendrickson says. "Just putting a board on the floor, it represents an uneven sidewalk. And everybody does it, so why can't they do it here?"

For more photos, videos and stories, visit pnonline.com or facebook/pnmagazine.com.

S'NS

People

Agosto Earns Spirit Of The Games Honor

by Brittany Martin

Making other people smile is what motivates Keyla Agosto. And there were plenty of smiles — as well as a few happy tears — to go around when she was named the 2024 Spirit of the Games award winner July 30 during the closing ceremony of the National Veterans Wheelchair Games (NVWG) inside the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in New Orleans.



Keyla Agosto holds the 2024 National Veterans Wheelchair Games Spirit of the Games trophy.

As the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) Puerto Rico Chapter member and Army veteran made her way up to the stage to accept her trophy, her teammates sang a traditional song in Spanish, saying she was a “boricua,” or “native Puerto Rican, just to let you know.”

The 34-year-old Bayamon, Puerto Rico, resident, who has multiple sclerosis (MS), says she was surprised by the honor and was happy to share the moment with her teammates.

“You think when you do stuff like this nobody sees what you are doing. And now, I feel surprised because a lot of people see when I have a happy spirit,” she says. “But, at the same time, it’s the first year my husband [Hector Ortiz] has not been here.”

Started in 1987, the Spirit of the Games award honors the NVWG athlete who best exemplifies athletic performance, sportsmanship and good character. Winners are nominated by their peers.

CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO



Paralyzed Veterans of America Puerto Rico Chapter member Keyla Agosto, with ball, enjoys playing wheelchair basketball.

Agosto says she believes she was selected because of her spirit.

“Because I think I have the spirit to try and make people happy,” she says. “And I’m always smiling. And sometimes people think like I’m fake, and I’m not. I wake up with a smile and go to sleep with a smile. Like, it’s my personality.”

CHANGING HER MINDSET

Agosto joined the Army in 2013 and worked as an 88H cargo specialist. She was diagnosed with MS in 2021 and was officially discharged in 2023.

“I’ve loved sports since I was a child. I played basketball as a child,” Agosto says. “But when I got diagnosed with MS, I could not play anymore because I cannot play for a long time. I cannot stand for a long time. I have to sit. The same time I got diagnosed, I got depression and anxiety because my whole life changed.”

CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO

Her depression caused her to lose a great deal of weight, so her psychologist, Luis Rivas at the San Juan Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center in Puerto Rico, urged her to try playing sports in a wheelchair.

"I was like, 'How can I play in a wheelchair if I'm walking?' And he told me, 'Believe me, it will change your life.' And I was like, 'Well, let's see,'" Agosto says.

She's since competed in the NVWG, which is co-sponsored by PVA and the VA, for three years and says it changed her mindset.

"When I went to the Wheelchair Games [in 2022], I felt like they opened me up," she says. "They exposed me to a lot of stuff. And now if they tell me, 'We have this and that,' my answer is, 'Yes, yes.'"

COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA



Keyla Agosto, squatting left, cheers on another veteran athlete during the swimming competition at the 2024 National Veterans Wheelchair Games in New Orleans.



Keyla Agosto competed in swimming and earned a gold medal in the Open V class 100-meter freestyle at this year's 43rd National Veterans Wheelchair Games July 25-30 in New Orleans.



Keyla Agosto prepares to hit the ball in a wheelchair softball game at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games in New Orleans.

JUST DO IT

Agosto had a full itinerary at this year's NVWG, as well, competing in wheelchair basketball, wheelchair softball, swimming, field events (discus and javelin), bocchia and cornhole.

She won team gold medals in wheelchair basketball (Team Esplanade) and wheelchair softball (Team Gumbo), individual gold medals in swimming (100-meter freestyle), discus and bocchia and an individual silver medal in javelin.

She says wheelchair basketball is her favorite, and she hopes one day to compete with the Puerto Rican national team at the Paralympics.

Agosto says seeing veterans with other types of disabilities competing at the Games inspires her.

"Sometimes when you have a disability, you feel you cannot do stuff," she says. "But the best experience is to see people swimming without a foot, without a hand. Because I have



Army veterans Keyla Agosto, right, and Jennifer Steele take a selfie at the 43rd National Veterans Wheelchair Games in New Orleans.

