

HOW WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL RAISES THE DISABLED PEOPLE FOR NEW LIFE

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The sport is a real challenge for the disabled athletes in Bulgaria and in Cyprus and helps them to overcome the isolation and the uncertainty

"For the first time in Bulgaria we have wheelchairs for sports, but there is no one to use them." These are the words of Boris Tomov – wheelchair basketball player from Sofia, Bulgaria. Twice a week he, along with 11 men and 4 women, trains at the National stadium "Vasil Levski". "When we started to develop the wheelchair basketball in Bulgaria, we thought that the most difficult part will be financing, - says Boris. - But it turned out that it is not. It is more difficult to find people with disabilities to play sports."

The emergence of the first wheelchair basketball team in Bulgaria was initiated by the Rotaract Club "Sofia-Balkan". In 2007 the organization put in the idea, all of its enthusiasm and resources and after a year and a half formed the team Sofia Balkan. It organized charity auction and found sponsors, provided wheelchairs, each of which costed around \$ 3,500. Held a special seminar at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" to teach some trainers, translated the needed documentation for classification of the competitors. Throughout all these efforts the Rotarians were looking for people with disabilities who want to play basketball. But it turned out that there were not many willing to do it..

What are the wheelchair basketball players dreaming of - in Cyprus and in Bulgaria?

In Nicosia, the capital of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, people also want more disabled athletes to play sports. The republic has a population of only 300,000 people, but the wheelchair basketball team KKTCELL Tekerlekli Sandalye Basketbol Takımı has a modern sports hall available for training four times a week, plays in the Turkish Basketball League along with nine Turkish teams and the players are paid for their efforts. The team has a main sponsor - the mobile company Turkcell. However, the players argue that the state should care more about them. Their first request was to become professionals. They have financial support, but want to be like their Turkish counterparts, who receive € 2,000 per month and are fully committed to the sport – they train five times per week, twice a day, for 4-5 hours, they have workouts in basketball, fitness, stretching, mental exercises...

- Everyone in the team wants to play as professionals, - says Alye Kocasoy who suffers from polio, but has been playing basketball since she was 15. - Most of us are working and are coming to trainings on the end of the day, which is very difficult. We have problems with the maintenance of wheelchairs as they erode quickly. But the federation doesn't buy new wheelchairs every year and we have to repair them constantly. This is a big problem especially for the men who play very intensively. And the wheelchairs are very expensive – they cost around 5,000 GB Pounds – each one is custom made for everyone player and it is difficult to be exchanged.

In Bulgaria the wheelchair basketball players are also hoping for better training conditions. Unlike their Cyprus counterparts, however, the government does not support sport for disabled sufficiently. In Bulgaria there is no adequate policy on sport for people with disabilities: there is no registry, there is a lack of adequate funding and the infrastructure is not adapted to the needs of the disabled.

- The wheelchair basketball cannot exist without the support of the state, - says the president of the Rotary Club "Sofia-Balkan" Vladislav Smilov. – There has to be either a long-term policy on people with disabilities that can ensure the financial stability of the clubs, or there has to be a corporate sponsor who will not help from time to time, but will have a serious commitment.

That is why, due to the lack of money, two players train now only once a week. Christo, who is from Blagoevgrad (a small town located on around 80 km from Sofia) and travels to Sofia for the trainings at the stadium, passes through

Pernik (another city located on around 100 km from Blagoevgrad) to pick up another disabled player and to join the trainings. The transportation is paid by the "Rotary Balkan Sofia" and cost 200 leva per month (around 100 Euro). Money for a second travel in the week is not available...

According to Boris and his teammates, however, the real problems for the sport of the disabled people are coming from the infrastructure. "For everyone in a wheelchair the most important thing is to be able to get out of his home – explains Boris. – Someone could live on the 5th floor and has an elevator, but if before the exit there are stairs, he will be doomed. All over Europe the municipality would make everything possible to help him and to get him out of his house. In Bulgaria this is not the case. The reluctance to sports and exercises is due to lack of information. Sport for people with disabilities should be promoted so that all in wheelchairs could overcome their fears. And everyone should say – if he can do this, then I could do it too.

