

# Communicating In and Through “Murderball”: Masculinity and Disability in Wheelchair Rugby

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*This article investigates communicative practices surrounding wheelchair rugby, a growing sport played worldwide by people with quadriplegia. Researchers have studied extensively the practice of using sport for rehabilitation, but the role of communication in this process has been overlooked. We argue that participating in this sport is itself a communicative act challenging ableist views of disability, and that the behavior of wheelchair rugby players transforms the stigma associated with their condition via enactments of hypermasculinity. Additionally, we suggest that the sport’s organizational culture operates as a space for newly quadriplegic persons to learn strategies for coping with their disability and the life changes that surround it. While we recognize the rehabilitative potential of these enactments, we note the ways the activity reifies patriarchal notions of gender and sport as well as validates traditional, often ableist norms of masculinity that complicate the social meanings of disability sport.*

*Keywords:* Communication; Disability; Masculinity; Rehabilitation; Sport

Watching wheelchair rugby players speed around a basketball court in their chariot-like wheelchairs, smashing into and tipping each other over, one understands why the sport is called “Murderball.” Featured in the Oscar-nominated documentary of the same name, it is the most visible and fastest growing wheelchair sport in the world

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(Buchanan, 2002; Gitonio, 2002). The sport—generally called “quad rugby” or “wheelchair rugby” by participants—is played by quadriplegic athletes who have varying degrees of impairment in all four limbs. It was brought to the U.S. in the 1970s as an alternative to wheelchair basketball and track and field events, which were dominated by more mobile and stronger paraplegic athletes. The sport combines elements of ice hockey, basketball, and able-bodied rugby. Players must carry a ball across one end of a basketball court, passing to teammates and avoiding getting hit by opposing players. The on-court displays of its mostly male athletes emulate those of able-bodied men in other high-contact sports like ice hockey and football. As Gitonio writes, Murderball is not meant for “sissies.”

While Murderball has only recently gained visibility in popular culture, disability sport has long been of interest to scholars. To date, most of this work has examined the type and amount of media coverage of disability sport (Brittain, 2004; DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Hardin & Hardin, 2003; Hardin, Hardin, Lynn, & Walsdorf, 2004; Thomas & Smith, 2003), and the popular images associated with these activities (DePauw, 1997; Hardin, 2003; Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Hardin, Lynn, Walsdorf, & Hardin, 2002). Similarly, the use of disability sport as therapy also has received significant scholarly attention and has generally confirmed that disability sport and physical activity contribute positively to rehabilitation programs (Guthrie 1999; Hutzler, 2003; Kosma, Cardinal & Rintala, 2002; Kretchmar, 2000; Mutrie, 1997; Sherrill, 1997). In particular, studies suggest that participation in wheelchair sports often results in increased self-esteem and a change in worldview and personal perspective (DePauw & Gavron, 2005; Guthrie & Castelnuovo, 2001; Huang & Brittain, 2006; Promis, Erevelles, & Matthews, 2001; Taub, Blinde, & Greer, 1999). To date, however, the role communication plays in the rehabilitative function of disability sport appears unexamined.

We argue that participating in wheelchair rugby is itself a communicative act that sends a complex message to both the community of sport and our broader social collectives that counters ableist assumptions about what persons with quadriplegia can accomplish. Given that involvement in the community of sport is restricted by certain social characteristics and such involvement draws upon traditional notions of gender and ability (Kassing et al., 2004), participation in disability sport must draw on traditional notions of gender and ability in challenging ableist expectations of disabled persons. Many wheelchair athletes—especially elite athletes—consider themselves on par with able-bodied athletes and wish to be viewed as such (Brittain, 2004; Hardin, 2003). Similarly, many quad rugby players view their sport as more than physical therapy. Wheelchair rugby players describe themselves and the game as “more athletic” than other wheelchair sport participants and contests. Players proudly display their willingness to sacrifice their bodies, claiming that they play rough and are always ready to take a spill for a loose ball (Gitonio, 2002). Since these characteristics of sacrifice and toughness are viewed as part of a “macho” and masculine image (Messner, 1992), wheelchair athletes can be viewed as using sport to communicate to ableist society that they are not weak, passive, or frail (Huang & Brittain, 2006; Taub et al., 1999). Just as media portrayals of participation in

wheelchair sports shape both physically disabled and able-bodied people's views of disability (Brittain, 2004), communication among quad rugby athletes informs larger meanings of disability.