“You think when you do stuff like this nobody sees what you are doing. And now, I feel surprised because a lot of people see when I have a happy spirit.” — **Keyla Agosto**

two hands, I have two legs and it's hard, but it's like, 'How are they doing that?' Yesterday, I was talking about that and say, 'They swim with their heart.' They have to, because it's hard."

Agosto, who is the third PVA Puerto Rico Chapter member to win the award and first Puerto Rican female, urges other veterans with disabilities to get out and find their passion.

"Don't stay at home waiting ... because sports change your life," she says. "I know not everyone loves sports, but maybe they love school, or they have to do whatever they want to.

And don't think they cannot do stuff. Like, they just have to do it."

When she's not playing sports, Agosto is working on earning her doctorate in education and has a goal of teaching sign language to young students.

"I think they have to teach at school to everyone how to speak sign language, and I think this is my purpose, to teach people to do sign language," she says. "Because sometimes the kids get frustrated because they cannot communicate, and they keep doing therapy to speak. Sometimes, it just changes them. Like, they can communicate, just with their hands."

Along with her trophy, Agosto received a \$2,000 flight voucher to a U.S. destination of her choice and complimentary travel and lodging for the 2025 NVWG in Minneapolis, courtesy of First Nation Group.

For more NVWG stories and photos, read *Southern Successes* on page 30, visit pnonline.com and facebook.com/pnmagazine.

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On The Sidelines

BASKETBALL

Richmond Rebound

The National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) Adult and Junior Division Wheelchair Basketball National Tournaments are staying in Virginia.

The NWBA, along with sports club Sportable, Richmond Region Tourism and Henrico Sports & Entertainment Authority, announced July 16 that the 2025 events would be held over the first two weekends of April in the River City area. The championships will be held at the Henrico Sports & Event Center in Glen Allen, Va.

The Junior Division will lead things off with the top 32 ranked Varsity teams and the top 16 ranked Prep teams earning an invitation to participate in the NWBA Varsity and Prep Wheelchair Basketball National Championships April 4–6, 2025.

The following weekend, the top 16 ranked wheelchair basketball teams for each Adult Division (I, II, III) will earn an invitation to their respective division's national tournament April 11–13, 2025.

Roughly 96 teams and more than 1,100 wheelchair basketball players took part in both events earlier this year in Glen Allen.

For more information, visit nwba.org.

The National Wheelchair Basketball Association Adult and Junior National Tournaments will be held in Glen Allen, Va., again this year.



CHRISTOPHER DI VIRGILIO

EDUCATION

Conference Moving To Utah

The Move United Education Conference is headed north to some cooler weather next year.

After holding the event the last few years in Phoenix, Move United announced in June that the National Ability Center in Park City, Utah, will host the 2025 conference. The 2025 Move United Education Conference is set for May 5–7, with pre-conference workshop opportunities starting May 3.

The conference brings together sport providers who share a dedication to ensuring that athletes with disabilities have fair access to sports and is anticipated to attract over 400 attendees.

“The Move United Education Conference provides a unique opportunity to bring together leaders in adaptive sports and recreation, fostering collaboration and driving progress towards greater inclusivity,” says chief program and education officer at the National Ability Center Tracy Meier in a press release. “We’re so happy to be a part of this conference and

The 2034 Paralympic and Olympic Winter Games will be in Salt Lake City.



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can't wait to showcase our programs and facilities."

Located just east of Salt Lake City, the National Ability Center will be celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2025. Each year, the center empowers more than 5,500 people in over 30,000 experiences and lessons, including snow skiing, snowboarding, horseback riding, cycling, swimming and more.

For more information on the education conference, visit moveunitedsport.org. For more information on the National Ability Center, visit discovernac.org.

MEDIA

Meet The Quad Gods

A new documentary gaining national acclaim about an esports team of quadriplegics is now available on Max (formerly HBO Max).

Making its world premiere in June at the Tribeca Festival, *Quad Gods* follows the lives of a group of New Yorkers with quadriplegia. They met at the Mount Sinai Hospital neurological rehabilitation center and created the

world's first fully quadriplegic esports team — Quad Gods.

