

Clockwise from right: Craig Kokron reaches to block a shot; Corbin Beu climbs the rail; Silvino Munoz shows off his hook shot; Richard Huebsch, b-ballin'.



HOOP DREAMS

Wheelchair athletes challenge themselves, break down stereotypes

By KEVIN POLOWY
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Since a hereditary disease confined Craig Kokron to a wheelchair five years ago, the ASU junior has visited several Valley schools to educate students about preventing spinal cord injuries and inform them that once injured, disabled persons can still accomplish unbelievable feats.

And then he takes the basketball court and proves it.

Kokron, 35, is a member of the Banner Wheelchair Suns, a community-based basketball team sponsored by the Phoenix Suns, Banner Health Care Systems and America West Airlines.

"The best thing about the team is getting people in wheelchairs out to be athletic," Kokron said. "And to show people that

we can do things that they didn't think we could do."

Gary Venjohn, an ASU faculty member who aids students with disabilities in career planning and development, coaches the Suns. Venjohn helped organize the team in 1987 and played ball for the Suns until 1996. Last year was his first season at the helm.

"The reason I continue to coach is because these guys need a leader but also that this is more than just about these 15 guys on our roster," Venjohn said.

"This is a community team. We go into the community and show people that you can get out and do things even after the disability. The idea of going into the schools and everything else we do is to send prevention messages that you don't want spinal cord injuries or car accidents so

wear your seatbelts.

"We also show that people with disabilities have abilities and that you can do more than what you think you can do and just help the community of people with disabilities as a whole."

The Suns are in Division II of the National Wheelchair Basketball Association. Founded in 1948, the NWBA is comprised of 181 teams within three divisions and 22 conferences. The Suns, which are independent of a conference, are currently tied for the 18th ranking in Division II.

Last year the Suns finished with a record of 26-9 and were ranked 5th in their division. Venjohn said the plunge in ranking is understandable because the team lost three starters from last year—one to a Division I team in Nashville,

one who left the area and another who retired.

The coach said the experience level on this year's team varies.

"We've got guys who have played 20 plus years and we've got guys who just started this year. So we have anywhere in between."

Nonetheless, the Suns boast a roster of incredibly multi-talented athletes.

Sharon Miller, the team's lone female, also plays on the USA National Women's Team. Emeison Calle and Alaberto Carrilo play on the Colombian National Team. Calle plays on a wheelchair rugby team as well.

Other team members include former Phoenix Sun Curtis Perry, ASU alumni Tom Czarnicki, Kokron, Gordon Moye, Kevin Rasmusson, Steve Winter, Silvino



photos by Ian Wingfield/State Press
Above: Coach Gary Venjohn talks strategy.
Left: Shot-blocking, up close and personal.



Munoz, Paul Crane, Corbin Beu and Vietnam veterans Richard Huebsch and Gary Judy.

Beu, in addition to playing on the Suns, is a member of the USA National Wheelchair Ice Hockey Team. Beu participated in the Olympics in Nagano, Japan where he was a fan favorite.

"It was unbelievable," said Beu, who was nicknamed "Zebra" because he zebra-stripped his hair and has a wheelchair from Zebra sports, the company he works for. "There were 14,000 people in the stands chanting my name."

Beu, a native of Madison, Wisconsin who suffered a broken back in a car accident, joined the Suns in 1996 after coming to Phoenix to shoot a commercial with the Harlem Globetrotters.

"That's one of the things that brought me down here was the basketball team," Beu said. "Once I got onto a team that was a lot more competitive, it was a lot more fun."

Beu's teammates also enjoy the competitive nature of the game.

"I didn't want to be in a sport that wasn't competitive," said Richard Huebsch. "Being in a game I enjoy and being in a competitive sport, which it can be, and being with a bunch of guys that I

get along with makes it fun."

"There is much higher competition here (in the United States)," said Calle, who has also played for the Miami Heat-sponsored team in addition to the Colombian National Team. "Wheelchair basketball may be a professional (sport) in a couple of years, so to us, it's like a career."

To be eligible to play in the NWBA, a player must have an irreversible lower extremity disability, such as paralysis or amputation. NWBA games are sanctioned by NCAA rules.

To make competition more equitable among existing and new teams and balance teams strengths, the league abides by a classification system dependent on the involvement of each player's disability. Each player is designated as a class I, II, or III player and these classifications are given a numerical value. Of the five players on the court, these values are added up and must equal 12 or less.

Also, a player has two pushes on the wheel and has to dribble the ball once before pushing the third time and moving the ball otherwise will constitute as traveling. The only other major rule difference between wheelchair and able-bodied basketball is that the NWBA allows players four seconds in the lane versus three seconds in the NBA.

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But the game itself is much more difficult than able-bodied ball, players said.

"It's a very physical game. It's the hardest work I've ever done, actually," said Kokron, a forward who was a varsity wrestler in high school and also played football and baseball before he was forced into a wheelchair.

"It's a good workout and a good way to measure what kind of shape you're in," said Steve Winter, who was an avid basketball player before injuring his back during a high school game 19 years ago.

Winter also said the concept of team is more important in wheelchair basketball.

"You have to rely on your teammates more cause you can't go one on one," he said. "In regular basketball you can make a move on a guy, but in wheelchair you need a pick or something like that."

Wheelchair basketball embodies the same strategies as able-bodied ball, but some tactics like pick and rolls and

when a guy gets knocked out of his chair, it's pretty brutal."

"The big guys in the middle play an important role," Venjohn said. "You want to get the ball down so you want to free them and get them down underneath. People have to stay seated in their chairs so if you're taller than the other person you just hold the ball up and shoot over them."

Venjohn noted that there are typically two different paces to the game. "In our early offense, we try and fast break and bring it down and get the easy quick shot. Or otherwise we pull into a half court game and set up screens and pick and roll."

"The first part of the game is quite fast paced and the second part of the game we slow it down and set up the half court offense."

The Suns play the bulk of their season in the winter. This year they have already traveled to San Diego and Tucson and will attend four more national tournaments in Dallas, Las Vegas, Long Beach, California and possibly Denver. They will also host two tournaments in Phoenix.

Venjohn said that with the loss of three starters, this year's front five will vary from game to game.

"It's a matter of somebody else stepping up to the plate and picking up the scoring slack, which will happen," he said.

Enthusiasm among team members indicates that someone stepping up won't be a problem, no matter their experience level.

This is Silvino Munoz's first year on the Suns. "I love this game," said Munoz, who was stricken with polio 18 years ago when he was 14. "It's so much fun. I could play basketball everyday."

Veteran Richard Huebsch, 51, has been playing wheelchair basketball for over 17 years and isn't quite ready to quit.

"So I keep coming out, as old as I'm getting," he said.

"I'll probably play as long as I can push,"

local scene

Wheelchair Basketball
Banner Wheelchair Suns' record last year: 26-9