In this study, we explore how communication in wheelchair rugby participation, both on-court displays and off-court talk and stories, shapes understandings of self and relations with others. Specifically, we evaluate the ways that disability sport creates spaces for and enacts messages that variously impact both the physical recovery process and identity rehabilitation. In the sections that follow, we expand upon the relationship between disability, sport, and rehabilitation, and address the ways that disability and disability sport impact identity and masculinity. We follow this with a brief discussion of our methods before examining the messages communicated to ableist society through playing quad rugby and the ways player communication within the sport shapes understandings of self and disability. In doing so, we explore the ways that some rehabilitative sport communication surrounding quad rugby relies upon and perpetuates both masculinist and ableist views of the "normal" body.

### **Disability, Stigma, and Rehabilitation Through Communication in Sport**

Acquiring a significant disability like quadriplegia has a dramatic effect on one's self identity. In his well-known examination of how people dealt with this trauma, Goffman (1963) referred to the practice of adjusting to a visible disability as managing a "spoiled" identity. But this view of disability as "spoiling" one's identity has been increasingly challenged and labeled "ableist" by what has become known as the Disability Rights Movement (DRM), the origins of which researchers date around the same time Goffman published his work on stigma (Fleisher & Zames, 2001; Shapiro, 1993). Activists associated with this movement, modeling many other civil rights movements arising in the late 20th century, have adopted the practices of identity politics, articulating what Linton (1998) terms "claiming disability" described as the positive affirmation of and pride in identifying oneself as disabled. While the practice of identity politics has become controversial within the DRM (Davis, 2002), the view that disability should be accepted as a "normal" part of life has begun to permeate Western culture, and scholars increasingly view disability as a social construct (Liachowitz, 1988; Murphy, 1990). As DePauw (1997) notes, this perspective of disability has the potential to alter our cultural view of disability within the community of sport, framing such sport endeavors as valid athletic performances instead of merely therapeutic activities. In our analysis of the communicative practices of quad rugby, however, we suggest that neither the stigma model nor the claiming disability model can alone account for the identity issues involved in this sport.

The benefits of sport recreation for physically disabled persons promote resistance through empowerment and empowerment through resistance. Participation in disability sports communicates to ableist society a message that resists typical perceptions of physically disabled persons as weak or frail (Brittain, 2004; Taub et al., 1999). Physical activity mediates participants' perceptions of the stigma associated

with disability by helping them to view their disability as less limiting (Bedini, 2000; Taub et al., 1999). Participants further empower themselves by building muscle and developing more control over the movement of their bodies. But the aspiration for strength and mobility may be guided by an ableist ideal of the athletic body. Taub et al. (1999) found that while disabled male interview respondents felt they were challenging stereotypes of the disabled as sick or weak, the respondents also expressed internalized perceptions of conventional beauty that reinforced “norms that are oppressive for individuals with disabilities” (p. 1481). In quad rugby, athletes’ physical displays of aggression and hard hits on the court sharply contrast with an ableist perspective of disability, but that aggression is closely associated with traditional values of athleticism and the body (Cherney & Lindemann, *in press*). Able-bodied rugby is particularly associated with masculine characteristics (Price & Parker, 2003), so wheelchair rugby players likely reify heterosexist and ableist notions of what it means to be a “man” and how to appear “manly.” Quad rugby players, then, contest stereotypical notions of disability while simultaneously accepting and reifying ableist values.

