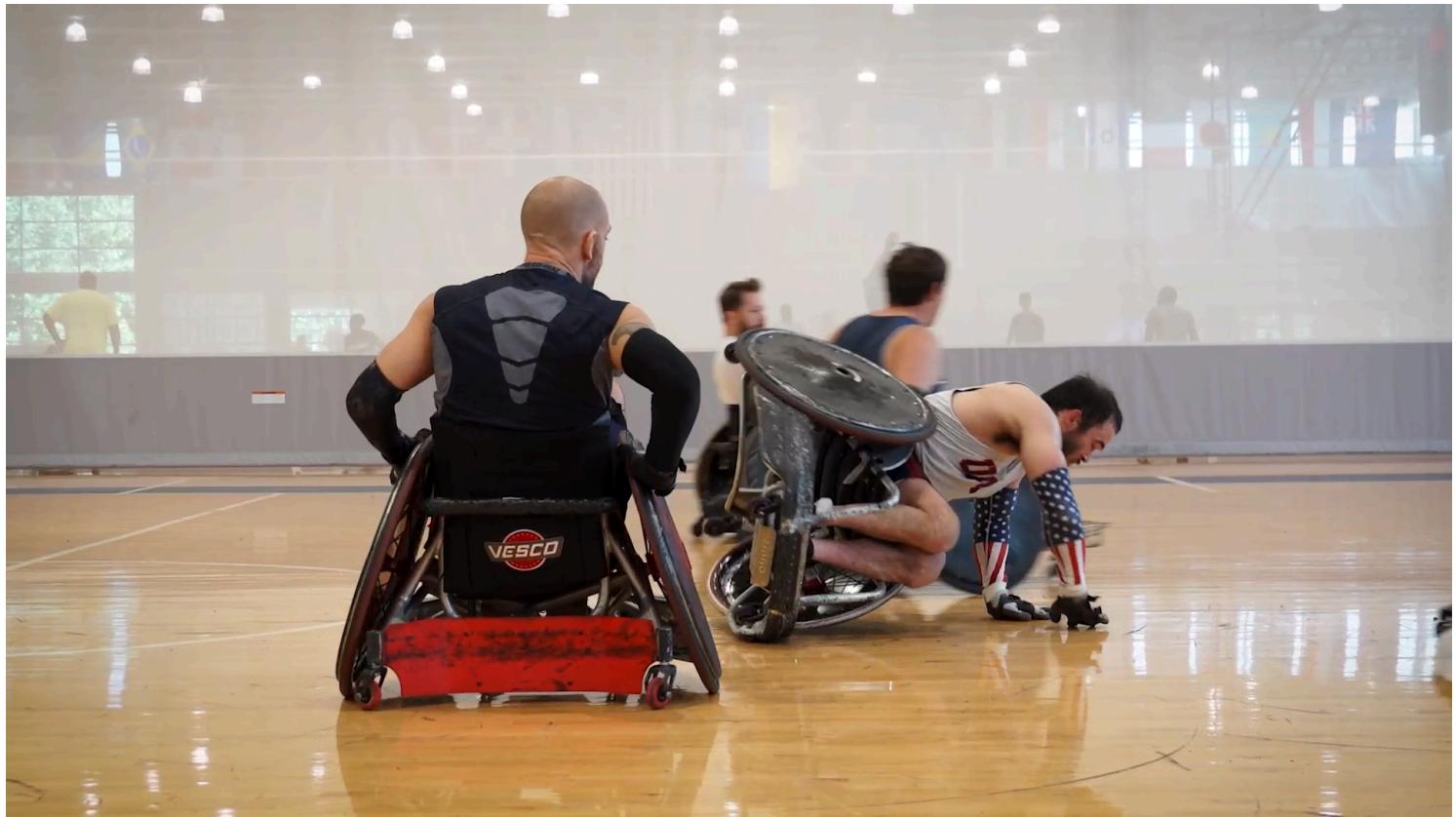


WELL+BEING

They call it ‘murderball.’ Wheelchair rugby isn’t for the faint of heart.

The sport is relatively young but fast-growing, and the competition to win gold in the Paris Paralympics is expected to be tight.



By [Amanda Morris](#) and [Hadley Green](#)

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Morris reported this story from Team USA's wheelchair rugby training camp in Birmingham, Ala. Green spent two days with Team USA to capture the training camp action on video.

