

Finding Confidence Through Wheelchair Basketball



Adaptive sports are about more than just athletics.

Playing a sport like soccer or basketball can get you in shape. It can also introduce you to friends and mentors. It can lead to college, a career and a family. It can even connect you with the world.

Ever since he was a young child, Siphamandla (Sips) Gumbi was passionate about sports. Growing up in the town of Umlazi in the province of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa in the 1980s during apartheid, the sport that was popular in his community was soccer. His father had built up quite a reputation for himself after he played for two of the top national soccer teams including AmaZulu, and he passed his passion on to his son.

At the age of five Sips became a wheelchair user following the removal of a tumor in which he acquired a spinal cord injury. After becoming a person with a disability, his father continued to work with him and encourage him in soccer in part because sports was something that both father and son were passionate about, and because their Zulu culture taught them that life throws unexpected situations your way, and you have to rise above them. Soccer continued to be an important outlet for Sips, even as he went to boarding school to make up for lost time before attending high school in his Township. In high

school, he continued playing soccer and he also pursued track and field.

He would not discover wheelchair basketball until a friend introduced him to it in 2007, when he was a student majoring in sports sciences at the University of Durban-Westville, now a branch of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. "I just fell in love with it and I never really looked back." Soon he was called up to compete on South Africa's national team which in 2007 won the All Africa Games in Algeria. Eventually his team qualified for the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing where they showed their skills competing against the best teams in the world. That continues to hold a special place in Sips's memory, but after competing in 2008 and the 2012 paralympics, he knew that his sports career could not go on forever.

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Fortunately, through playing sports, other opportunities presented themselves. After graduating college he got a job working for the government. A few years later, his former

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paralympic coach told him about a position with Chairman Industries, a local distributor of mobility equipment, which his former coach was now leading.

After traveling the world and starting his career, the challenges facing those around him became all the more stark. It was clear through his world travels that life for people with disabilities everywhere was difficult, but traveling also showed him how much more difficult it was in South Africa. A majority of the athletes with disabilities that he knows tend not to meet their significant other, establish a family, obtain a degree or get a job. For most, their main source of income is a pension which amounts to around 1700 RAND, or US\$115 per month. The difference between the life that Sips was living and the lives of other South African disabled athletes in his community became extremely sharp.

Appreciating how wheelchair basketball and soccer gave him a greater sense of confidence and self-efficacy, Sips decided to focus on coaching wheelchair basketball clinics in his local community after he finished up with the Paralympics. He established an organization focused on teaching young people with disabilities how to play wheelchair basketball.

Many of the people that he has coached have gone on to win national championships of their own. Some have competed in the South Africa Paralympic selection. He coached a girls team which represented South Africa in Paralympic qualifiers.

For Sips, sports are about teamwork. In wheelchair basketball there are individuals who are amputees, those with spinal cord injuries, polio or cerebral palsy. Some might be able to throw the ball from one end of the court to the other. They might be able to lean over and grab the ball off the ground. Others might not have this level of function. Each player gets a rank between 1 and 4.5 based on their level of function. Each wheelchair basketball team must have five players with individual ratings adding up to 14 or less. Much like a game of chess, it is necessary to create a strategy that caters to the unique abilities of each person and results in a win for the entire team.

“I tell my players to think of life as a new team that you are facing on the court. Each day you face a team with a different approach. That is life itself. It brings you a lot of things you’re not expecting but you have to find a way to maneuver around those challenges.”



After a few years of doing these clinics, he wanted to learn about how he could take his coaching to the next level. A colleague with a disability had recently completed an U.S. Department of State-sponsored program and through this friend Sips discovered the Global Sports Mentoring Program (GSMP). GSMP brings athletes to the United States for five weeks of mentorship to learn how to advance the participation of women and girls and people with disabilities in sports.

The Global Sports Mentoring Program is an international leadership development initiative that was launched in 2012 by the State Department. It now consists of two pillars that focus on advancing gender equality (i.e., Empowering Women and Girls through Sports program) and disability rights (i.e., Sport for Community program). These five-week, immersive mentorship experiences focus on empowering international delegates to serve their local communities by increasing access to and opportunities for participation in sports.

After a pre-orientation and post-orientation in Tennessee and Washington DC, Sips spent three weeks at the University of Texas learning about adaptive sports programs for people with disabilities in the United States. He visited a

recreation center open to all, including people with disabilities. It had adaptive equipment such as rowing machines and handcycles that could be used by people with disabilities.

He was astonished at the amount of resources available to disabled athletes in the United States. In addition to the adaptive equipment, there were coaches with specialized knowledge. Sips encountered disabled athletes who spent up to seven hours a day training and preparing. They started learning the sport as small children. Athletes in his club back home spent no more than 4 hours per week practicing and they might not start till their mid twenties. The program galvanized him to look for ways to get disabled athletes started earlier, and to get them better supports.

“We are not quite there. For us it came naturally because we are athletes. We love the game, but there is a massive difference in the level of playing from the US, Australia and UK compared to what we have in Africa.”

His exchange experience continued even after he had returned to South Africa. As an alumnus of the GSMP, he gained access to a whole network of alumni dedicated to increasing access to sports for women and girls and



people with disabilities. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit at the beginning of 2020, GSMP alumni teamed up to provide resources and support for impacted sports communities. Sips' basketball clinics were noticed by a 2019 GSMP alumnus from Zambia who he met through these alumni activities. That acquaintance ultimately led to an opportunity for Sips to travel to Zambia to carry out

wheelchair basketball clinics in his colleague's community. He has received invitations to do clinics in other countries as well.

Sips' dream is to establish an adaptive recreation center in South Africa like the one that he saw in Texas. He knows that he can't do it alone and that it will take a team effort from the community, but it's worth a try. ■