In addition to fostering resistance and empowerment, disability sport provides a defined space for social interaction that increases social networks and relationships (Ashton-Shaeffer, Gibson, Autry, & Hanson, 2001). Disabled persons learn from other participants how to be physically active and what it means to be disabled (Ashton-Shaeffer et al., 2001; Taub et al., 1999). As we demonstrate below, organized wheelchair rugby similarly encourages disabled athletes to enact (on-court and off-court) disability and masculinity in particular ways.

### **Disability and Masculinity in the Organizational Culture of Sport**

Communication activity among team members coordinates actions and attitudes (Meân, 2001; Turman, 2005), and sport teams can assimilate members into a particular organizational culture. Team members constitute organizational culture through participation in their sport (Kassing et al., 2004) and through stories, metaphors, and rituals that encourage shared values and beliefs (Bantz, 1993; Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1983; Trujillo, 1992). Newcomers not only learn the rules of the game but also the preferred image of an athlete and how to present that self to others. Goffman (1986) aptly describes the process of enacting those expectations as “frame alignment.” Research on therapeutic recreation (Ashton-Shaeffer et al., 2001; Bedini, 2000) argues that wheelchair sports athletes come to frame and understand disability in both enabling and constraining ways through their participation.

Communication in organizations often reinforces particular gender roles, creating and sustaining an organizational culture that values traditional notions of gender (Bantz, 1993; Collinson, 1992). Similarly, communication in a sport team can create and sustain an organizational culture that emphasizes and encourages particular meanings and enactments of masculinity. For example, Collinson’s (1992) observations of blue-collar male employees revealed that workers exaggerated the signifiers

of their masculinity, which included making claims of sexual prowess and mocking employees who do not “tough it out.” Scholars (Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990; Whitson, 1990, 2002) point to similar “locker room talk” as an inextricable part of the sport communication experience. In fact, sport and sport organizations have long reflected and embodied similar societal values. In the early 20th century, young boys were pushed into physical activities that were designed to instill “true manliness” (Messner, 1992; Whitson, 1990, 2002). Our study of sideline and “locker room talk” among quad rugby athletes uncovered similar values in the organizational culture of the sport. Since recreational sport participation provides substantial “improvements” of the body (strength, mobility, etc.) that implicate both sexist and ableist ideals, disability sport appears to be a rich terrain in which to examine enactments of masculinity and ability as part of an organizational culture.

Considering quad rugby in this masculinist and ableist context prompts several questions: How do on-court displays and off-court talk among wheelchair rugby athletes help to manage the stigma associated with the visibility of their physical disability? How does communication among wheelchair rugby athletes align frames of meaning about disability and masculinity? How does communication in the sport sustain an organizational culture conducive and/or resistant to the rehabilitation of wheelchair rugby players? And finally, how does the ability and masculinity traditionally associated with sport impact quad rugby’s challenge to ableism? To address these questions, we employed ethnographic methods, detailed below.

## **Method**

The first author conducted 3 years of participant observations of two United States Quad Rugby Association (USQRA) national tournaments, and practices and games of two teams: the Desert Demons, a nationally ranked team, and the Saguaro Scorpions, a developmental team with many newly disabled players. The first author transcribed scratch notes from these 124 hours of participant observations approximately 48 hours after each observation. This approach yielded 496 pages of typed, single-spaced field notes. The author also conducted a total of 25 ethnographic and semi-structured interviews. Interview respondents included 19 players, 16 male and 3 female, two referees, and four friends and family members, all of whom were given the option to choose a pseudonym or have one assigned to them by the researcher. The transcriptions of these interviews amounted to 133 typed, single-spaced pages. These interviews provided valuable opportunities for member-checking or member validation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), in which tentative coding categories were presented to participants for verification of truth, accuracy, and validity. In most instances, interview respondents confirmed the patterns and themes of communication that emerged in fieldwork. The most useful insight offered by interview respondents addressed the ways players become enculturated into the culture of quad rugby. While the first author initially intuited a more-or-less simple process of

becoming a member of a team, respondents pointed to more profound levels of enculturation that paralleled their experiences in spinal rehabilitation clinics.

