

They call it Murderball

Wheelchairs collide in quadriplegic rugby, a rough and competitive sport that blasts away doubts and doldrums.

By STEVE PERSALL

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TAMPA - Sneakers don't squeak on the floor's varnish when these athletes stop or change directions Tuesday nights at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Gymnasium. Instead, a quiet hum accompanies court motion, created by another use of rubber for sports mobility:

Wheelchair tires.

But not just any wheelchairs in a sport that isn't merely a game.

These are fortified models specially designed for quadriplegic rugby, perhaps known better as Murderball, the title of an acclaimed documentary about the sport and its players. Built lower to the ground, and wider than some doorways, they cost at least \$2,000 each before being customized into Road Warrior-style chariots.

It's a small price to reclaim some of what fate has stolen.

Some qualify as players because childhood polio or rare viral diseases that required limb amputation. Many "quads," as players refer to themselves, became paralyzed simply by being in the wrong place at the wrong time: a car that strayed off the road, a lake that seemed safe for diving, or an inner tube dragged behind a boat. One second, one miscalculation, and lives are altered forever.

In Justin Stark's case, the wrong place should've been a right one for a 10-year-old child. Stark, now 26, was playing at a classmate's home when something snapped in his friend's father, who grabbed a gun and began shooting everyone in sight. Stark's sister, Jennifer, was killed. Stark took a bullet in his neck that severely damaged two vertebrae, and another bullet over his right eye, where an arching surgical scar still shows.

"It could've been a lot worse," he said as other players arrived at the gym.

Years later, playing a rough and occasionally tumble sport makes life a bit better. At least it's an interesting conversation starter with able-bodied people surprised that the man in a wheelchair plays something called rugby.

"The first question is always: "Well, how do you push around on grass?" " Stark said. "Then I have to explain the sport's played inside, and the next question is: "Are you crazy?" "

If so, there are plenty like him. The U.S. Quad Rugby Association's Web site(www.quadrugby.com) says at least 400 players compete on more than 30 teams in the United States. Seventeen other countries field all-star teams for international competition such as the Summer Paralympic Games held every four years. The movie Murderball follows Team USA, led by All-American Mark Zupan, on its drive to a 2004 Paralympics medal in Athens, Greece.

Stark plays for the Tampa Generals, ranked 10th nationally for the new season beginning in October. Tuesday night workouts at the MLK gym are currently for scrimmages, even open to future opponents such as players from Sarasota's Hoveround Lightning club. The Generals have won three national championships since their inception in 1989.

The game is a hybrid of basketball - with its court setting, tipoffs, inbound plays, passing and dribbling - and football with its jarring collisions and style of scoring. Four players in manual wheelchairs are combined according to a detailed classification according to their mobility, dexterity and strength from .5 (most impaired) to 3.5 (least impaired). Anyone rated higher than 3.5 isn't eligible. (Players have differing degrees of quadriplegia, which can range from no mobility to some. The rating is compiled by computing the range of motion in each joint. Every joint counts in the final compilation.) Teams can't have players on the court totaling more than 8 points at any time. Stark's various strengths and weaknesses in his upper body earned a 2.0 classification.

The objective is to advance the ball until a player with possession crosses the court's end line with two wheels of his or her chair. It isn't as easy as it sounds, with all the defensive steals and bumper car action going on. Games are divided into four quarters, eight minutes each.

Players are tightly strapped into their wheelchairs, but that doesn't prevent the occasional breath-stealing tumble. Serious injuries are rare; mostly players suffer broken fingers and bruises. That doesn't prevent some quadriplegics who don't participate from doubting those who do, on Internet message boards.

"I read all these (posts) by people saying: "Oh, those guys who play rugby are crazy. I'm not risking injury doing that," " said Stark, a manager for the Florida Spinal Cord Injury Resource Center in Tampa.

"You can tell they've never seen the game but they see a guy fall in a photo and it's like: "Well, they're just asking to get hurt again.' They still have that fear that they're breakable. They can't fathom (quads) being active like this."

Working with patients still adjusting to life as quadriplegics, Stark encourages those who are ready to use rugby, or any wheelchair-related sport, as extended therapy.

"It's early on for a lot of them," he says. "But you only learn so much in rehab. You learn so much more by hanging around guys with similar injuries as you; more than any therapist. A lot of guys are hesitant at first. But you have to get them out there, even if it takes dragging them.

"They're skeptical: 'Am I going to be able to do it?' Once you try, you start realizing you're on a level playing field.

"Then you go to a tournament and see a hundred guys in (wheel)chairs, and they all have the same story. They've all gone through the same thing. No longer are you the outsider. You're just one of, you know, anybody."

Brandon resident Ryan Lindstrom, 21, didn't need any persuasion to play. He was still locked in a padded chair and neck brace in 2002 when he saw his first wheelchair rugby game, only weeks after crashing his car during his first leave from Navy training.

"I'm sitting there saying: 'Oh, man, I'm playing this. I'm playing this,' " said Lindstrom, rated a Class 3.0 athlete. "My Mom's sitting next to me saying: 'Oh, no you're not.' "

Six months later, Lindstrom signed up with the Generals. "I got into it as fast as I could because I didn't want to lie in a bed forever," he said. "I got up and got my a-- moving. Playing rugby doesn't just teach you how to live, but teaches you how to have fun."

Even his mother, Cathie, 47, stopped worrying and learned to love the game.

"The first time she saw me fall down, she nearly fainted," Lindstrom said. "Now, she sees me hitting people and she's yelling 'Hit him harder.' "

Cathie Lindstrom clearly remembered that first fall, and what getting up again did for her son.

"I didn't think I was ever going to breathe again," she said during the scrimmage. "After going to that game, I knew my son was going to be all right."

She sat alongside Ryan's closest friends, Bryan Hartz, 20, and Thor Nalsen, 23, who share a home with him nicknamed "Quad Delta House" for their Animal House antics. They're also his partners in a business making clear plastic spoke guards for rugby chairs that won't dent like the metal guards in Murderball. When players get tired, Hartz and Nalsen strap into wheelchairs to fill out the teams.

"If I had to make a choice to be completely well again, I wouldn't give up these friends," said Lindstrom, who recently won five medals, including three golds, at the National Veteran Wheelchair Games in Wisconsin.

"Between that event and rugby, there's nothing the kid can't do," Cathie Lindstrom said. "Rugby has changed his world tremendously. If it wasn't for this game, I don't think he'd be as far along as he is. Without rugby, I think his world would be closed."

That's how Mark Hickey, 46, felt for 11 years before discovering wheelchair rugby. Hickey, a class 3.0 Generals player, was riding an inner tube dragged behind a boat on Lake Seminole in 1980 when he slipped off, breaking his neck and, for a long time, his spirit.

"I was just existing in the chair day by day," Hickey said. "When I got into rugby, I started living in the chair."

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MURDERBALL ON THE WEB

St. Petersburg Times film critic Steve Persall gave the film Murderball an A, calling it "a defiant film on all counts, refusing to push those emotional buttons Hollywood has worn down to nubs." The review, which appeared in Thursday's Weekend section, can be found at www.sptimes.com/links