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At a Paralympic training camp, Chuck Aoki sped down the court in his wheelchair before getting rammed from the side by another player, which caused him to go tumbling, flipping three times in his chair before thudding onto the ground.

Aoki was unfazed. Crashes are to be expected in wheelchair rugby, a fast-paced, high-contact sport that challenges common stereotypes that view people in wheelchairs as fragile.

The sport was invented in the late 1970s by quadriplegics who wanted an alternative to wheelchair basketball but has grown increasingly popular over the past decade, thanks in part to faster, lighter wheelchairs and rule changes that have intensified the game.

One sign of the fiercer competition? The United States, which once dominated the sport, has not won a Paralympic gold medal in wheelchair rugby since 2008. As the matches begin today, the team will be looking to reclaim the top spot in the sport in Paris, but to do so, it will need to beat out seven other teams that are equally tough.





Chuck Aoki is co-captain of the U.S. Paralympic wheelchair rugby team. (Photo: Charity Rachelle for The Washington Post)

“I believe we’ve got the team and talent to do it, but it’s going to be an absolute war and a battle to get there,” said Aoki, 33, of Indianapolis, who is a co-captain of this year’s team. “The sport as a whole has gotten a lot stronger.”

An increasing number of players, particularly women, are joining the sport. For the first time, the U.S. Paralympic wheelchair rugby team will have a female player: Sarah Adam, 33, of St. Louis.



Sarah Adam is the first woman to make the U.S. Paralympic wheelchair rugby team. (Photo: Charity Rachelle for The Washington Post)

“I’m not going to let anybody underestimate me,” said Adam, who has multiple sclerosis and is known for her ability to zoom down the court, her signature sleek ponytail flying out behind her. “The guys think they’re going to come and hit into me and knock me over, and I hit them right back and put them on their face and kind of roll away like it was nothing.”

There’s a reason they call this sport “murderball.”

How to play ‘murderball’





Athletes practice at the Lakeshore Foundation facility in Birmingham, Ala., on May 17. (Photo: Charity Rachelle for The Washington Post)

Wheelchair rugby is played at lightning speed on an indoor court — about the size of a basketball court — as a 40-second shot clock ticks away. (The time limit was introduced after the 2008 Paralympics to speed up the game.)

Rules of wheelchair rugby

The game is played in eight-minute quarters but typically lasts about an hour and a half. Players carry the ball across the opposing team's try line to score. Both wheels on their chair must cross the try line for the point to count.

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To score, players race down the court carrying the ball — similar in size to a standard volleyball — to the opposing team's try line. (The ball is often covered in the sticky goo that athletes use to grip their wheels better.) Players can roll, bat, throw or bounce the ball to pass it — and they must dribble or pass at least once every 10 seconds or forfeit possession.

It's a physical game. While athletes can't hold onto or push other players' wheelchairs with their hands, they can ram each other — hard. Sometimes these collisions involve so much force that the wheelchair frames crack.

Some hits are illegal, such as hitting the back of a chair in such a way that it causes players to spin out and lose control of the chair. It's also illegal to smash into players directly from behind, which could cause their chair to flip forward, risking a head or neck injury.



A Team USA mechanic prepares to replace a wheel during practice. (Charity Rachelle for The Washington Post)

Changes in wheelchair technology and design have helped players move even faster around the court — the faster they go, the harder the hits. Players say the chairs used in wheelchair rugby are now less heavy and easier to maneuver, thanks to chair redesigns and the use of lighter-weight metals such as titanium and aluminum. However, most chairs are still roughly 40 pounds, meaning that strength is just as important for players as speed and endurance.

“The athleticism has picked up a ton; you’re kind of sprinting for an hour and a half, and it’s basically high speed bumper cars,” said Eric Newby, 36, of Nashville, Ill., who co-captains the team with Aoki.

Broken bones and mangled fingers



Chuck Aoki does not have sensation from the elbows down, so he doesn't always realize when his hands have suffered a serious injury. (Charity Rachelle for The Washington Post)

Athletes are happy to share stories of their competition scars such as mangled, bleeding fingers, torn shoulders and broken bones — and say that the physicality is one of their favorite aspects of the sport.

While athletes wear gloves to protect their fingers, some speak of getting cuts on their fingers that went down to the bone. In Aoki's case, he does not have sensation from the elbows down, so he doesn't always realize when his hands have suffered a serious injury.