The third data gathering procedure used was document analysis, and it comprised roughly 3 of the 149 total research hours and 98 of the 727 pages of total research data. The USQRA website (<http://www.quadrugby.com>) contains publicly accessible press materials, descriptions of rules, and information on injury classification. These documents aided understanding of on-court displays and off-court sideline talk as well as the ways USQRA rules and regulations were enacted in player communication. With participant observations and interviews, these documents allowed a triangulation of the data whereby interpretations could be checked against “native” understandings.

Coding began with an open, line-by-line reading, which revealed several general emic categories: athletes’ on-court displays, athletes’ off-court talk, athletes’ off-court storytelling, spectator reactions, and organizational attributes of game conduct. In a process consistent with those outlined by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), these categories became more narrow and textured when read against relevant literature. In further coding, in-process and analytic memoing (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) helped refine the categories, which eventually included: self-presentations of stigma, social talk about risk framed by what we call “daredevil masculinity,” and communication that enculturates participants into organizational culture. Below, we flesh out these categories, drawing on field notes and interview transcripts and contextualizing them in the larger body of literature regarding disability and identity.

### **“Oh My God! These Guys Are Nuts!”: Communicating Stigma and Self in Quad Rugby Participation**

Quad rugby athletes’ on-court displays reflect the complexity of the relationship between self-presentations of stigma and the rehabilitation process. Persons with disabilities struggle to rearticulate their identity as embodied rather than torn apart from one’s self “as an alien thing” (Do & Geist, 2000, p. 52). Most scholars addressing embodiment approach it through the interview narratives of disabled persons (Do & Geist, 2000; Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, & Davies, 1996; Sparkes & Smith, 2002). By examining on-court displays and off-court talk, this study follows Kassing et al.’s (2004) admonishment to study sport communication in situ and adds a new approach to research on rehabilitation and embodiment.

The athletic ability displayed on the court contrasts with what an ableist orientation expects from persons with a physical disability, as illustrated in the following field note excerpt.

The chairs, with molded and welded metal across the front like battered chariots, seem to be extensions of their bodies as they ram their fronts against each other to get geared up. During the game, they smash into other players with abandon, graceful and reckless in what almost seems like anger or rage, as if the game meant something more than just winning a trophy. (Field notes, page 7, lines 32–36)

While the on-court displays may seem reckless in terms of the potential for injury, the smashing and hitting is purposefully employed to help players score points.

On his way to the goal, Doug knocks over Texas' fastest player and the team's sideline cheers loudly. The player crashes face first into the hard parquet floor and is immobilized for a long while as the point finishes. He is pulled up by two able-bodied men who run in from the sidelines. His long hair hides for a moment the red welt on his left cheek, which he begins to rub thoughtfully. He slowly wheels over to the sidelines. (Field notes, page 105, lines 47–51)

The above examples are enactments of physical aggression that—while similar to what able-bodied athletes might enact on the court or playing field—differ from the ableist expectation that physically disabled athletes are docile and fragile.

Players themselves noted that the physicality required of them exceeds ableist expectations for people with disabilities. Ally, a female player from the Saguaro Scorpions who is new to the sport, commented on her initial perceptions of quad rugby: “I never expected people in wheelchairs to be ramming into each other. I thought it was crazy. When I first saw the people go over [tip over], I’m like, ‘Oh, my God, those guys are nuts’” (Interview, 02/04/06, page 2, lines 74–75). Similarly, Jeremy, an athlete with several years experience, noted:

I always say there’s no sport like rugby that just really shatters people’s notions of what’s possible. I mean, rugby, we got a saying: “It smashes stereotypes.” We did a demonstration for an elementary school. The whole school came and saw us, and one of their kids talked to the teacher and said that there is no way that these guys can be disabled and play that sport. After they saw what we could do, it just kind of blew away their perception. (Interview, 12/09/05, page 2, lines 54–59)

Clearly, players frame their on-court displays as incongruous with traditional sport behavior and the physicality ableist culture expects from a person with a disability.