Why wheelchair basketball is gaining ground in Cyprus, and in Bulgaria no one has heard of it?

The Cypriotes also want more people with disabilities to play sports and more spectators of the games. The team has supporters, but Alyie and her teammates are dreaming of full stands. She graduated law and has been working as a financial controller. Because of her performance she is part of the national team of Turkey and is an example for dozens of young Cypriotes and Turks with disabilities. Alye recalls that her parents persuaded her not to overwork in sports, but she didn't give up the trainings. She claims that basketball helps people with disabilities to find new friends and is an excellent mean for rehabilitation.

The responsible for the wheelchair basketball in North Cyprus is a special federation. It was established with the aim to receive and distribute some financial support from the state. The money is used to pay for new equipment, for the visits of the team in Turkey and for the transportation of the athletes to the trainings (four days a week five players from five different cities are coming to Nicosia hall to train). The players take part in tournaments and friendly matches, they organize show games and are part of the European club championship. For one year they record at least 25-30 matches. According to them, this is not enough, as their Turkish colleagues spend a lot more time on training.

The wheelchair basketball in Bulgaria has a seven-year history, however it resides underground. The government condemns it to extinction because it does not support it. Several years ago, the sport flourished thanks to one man - Ivan Tzenov, former Deputy Sports Minister and member of the Bulgarian Basketball Federation. Within one month he constructed a special entrance for the disabled athletes to the stadium "Vasil Levski", he equipped special bathrooms, provided changing rooms and room for the wheelchairs. The sports hall "Bubba Basket" was given up for the training of the team. He invites the wheelchair basketball players to every major event of the Federation. Thanks to his personal attitude players participate in many sports events. In the beginning, when they were invited, they were just spectators of the matches of the space under the basket. Then they decided to challenge the "normal" players to sit on chairs on the field and to score baskets. It turned out that even professionals in brilliant health can do it hard. However, when the government changed the support for the wheelchair basketball shrank and the incentives ceased. Today the team trains twice a week, and when there are some events at the National Stadium the hall remains closed. Since in Bulgaria there is no wheelchair basketball they play official matches very rarely – for 2014 the official games of the team are only three. For seven years there were formed only two more teams - one in Varna and one in Burgas. Players and coach are dreaming for a championship and for more matches that will give meaning to the training. And everything could be different if there was someone to pay the monthly allowance - 1,000 leva (500 Euro) for the whole team. However, this seem to be a lot of money for Bulgaria, and the players themselves collect money to buy new tires for the wheelchairs and new equipment.

Does the show games make sence?

Many disabled people in Cyprus cannot overcome the isolation to which they are doomed because of their disability. They don't go out of their homes. They don't have self-confidence and don't want to change their lives. Basketball and

sports in general give them a chance to be integrated in the society again. They can develop themselves and emerge from the anonymity they are living in. And more people could know about their problems. In order to win more fans and new players, the wheelchair basketball team is taking part in everyone basketball events in the city. Once a year, the team organizes a show game with "normal" basketball players who sit in wheelchairs. These matches bring together a big audience and become a real show. In order to demonstrate the involvement of the "healthy" athletes with the athletes with disabilities, there is no winner and the score remains even.

- Over the past two years there are coming more and more people to these games, - says Ibrahim Yavuz who is playing for the Turkey national team like Alye. – The sponsor us also attracts people. When someone comes to our game, for sure he come back again because the game is interesting. It is no boring as people think. Of course, the big problem is that the media do not write about us. We are not shown on the TV, but in the last 2-3 years, journalists are tending to notice us more often. Hopefully their attitude will change, because the publicity is very important and will change people's attitudes. So far, however, newspapers and television emphasize football.