Holding a 7.1 out of 10 rating on the media database imdb.com in late July, the film isn't just about using adaptive chin controls and other devices to play video games and compete in competitions.

The 90-minute documentary delves into the lives of Blake, Prentice and Richard, including their friendship, the accessible barriers they face and more.

"Providing a unique lens into both gaming and disability, this captivating story challenges assumptions and spotlights the restorative power of resilience, passion and found community," writes Andrea Passafiume on the Tribeca website (tribecafilm.com).

For more information, visit quadgods.com.

PARALYMPICS

Games Return To Salt Lake

The Paralympic and Olympic Winter Games are coming back to a familiar location in the Rocky Mountains, but their return to the United States isn't without some controversy.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) announced July 24 that the 2034 Winter Games will be returning to Salt Lake City. Utah's capital city previously hosted the Winter Paralympics and Olympics in 2002, which was the last time the Games were held in the United States.

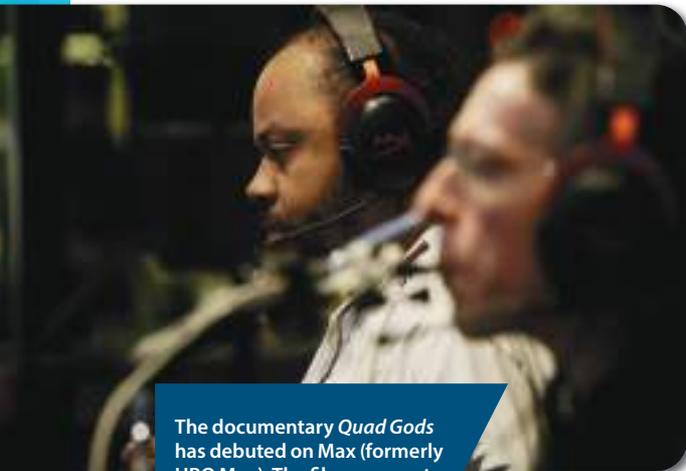
However, landing the Games involved the IOC pushing Utah leaders and the Salt Lake City-Utah Committee for the Games organizing committee to lobby the United States government to end its investigation of suspected doping activity by Chinese swimmers who competed at the 2021 Tokyo Summer Olympics.

The U.S. investigation centers around 23 swimmers from China who tested positive for the banned heart drug trimetazidine at the Tokyo Games. The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) accepted China's explanation that the positive tests were because the athletes were "inadvertently being exposed to the substance through food/environment contamination" and allowed them to compete in Tokyo. Several of those athletes competed at this year's Olympic Games in Paris.

The IOC sees the U.S. investigation as a challenge to the authority of the WADA and wants it stopped. To that end, the host contract from the IOC allows it to pull the Games from Salt Lake City if "the supreme authority of the World Anti-Doping Agency in the fight against doping is not fully respected or if the application of the World Anti-Doping Code is hindered or undermined."

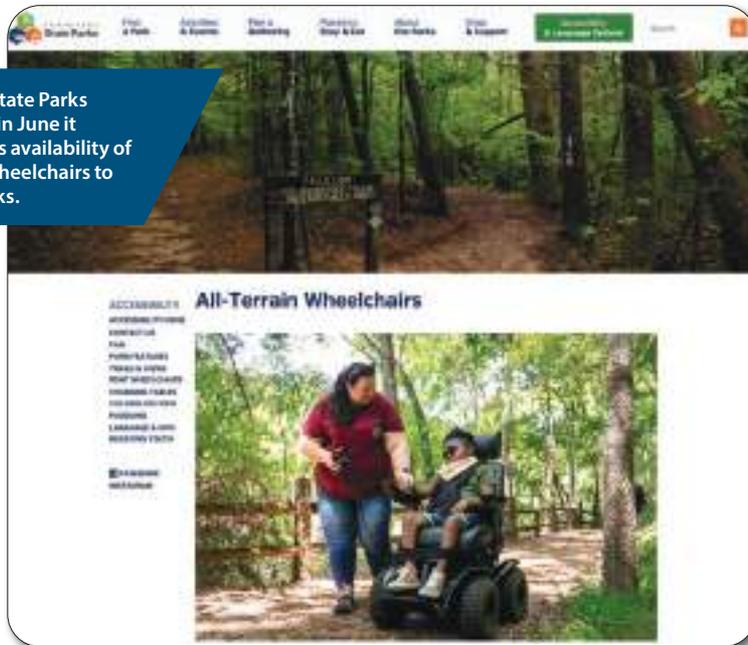
The IOC press release announcing the Winter Games' return to Salt Lake City states that, "This measure has been fully supported by the State of Utah and the USOPC [United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee]."