When elite able-bodied athletes talk about their bodies, they often frame the body as utilitarian, as a tool with which to accomplish things (Messner, 1992). Messner argues that such framing is dangerous, as it encourages athletes to treat the body simply as a means to an end and to ignore the possibility that one’s body sometimes simply breaks down. But this attitude is consistent with the values of hegemonic masculinity (Sparkes, 1999; Sparkes & Smith, 2002; Whitson, 2002). Not surprisingly, then, quad rugby participation parallels the way communication practices in the community of sport often generally reify traditional gender values. Quad rugby players reify hegemonic masculinity even as their on-court displays challenge ableist assumptions, just as players on the rugby club for gay and bisexual men examined by Price and Parker (2003) reify heteronormativity. The rough-and-tumble play of these physically disabled players offers another entry point into how participation communicatively constructs masculinity and disability. Specifically, players’ off-court talk about those displays establishes a frame of invulnerability that constructs what can be called a “daredevil masculinity.” As we illustrate below, this frame masculinizes both male and female players.

### **“What’s the Worst That Can Happen? You’re Going to Break Your Neck Again?”: Communicating Invulnerability as Masculinizing Practice**

While quad rugby involves extensive physical contact, the players claim that much of what they do on the court *seems* more violent and dangerous than it may actually be. By framing their participation as less dangerous than it might seem to spectators, they discursively construct a frame of invulnerability that encourages a “daredevil masculinity” that is actually quite dangerous, especially for athletes who have already suffered serious injuries. This framing reinforces the values of hegemonic masculinity and disciplines the few female players in the sport to adopt these values as well.

Player talk about the sport’s safety equipment lays the groundwork for these disciplining masculine practices. When asked how dangerous the sport was, Liz, one of the few female players in the league, responded: “The chair is aluminum. It’s going to make noise, so that’s the big, people [say], ‘Oh, my god.’ It’s like, I’m strapped in, it doesn’t—What’s the worst that could happen? You’re going to break your neck again?” (Interview, 12/10/05, page 3, lines 114–116). Such talk establishes a frame of meaning (Goffman, 1986) in which physical contact is understood as less serious than it is. This frame of invulnerability, aptly represented by Liz’s question “What’s the worst that could happen? You’re going to break your neck again?” encourages male and female players to adopt an attitude toward the body that is consistent with traditionally masculine notions of the body as a machine, a tool that should not feel pain or hurt (Messner, 1992). This masculinizing discourse is even more evident in the players’ resistance to the use of helmets in quad rugby.

The decision to not wear a helmet is accepted and supported by almost all players despite the fact that many take spills to the floor while still strapped into their chairs, leaving their head and neck to take most of the blow. Bill, a player on the Desert Demons with over five years’ experience, speculated: “Maybe it’s just the macho thing . . . When they ask me—I talk a lot in school and the kids always ask—‘Do you play with a helmet?’ No. They ask you why, and you really have no good reason” (Interview, 4/23/05, page 4, lines 96–100). B.S., a player new to the sport, concurred.

And I think that part of that [not wearing a helmet] has to go back to, you know, you don’t want to look more retarded, I guess, than what we feel like we already are, you know what I mean? If you start putting a bunch of helmets on dudes in wheelchairs, there’s, you know, that hurts the egos. (Interview, 11/05/05, pages 14–15, lines 639–643)

B.S.’s comments, like Bill’s, reify traditional masculine values of physical sacrifice and toughness. B.S.’s elaboration about seeming more “retarded” than players might already feel, however, speaks more directly to the link between traditional masculinity and ableist assumptions about “normal” and “ideal” bodies.

Quad rugby participation restores players’ masculinity because their machismo denies the ableist perspective of disability. In other words, by not succumbing to ableist stereotypes of what they are capable of, players talk about their participation in terms consistent with an ideal masculinity. Playing daredevil to challenge ableist expectations is not unique to quad rugby. In their study of spinal cord rehabilitation



magazines, Hutchinson and Kleiber (2000) found many men who suffer spinal cord injuries do not feel fully “recovered” or rehabilitated unless they enact what the authors call a “heroic masculinity.” Similar to the play of quad rugby athletes, this heroic masculinity requires the disabled man to engage in activities even most able-bodied men would not, including skydiving and hang gliding. Communicating invulnerability, then, creates a space for the rehabilitation of one’s masculinity.