The inclusion of the wheelchair basketball players in different sports events in Bulgaria also has an effect. Several of the players have joined the team after show games. Others come to training, but the fight under the basket and the physical efforts frighten them. According to Boris Tomov publicity is very important for the existence of this sport. It can make people with disabilities to seek for new friends and take on the challenge of the sport.

How basketball does improve the health of people with disabilities?

The wheelchair basketball players in Bulgaria and in Cyprus do know how important sport is from their personal experience. They argue that the rehabilitation through sport cannot be replaced by anything. The athletes have different disabilities, but for everyone it means more power in the shoulder, more strength in the abdominal muscles and in the muscles of the waist, more motion of the arms. During the workouts they are working all muscle groups – from the neck to the waist. The game increases the flexibility, dexterity, accuracy, strength, endurance. The players master the wheelchairs perfectly. And these qualities cannot be obtained in any rehabilitation.

How do the coaches work?

The trainer of the Nortcypriots is Hassan Segdyu Lems. He is 30 years old, lives in Nicosia and workes as a salesman. He has a disability and started playing wheelchair basketball when he was 11 years old. He claims he knows the problems of the disabled people very well, but there is always something new to be surprised by. "I learned everything from the disabled people, - says Segdyu Lems. – The most important thing is the faith and the self-confidence. There is a need for new players in the team, but the disabled just do not know that the team exists. The media are not very interested, and people with disabilities learn about us from the federation or acquaintances. If anyone wants to play, however, I contact him, I organize his transportation and he is starting with the training."

The coach of the Bulgarian team "Sofia-Balkan" is the long-time teacher in basketball at the National Sports Academy "Vasil Levski" Krustyo Tsarov. For the players he is a friend, and when necessary - a helper. He involved in the cause "wheelchair basketball" his whole family - his wife, professor in basketball, his two daughters and his son in law, being a therapist. "I teach the players to play basketball and to shoot, and they teach me how to move in a wheelchair, says assoc. professor Tsarov. - Some of them have their big business; others had not leaved their homes for years. One boy did not go out of his apartment for seven years. But after he came once to the training his life changed. We are helping each other. But I can say for sure that they give me more than I give them. And all of them are happy when someone is interested in their efforts. Unfortunately because of the classification of the different disabilities and the scoring system the matches are unequal. The boys are taking the losses very badly. And although this year we had only three official matches, they continue to train hard."

Why there should exist wheelchairs basketball?

There is not a single example of fans attending a wheelchair basketball game who didn't come back to watch again. According to the players from Sofia and from Nikozia the games are really amazing - full of emotions, arguments and fighting. They are topped with sweat and a lot of movement. Therefore, the audience leaves the hall a bit changed - so far, when they heard about a "man in a wheelchair," they imagined something like a dead man. And it turns out that there are excellent athletes who forget about their disabilities. Svetljo for example suffers from quadriparesis and has grip of the fingers. On the pitch he is slower than the others, but crosses passes and scores baskets more precise than his counterparts. Dobby has been part of the team for five months and has an amputation. He is walking with prothesis, but is doing well in the wheelchair. Nikki Vaklinov has broken vertebrae, but scores amazing points. The youngest player of Sofia Balkan is the 8-years old Tsvetomir who is fighting shoulder to shoulder with the men. Vladimir Gurov and Yveline Manolski also are doing very good. Ivaylo Petrov, who is the only Bulgarian player with an amputation, is incredible. And there are more players worthy of respect ...

- Sport is important because it helps people with disabilities to believe that they must move on - says Boris. - This applies to paralysis, amputations and malformations. For one year I have been begging three friends of mine with disabilities to come to the hall and to watch a bit. And if they like the game – they can stay. But they find excuses not to come. It is difficult to change the attitude. For many it appears impossible to overcome the thought that after the incident they are different. When I first gathered with my teammates everyone was helpful to others. I got my disability 18 years ago, but 12 months ago I learned things that I did not know. The others learned things they even didn't supposed exist - how to protect themselves from injuries, how to prevent wounds ... We became a family...