“I’ve actually gotten quite a few infections in my fingers that have led to amputations,” he said. “I don’t have any full fingers left.”

These elements of wheelchair rugby fly in the face of common perceptions of disability, such as the idea that disabled people are weak, fragile or in need of protection.



Athletes vie for the ball during practice. (Photo: Charity Rachelle for The Washington Post)

“Something that’s powerful about this sport is that it laughs in the face of societal views of disability,” said Jeff Butler, 34, of San Francisco, who has been on the team since 2015. “One of the big jokes we have on the court is what’s the worst that could happen? We could break our necks? We’ve already done that.”

As the first woman to compete on the U.S. team, Adam is no stranger to challenging expectations. She grew up playing sports with her brother, so competing alongside men, playfully trash-talking and cracking jokes “feels like home,” she said.

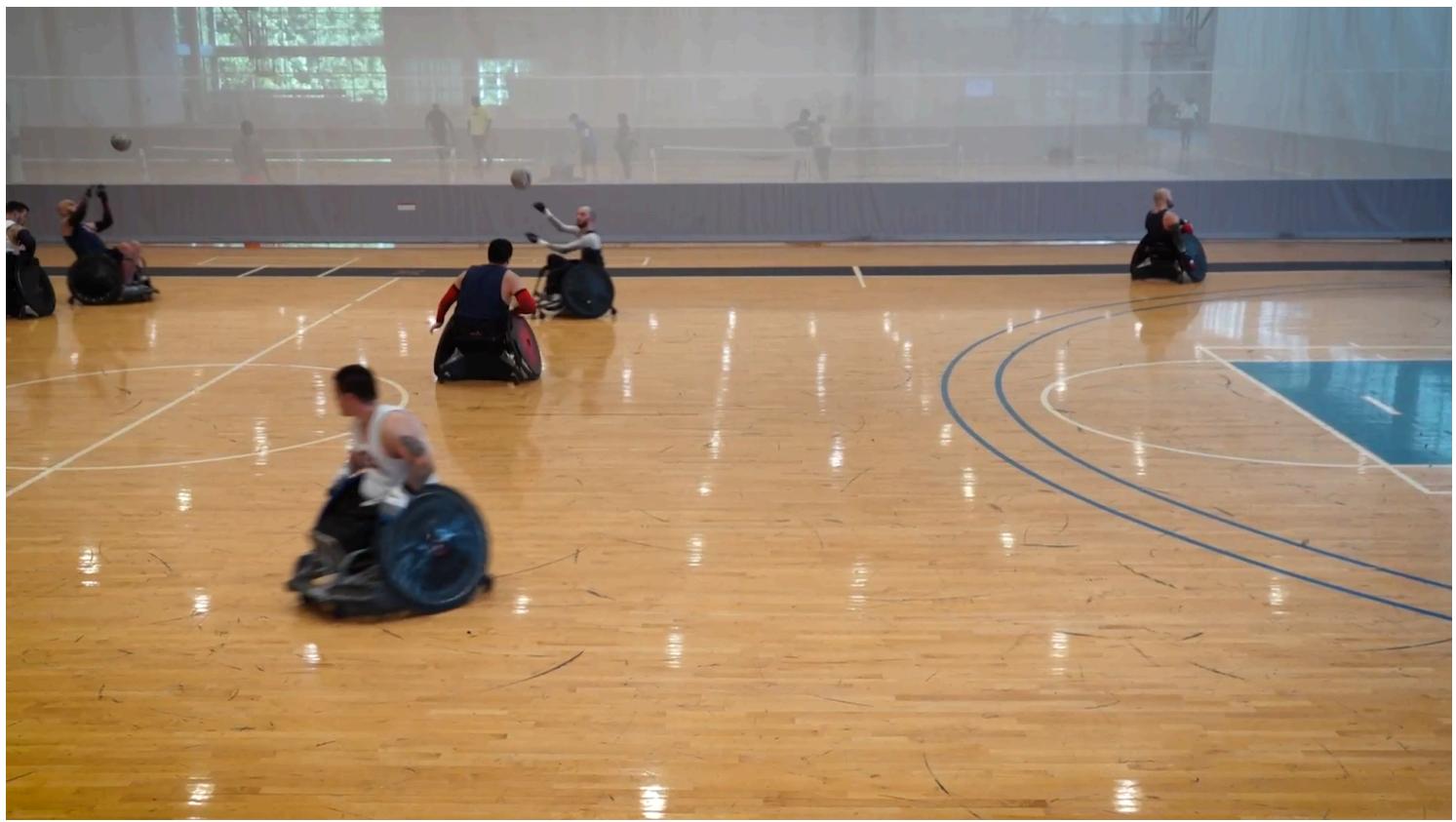
Adam grew up playing softball, basketball and lacrosse. As an occupational therapist, she later started volunteering for wheelchair rugby as a non-disabled person. After she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2016, she decided to start competing in the sport, even though she is often told to rest and not overdo it.