Female players’ talk emulated hard-hitting play as well and also points to quad rugby as a masculinizing practice. Similar to Liz, who speaks of the sport as less dangerous than it might look, Robin downplayed the aggressiveness in the sport: “I wouldn’t classify the attitudes as macho, but that could be one interpretation. . . I think it’s more along the line of attitudes you might find in those who participate in extreme sports” (Interview, 4/26/05, page 1, lines 10–12). In the same interview, Robin explained the need to be aggressive and take a hit on the rugby court:

At first the guys might back off, but, certainly, if it takes a hard hit to keep me from the ball or from scoring, they will deliver it. Sometimes guys apologize after a hard hit or after hacking me, but that doesn’t keep them from doing it again. . . I think most of the guys who have played against me will tell you I can take a hit and am pretty aggressive. (Interview, 4/26/05, page 1, lines 30–37)

Speaking of her aggressiveness and toughness in relation to the other male players, Robin’s talk reinforces the notion of sacrificing the body for the sport, an attitude consistent with the hegemonic masculinity that pervades most contact sports (Messner, 1992). In fact, all the females interviewed in this study noted that they must be even “tougher” than the men to play in this male-dominated sport. Ally described how being one of the few females on the court may contribute to receiving more hits:

They [male players] hit me just as hard as they hit the other guys. Sometimes, I think they hit me harder because I’m so light. . . I tended to fly further the harder they hit me, so I think they had a good time seeing how far they could get me to fly. (Interview, 02/04/06, page 3, lines 119–123)

Despite being lighter and easier to send flying, female players must show toughness to be accepted into the sport. When asked what it was like to be a female quad rugby player, Liz explained: “They’ll hit me harder because they know it’s easier to knock me over and push me out [of bounds], but they treat me like one of the guys” (Interview, 12/10/05, page 1, lines 43–44). Female players’ talk about receiving hits illustrates the way participation in the sport—and communication about their participation—masculinizes them by encouraging them to adopt the values of hegemonic masculinity regarding the body and its relative (in)vulnerability. Being treated like “one of the guys,” as Liz noted, hinges on showing the other players that despite being easier to knock around they are not afraid of taking a hit.

In the above excerpts, male and female players’ talk about not wanting to seem “retarded,” about giving and receiving hits, and “flying” in their wheelchairs as the result of a hit can all be read as striving for the feeling of being a “normal guy” that many (Messner, 1992; Price & Parker, 2003; Pronger, 1990) argue active participation in the community of sport provides. So, while embodying the violence

and aggression commonly seen in able-bodied sport may offer players an empowering perspective on their disability—as Jeremy declared, rugby “smashes stereotypes”—the talk surrounding the sport’s safety also masculinizes male and female players by fostering a potentially dangerous daredevil attitude.

But the culture of quad rugby also teaches participants other attitudes toward their bodies. Through their participation, and through the performance of everyday storytelling among team members, players are enculturated (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1983) into a world often vastly different from what they learned in spinal cord rehabilitation clinics. Learning the techniques other quads employ to get along in the “real” world outside of the rehabilitation clinic can be empowering for the newly disabled. As such, participation in quad rugby offers players the opportunity to share stories about how to “do” disability “the rugby way.” Such storytelling and talk enables newcomers to learn the ropes of being physically disabled by internalizing the culture of the sport.

### **“They Want to Live This Lifestyle”: Communication and Enculturation in Quad Rugby Culture**

In organizations, personal stories often teach members the way things are and should be done, which implicitly conveys the values held by members (Bantz, 1993). This process of enculturation (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1983) is illuminated by the way players communicate with others in the sport about their disabilities. Quad rugby players commonly share stories about difficult experiences with such things as involuntary urination, sexual activity, and simply doing the daily tasks that able-bodied people often take for granted. Newcomers to the sport, who are often newly disabled, adapt to life with a disability by spending time with other disabled athletes. Newcomers also learn the values of the quad rugby culture. As illustrated above, these values often reinforce ableist notions of gender and ability. Below, we explore two ways newcomers to the sport are enculturated into the quad rugby culture through communication with team members.