JESS JACKLIN



The documentary *Quad Gods* has debuted on Max (formerly HBO Max). The film came out in late July.

Tennessee State Parks announced in June it expanded its availability of all-terrain wheelchairs to 22 state parks.



TNSTATEPARKS.COM

The vote to award the Paralympic and Olympic Winter Games to Salt Lake City was 83 yes votes by IOC members, six no votes and six abstentions.

The next Winter Games are set for Milan, Italy, in 2026.

TikTok Tops 4 Million

Even before this year's Paralympic Summer Games got underway in Paris, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) had one of the most popular sports accounts in the world on TikTok.



TIKTOK.COM

In late July, the International Paralympic Committee announced its TikTok account had surpassed 4 million followers.

The IPC announced in late July that its TikTok account had topped 4 million followers. Launched in 2020, the @Paralympics account had more than 1.8 billion video views by mid-July 2024. One video featuring handcyclists lined up on

the start line at the Tokyo Paralympic Games in 2021 amassed nearly 77 million views.

"Since joining TikTok in 2020, the @Paralympics account has utilized a combination of humor, trends and sounds to shine a light on Paralympians and the Paralympics," says TikTok's Global Head of Sports Partnerships Rollo Goldstaub in an IPC press release. "This relatable content has broken down barriers and educated their community. We're excited to see the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games come to life on TikTok."

In addition to having more than 1.8 billion views in just four years, content on the @Paralympics TikTok account has achieved more than 159.7 million likes, making it the most engaged account in world sport with regards to followers/likes.

RECREATION

Tennessee Trail Chairs

Wheelchair users have a new and easier way to enjoy state parks in Tennessee.

Tennessee State Parks announced in June that it has expanded the availability of new all-terrain wheelchairs to 10 additional parks throughout the state. The new addition makes 22 Tennessee state parks where the chairs are available.

The wheelchairs are the result of a collaboration between the parks and Sunrise Medical, which designs and manufactures the wheelchairs, and the Tennessee Department of Disability and Aging.

The wheelchairs are designed to navigate a wide range of terrains. The chairs are free for visitor use and available for both children and adults. They can be operated independently and offer the option of allowing caretaker control.

It's possible for visitors to request an all-terrain wheelchair upon arrival at a park, but it may already be reserved. Visitors are asked to give advance notice of the need for a wheelchair.

For more information, including a list of parks or to make a reservation for a chair, visit tnstateparks.com/accessibility.

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The Editorials from **SPORTS 'N SPOKES** 1975 to 2007 Cliff Crase

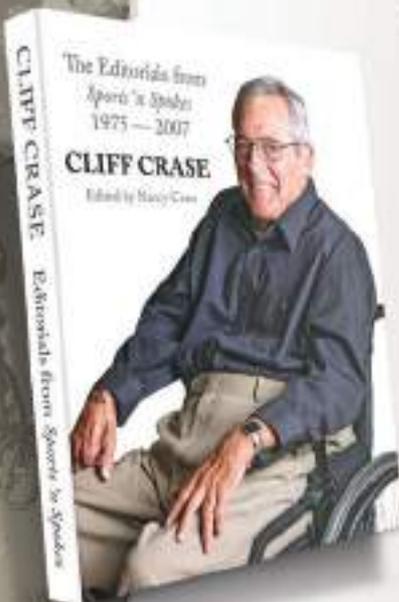
Edited by Nancy Crase

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Final Frame

One Tasty Morsel

During the 43rd National Veterans Wheelchair Games' inaugural adaptive bass fishing event, Paralyzed Veterans of America Central Florida Chapter member Eddie Hawks ran out of hands to hold up his catch. So, he used his mouth to hold one of the fish, while boat captain Austin Plaisance stands next to him July 23 at Bayou Segnette State Park in Westwego, La. Photo by Christopher Di Virgilio.



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