“I want to be somebody who breaks that stereotype down and say, ‘Don’t put me in this bubble. Don’t try to protect me. Let me show you what I can do,’” she said. “And that’s what wheelchair rugby allows me to do.”

Her favorite part of the game is figuring out the strategy for getting around opponents, but she is also drawn to its physicality. She keeps a caster wheel in her bag as a trophy from an incident in which she rammed an opponent so hard that she flipped him over and broke that front caster wheel off his chair.

“It’s a reminder that I can give the hits. I don’t have to just take it. I’m going to give it, even when the guys are a little bit bigger than I am,” she said.

A raucous training camp



In May, at Team USA’s wheelchair rugby training camp in Birmingham, Ala., players careened, crashed and tumbled on the court as they prepared for the Paris Games. Roughly half of the team consists of returning players — ones who remember heartbreaking second-place losses in the last two Summer Paralympics.

But there is also a slate of new players, many of whom are higher-functioning athletes attracted by the sport’s physicality and growing popularity.

To compete in wheelchair rugby, players must have a loss of function in their upper and lower limbs. Traditionally, most players in the sport have had these types of disabilities because of spinal cord injuries, but now, newer players have a wider range of disabilities such as multiple sclerosis, amputations, muscular dystrophy and cerebral palsy.



Sarah Adam gets help changing a wheel during practice. (Charity Rachelle for The Washington Post)



“It’s getting harder to stop people now,” said Lee Fredette, 41, of Tucson, a defensive athlete who started playing wheelchair rugby two decades ago.

“There’s more people now all over the world with all this function. They’re big and strong and heavy, and they hit really hard.”

One of them is Zion Redington, 18, of Trussville, Ala., who was born with ectrodactyly, a disability that caused him to have one finger on each hand and

one toe on each foot. He has had both feet amputated. On the court, he is a massive, muscular presence, sometimes called “the chairbreaker” by other players.

“Being so young, this is absolutely not my peak. By 2028, I’ll be so much stronger, faster and smarter,” he said. “I want to be the Michael Jordan of wheelchair rugby. I’d love to grow wheelchair rugby and get it more popular.”



Zion Redington is sometimes called “the chairbreaker” by other players. (Charity Rachelle for The Washington Post)

Competing against international teammates

The sport has historically been dominated by the United States, Canada, Australia and Japan. But wheelchair rugby programs have been growing in Europe, Asia and South America, said Richard Allcroft, president of World Wheelchair Rugby, the sport’s governing body.

Many players from other countries come to the United States to train because of its robust wheelchair rugby league, which boasts about 50 teams.

As a result, athletes including Aoki will be facing off against former teammates in Paris — and some of their teammates are now coaching players in Britain and Denmark.





Left: Chuck Aoki and Britain's Jim Roberts compete with their teams in the last Summer Paralympics on Aug. 27, 2021, in Tokyo. Right: British athletes and team members celebrate their gold medal win against the United States in Tokyo on Aug. 29, 2021. (Left: Tasos Katopodis/Getty Images; Right: Behrouz Mehri/Getty Images)

Some argue that it also means the United States wheelchair rugby league is effectively training the international competition. In 2021, Britain beat the U.S. squad for the first time to win gold. Britain's top scorer, Jim Roberts, had played in the United States for several years.

“We had never lost to them before, and they came out and smacked us in the face,” said Josh Wheeler, 44, of Tucson, a returning Paralympian on the team. “If we want to become the top team again, then we do have to stop bringing in international players and coaching them on how to be better.”

But there are other long-standing players on the team, such as Butler, who think the tougher competition helps boost the sport’s fandom. “It makes people take us more seriously,” he said.

Wheelchair rugby matches at the Paris Paralympics begin today, and the U.S. team will face Canada in a preliminary-round game.

About this story

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