

# A Valuable Practice...

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*Sometimes in the whirling chaos of life, you meet people who change you; people who unknowingly help you learn valuable lessons about your own existence...*

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photo by Dean Leonard

Eddie Crouch of Smyrna, and Wayne Romero of Lewisburg

The shrill sound of a coach's whistle interrupted my anxious thoughts and my busy stride as I entered the brightly lit Tennessee Rehabilitation Center one Friday night in Smyrna. My wondering gaze absorbed the warm yellow of the basketball court and it's freshly polished surface, aglow with mirrored images of activity. The whistle assaulted my ears once again and I glanced up, as a small army of wildly pumping wheelchairs raced towards me. They battled for control in a mad entanglement of arms; the powerful echo of clashing metal, sharp and intimidating. Stepping back, I pulled my children in behind me and held my breath. The battling men in wheelchairs halted before us as quickly as they came and I slowly let the air out of my lungs.

We made our way to the bleachers and sat down, enthralled by what we had just witnessed and excited to see more. A couple of friendly faces stared in our direction and I threw my hand up, feeling as if I knew them already. I had seen their photos on the Internet and had spoken with them through that same venue for many days upon hearing of their upcoming competition in Sydney.

Eddie Crouch of Smyrna, and Wayne Romero of Lewisburg introduced themselves graciously and seemed genuinely pleased that we had come to watch their competition. They, along with Cliff Chappin of

they don't "play nice" (by making physical contact with each other), but wheelchair retaliation is allowed.

While observing their manic stop and start performance, individual skills and personalities became obvious; Romero, cool and in control, intercepts an impossible pass and makes an effortless break for the goal line and Crouch, with unconscious flair and confidence glides along, scooping up the ball with one hand and flipping it into the air with a playful spin.

My oldest boy sat patiently nearby, mesmerized by the action, but desperately wanting to join in. After building up enough nerve to ask, he was kindly given permission to play for a few minutes. He found an empty chair and wheeled himself right into the middle of the action with eyes wide open, while mine were shut tight. Thankfully, the "big guys" were careful not to bump him too hard and he loved every minute of it. Crouch and Romero were both quick to point out that the level of play witnessed here was nowhere near that which will be played in Sydney. "The last few years have seen the fitness levels of players increase significantly. This, along with advances in chair design, has created a faster, harder hitting game resulting in a lot more injuries. The athletes we'll face in Sydney are much tougher."

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Eddie Crouch of Smyrna, and Wayne Romero of Lewisburg introduced themselves graciously and seemed genuinely pleased that we had come to watch them in action. They, along with Cliff Chunn of Brentwood (who was regrettably not present), are members of an elite team of wheelchair athletes known as Team USA Rugby. Having won nothing less than gold in it's 10 years of competitive history, including the gold medal in Atlanta, this US Paralympic team of twelve represents a mighty force to be reckoned with. They will enter this year's competition as the #1 seed in their first match-up with Switzerland.

Crouch, a veteran player and the current vice-president of the United States Quad Rugby Association, said these 2000 games should be the most competitive ever. "The depth of competitive teams has increased considerably since the '96 and '98 World Championships. With Australia being one of those teams, and in our pool, it should be exciting."

For the first time this year, Wheelchair Rugby will move forward as a full medal sport in Sydney's 2000 Paralympic Games after having gained enormous popularity when played in Atlanta four years ago. "Murderball", as it was originally named because of it's aggressive nature, is played much like a combination of basketball and hockey, except each team has four players and 16 wheels. Man-to-man defense is set up, and chairs forcefully collide with each other, reminding me of a somewhat uncivilized bumper car ride. The object of the game involves passing a volleyball to an open man in hopes of scoring across a goal line. The player in possession of the ball has only 10 seconds to dribble or pass; otherwise it becomes a turnover and players can be sent to the penalty box if

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Strength and determination often shows in the faces of competitive athletes; but courage and an undeniable passion for life is more profoundly evident in the face of someone who sits in a wheelchair, for they have truly been intimate with adversity. Some have experienced the shock and the pain of waking up in a hospital bed with lifeless limbs, without being able to lift so much as a finger and not knowing how or why. Some were gradually introduced to their paralysis as children. The how and why doesn't seem to matter much to them now; these men have faced their private challenges and have become better people for having done so. All they truly want at the moment is another chance at gold and to prove themselves as competent athletes.

As we readied to leave, my son asked, "Mom? Why are those guys in wheelchairs? Why don't they play without them?" I triumphantly smiled inside as he looked at me with all the seriousness of a child. He hadn't realized they were paralyzed; that if they had their choice, they would be running and jumping instead. He was impressed by their attitude and their formidable strength and capability; not to mention their genuine willingness to share their talent with him.

The fact that this innocent question came from a nine-year-old boy, who idolizes able-bodied sports heroes like McGwire, Jordan, and Maddux, was proof positive that my mission to undo the disabled myth within my child's mind was successfully accomplished through a couple of tough, but able-hearted Paralympic athletes. Bravo, guys...and thanks.