

After the GLORY

Wheelchair athletes go beyond their athletic careers and accomplishments and become worldwide ambassadors who work to change lives.

by Susie Grimes

Fifteen years ago when Mobility International USA CEO Susan Sygall asked me to teach wheelchair basketball to a group of people with disabilities in El Salvador, I reluctantly agreed. I didn't speak Spanish and anticipated their wheelchairs would be broken down and their basketball skills poorly developed. I never imagined that coaching a workshop was going to open doors to a new life and career path.

In the gym I quickly realized the universal joy of playing sports transcends language barriers and is a powerful avenue for peace building. My new friends from El Salvador had become disabled from fighting one another in their civil war during the 1980s, but I watched as they became teammates on and off the court.

Many years earlier as a forestry worker, I had fallen 65 feet from a Douglas fir, crushing my ankles, breaking my back, and sustaining a spinal-cord injury (SCI). After that, playing wheelchair basketball changed my life, giving me purpose and confidence. I won a gold medal as a member of the U.S. women's wheelchair basketball team at the 1988 Seoul Paralympics and a silver at the 1992 Barcelona Games. I was at the peak of my sports career, but after my experience in El Salvador I began looking for opportunities to use my sports background for purposes other than elite competition. I wanted to put my leadership skills to a new use and be part of a worldwide effort to improve conditions for people with disabilities.



Following her accomplishments as a wheelchair racer, Jean Driscoll (right) mentored emerging athletes and coaches in Ghana and brought some of them to the University of Illinois. She was motivated to make a difference for others and helped establish Ghana's first Paralympic team, which attended the 2004 Athens Paralympic Games.

Purpose Beyond Competition

In 1997, I was one of ten athletes representing the U.S. in the Wheels for Hope tour sponsored by the International Medical Corps and the United Nations Mine Action Center. We played the Bosnian National Wheelchair Team in five different cities to bring attention to the land mines littering the countryside that were killing or maiming civilians.

When the NATO-led Stabilization Force convoy that was escorting us pulled up to the gym, the commander urged us to stay on the concrete path. He said the verdant fields around the school were littered with active land mines. The soldiers carried a few of us up the steep stairs into a cold, dimly lit school gymnasium bulging with a crowd of spectators pushed to the edges of the sidelines. We wheeled single file into the noisy gym. Light filtered through broken windows, and we saw a large 12-inch hole in the middle of the court.

The all-male home team acknowledged us with ambivalence. They were excited to compete with Americans but were not used to playing against women. We tipped off. The game was sloppy at first but quickly became a skilled physical contest. The fans appreciated the outside shots, assists, and excellent passing but cheered when the U.S. committed a turnover, eager to see their team beat the Americans. But the athletes on both sides formed a bond, and the game ended with slaps on the back all around. The fans didn't see their home team win but enjoyed a reason to rally together against a common opponent and jubilantly express their newly established Bosnian national pride. Again, I saw how the power of sport can unify people and provide a critical outlet for physical, emotional, and social expression.

My athletic experiences ultimately led me to a stimulating career in interna-

tional development and experiencing international travel with a purpose beyond competition. I am one of several athletes with a disability whose lives have been enriched by using sports to help empower others around the world, learning about other cultures and moving outside our home court's boundaries.

World Citizen

Jean Driscoll grew up in Milwaukee, Wis., and never dreamed she would become a world-renowned athlete. She



Jen Howitt (left) travels to countries such as Uganda, Zimbabwe, and East Timor. She is developing a model for independent-living skills to be taught to people with disabilities by their peers, especially in areas where there is little or no access to formal healthcare or rehabilitation services.

was born with spina bifida, but her life changed when she went to college at the University of Illinois and had the opportunity to make athletics a major focus of her life for the next 14 years.

Driscoll's road-racing career included eight Boston Marathon® championships and five Paralympic gold medals. Three months after she retired in 2001, she was approached by Wheels for the World, an organization working to address the global lack of access to wheelchairs by renovating donated wheelchairs and supplying them to developing countries.

After saying no twice, Driscoll relented. Nine months later she was in Ghana, staring at crowds of up to 600 people—some crawling with sandals on their hands—waiting in line for donated wheelchairs' distribution.

In Africa people with physical disabilities are believed to be cursed by God and are often shunned by their communities. While there, Driscoll transformed from a champion athlete to a world citizen. She mentored emerging athletes and coaches and brought some of them to the University of Illinois for training through the International Disabled Sport Outreach Program. She was motivated to make a difference for others and helped establish Ghana's first Paralympic team, which attended the 2004 Athens Paralympic Games.

Connected by Experiences

One year after sustaining an SCI in a hiking accident, Jennifer Howitt, then 10 years old, seized the opportunity to participate in athletic programs offered by a community-based recreation program (Bay Area Outreach & Recreation Program, BORP) for people with disabilities in the San Francisco Bay area. She became part of a regional team of wheelchair athletes who traveled

across the U.S. to compete in basketball tournaments and track meets.

Howitt's determination and passion for sports led her to become an outstanding athlete and wheelchair basketball Paralympic gold medalist. At the opening ceremonies of her first Paralympic Games, in Sydney in 2000, she remembers being in the stadium with thousands of people with disabilities from all over the world.

"We were connected by our shared experience of disability and the fact that we were transcending all the dif-



Cheri Blauwet spent two months in Uganda establishing an integrated sports league for kids with and without disabilities through Adapted Physical Activity International Development and the Kampala Kids League.

ferences that usually pull people apart by using sport and disability to bring us together,” Howitt says. “For the first time I really felt like I was part of something global and important for the future of the world.”

Howitt decided to make international development her career. She earned a degree in international politics at Georgetown University (Washington, D.C.) and became a Rhodes Scholar, a prestigious international honor. She received her master’s of philosophy in international development at Oxford University in England.

As programme support officer for the Motivation Charitable Trust based outside London, Howitt travels to countries such as Uganda, Zimbabwe, and East Timor. She is developing a model for independent-living skills to be taught to people with disabilities by their peers, especially in areas with little or no access to formal healthcare or rehabilita-

tion services. Howitt teaches trainers how to instruct in sports programming and the use of appropriate low-cost wheelchairs. Through her role-modeling

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and mentoring, people with SCI and other physical disabilities in developing countries learn skills from their peers and see examples of healthy and confident individuals. While Howitt’s sport experiences got her started in this journey, she has successfully translated her passion for fighting injustice to creating tangible positive outcomes.

Global Advocate

Cheri Blauwet has competed, studied, interned, traveled, worked, and volunteered all around the world. Her athletic career as a premier marathoner and multiple Paralympic medalist began in high school in rural Iowa after she sustained an SCI in a farming accident. She soon realized that sport was her ticket to travel and see the world. She pursued athletics and competed in the Sydney Paralympic Games while studying molecular and cellular biology at the University of Arizona. This satisfied her love of travel and culture by studying abroad in Argentina.

When Blauwet entered medical school at Stanford University (Palo Alto, Calif.), she continued to find time for her studies and athletics as she trained and won the Boston, Los Angeles, and New York City marathons, numerous times each, and medaled at the Athens Paralympics.



Carlee Hoffman worked and lived with the people in the West Bank through Mercy Corps' Sport for Life program, which gave her insights into the everyday challenges for people with disabilities.

The people she met motivated Blauwet to learn more about how their domestic environment affected their access to sports, barriers, and stigmas and to use her sports and medical skills in humanitarian concert. She worked in a pediatric clinic in Guatemala, traveled to Ethiopia and Angola to promote amputee soccer programs in post-conflict nations through Veterans International, and spent two months in Uganda establishing an integrated sports league for kids with and without disabilities through Adapted Physical Activity International Development and the Kampala Kids League.

Blauwet's wealth of experience gained through her formal and informal education, her adventurous travel, and countless hours of volunteer and intern work has complemented her competitive spirit and made her a powerful global advocate and spokesperson for human rights. Now she is at Harvard University, where she is doing residency in physical medicine and rehabilitation. Her credentials and passion are aimed at promoting increased awareness of health and well-being within the dis-

ability community as an essential component of disability rights.

Shattering Perceptions

Ann Cody puts words into action through advocacy and diplomacy as BlazeSports America's director of policy and global outreach and as an Interna-

tional Paralympic Committee Governing Board member. Her Paralympic experience sparked an interest in learning about new cultures and provided a profound awareness of its powerful impact on the hosting nations.

"Disability groups have used the Paralympics as a platform to bring attention to their issues," says Cody, acknowledging that countries are required to conform to accessibility standards. She believes social values and attitudes toward people with disabilities are changing through media coverage of the Paralympics and the involvement of large numbers of spectators, volunteers, athletes, coaches, and referees.

"Involvement with the Paralympics embodies what is possible," says Cody. "It shatters restrictive perceptions and promotes excellence, peace, cooperation, and goodwill."



For Susie Grimes, life after sport has included managing a horse-boarding facility. An avid outdoorswoman, she also enjoys scuba diving and writing.

Cody's work through the IPC Women and Sport Committee to achieve gender equity in the Paralympics saw an increase from 25% (Barcelona, 1992) to 35% (Beijing, 2008) of sport events that included women. Through leadership, role modeling, and grass-roots development, the Paralympic sports movement is affecting social change on local, national, and international levels.

Increasing Confidence

After winning three national wheelchair basketball championships with the University of Illinois and two Paralympic gold medals, Carlee Hoffman spent her last college semester sharing her skills with athletes in the Palestinian territories. She says she decided to do an internship with Mercy Corps, a non-governmental organization, because it provided the opportunity for her to stay overseas for more than a month. It also gave her the chance to live in a culture instead of being a tourist or athlete.

Hoffman worked and lived with the people in the West Bank through Mercy Corp's Sport for Life program, which gave her insights into the everyday challenges for people with disabilities who live in areas where building basic infrastructure is a reality. They face no physical access for people in wheelchairs and no transportation, and political barriers severely limit mobility.

Hoffman's experiences brought her an invaluable education and changed the course of her professional interests to pursue a graduate degree in international public service. She believes sport can help increase confidence and main-



During a trip to Beijing's Forbidden City, Ann Cody takes a ride on a rudimentary stair climber. She puts words into action through advocacy and diplomacy as BlazeSports America's director of policy and global outreach and as an International Paralympic Governing Board member.

tain a better quality of life. She put this belief into practice and saw how the power of sport can build independence and transform people's lives.

It's Not All About Me

In a world where we can sometimes be self-consumed, these athletes have gone beyond themselves and their past

accomplishments to use their strengths where they can make a difference in people's lives all over the world.

Contact: Mobility International USA and the National Clearinghouse on Disability and Exchange, a project of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State, www.miusa.org/ncde. **S'NS**



Susie Grimes, who lives in Eugene, Ore., has worked for more than 20 years in community recreation and competitive sports programs for people with disabilities. Beyond her basketball accomplishments, she coached quad rugby for ten years, and her team won a national championship and several regional titles.