#### *“I Just Learned a Whole Bunch of Short Cuts”: Learning to “Do” Disability Through Communication*

Quad rugby athletes spend a lot of time together; they train together, travel together, and play together. As such, the interpersonal relationships that develop can be just as important to players’ therapeutic experiences as actually playing the game. Through off-court talk, players learn better how to “do” everyday activities and get by in life with a disability. Many pointed to their involvement in quad rugby as a large part of learning to function in an able-bodied world. In effect, players learn how to live by learning the game. Jeremy beamed when talking about his experience with new players:

We’ve got four brand new players . . . And you’re helping them with every single thing . . . You’re talking them through it. You put them in a chair, you get them

fitted, you tell them how to push, how to tape up, how to use gloves, how to use everything. And you're bringing them along every step of the way. It takes a year, it might take two years. It's a process. But guys did it for us, and you just pass it along because you can see brand new guys, and they want to play, they want to live this lifestyle, they want to be cool, and so they look up to players who have been there a little bit. (Interview, 12/09/05, pages 4–5, lines 177–185)

For Jeremy, the game is not just about playing, but about living the rugby “lifestyle.” Similarly, Sal, an “old timer” who played on one of the first rugby teams in the U.S. and is currently the coach of a team, recounted:

Everybody who is with us now are in their first or second year. Their rugby skills are getting better, which is great. Before it's over, you know, they're driving, they're no longer living at their parents' house, and they've got a girlfriend now. Those are the things that really hit home. Before you come out and you're exposed to this stuff, who would believe it? I would have still been lying in my bed. I would have never got out. (Interview, 4/23/05, page 1, lines 9–14)

Throughout the interviews, learning from others emerged as a dominant cultural narrative (Richardson, 1990; Silverman, 2000) among quad rugby players. The athletes frequently mentioned learning aspects of functioning in everyday life in the same sentence as learning quad rugby skills, stressing each equally.

Living the rugby “lifestyle” requires players to learn ways to do the basic tasks of everyday life in addition to learning how to play rugby. This quad rugby lifestyle, however, is part of the masculinist culture perpetuated through on-court displays and sideline talk about the game. Clint, one of the more experienced players on the Scorpions, described these “tricks of the trade” in terms that reflect the daredevil attitude that characterizes talk about the sport.

I was traveling with the guys and learning, I guess you could say, their secrets. Because when you're in the hospital they [physical therapists] teach you stuff by the book, the rehab way, the quote-unquote safe way of doing it. They teach you one way, and then pretty much you learn from the guys another way, a faster way. Because they teach you in the hospital the safer way of going about things . . . I just learned a whole bunch of shortcuts. (Interview, 09/24/05, page 2, lines 71–86)

Simply put, the organizational culture of quad rugby replaces the rehabilitation clinic as the source of new techniques for getting around in everyday life. Importantly, the messages players receive about living with a physical disability often differ from the medically sanctioned advice given to them in rehab. As Clint noted, the “safe” way taught in rehabilitation may not be as quick or efficient as the ways one learns through quad rugby participation. The advice garnered from these team relationships, then, challenges the medicalized gaze that positions disability as a deficiency (Foucault, 1990; Koppers, 2003; Young, 1990). This process is not uncommon in more traditional organizations, as learning the accepted way to accomplish tasks often conflicts with “right,” institutionally sanctioned ways of doing things (Jablin, 2001; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1983). In quad rugby culture, enacting “unsafe” practices in everyday living communicates attitudes that challenge

ableist assumptions about disability. But the daredevil nature of this orientation also accesses the hypermasculinity described in the previous sections. As such, this process of enculturation has unique ramifications for female quad rugby players.

The few female players in the sport interviewed in this study noted less involvement in talk about techniques for living with a disability. Liz described learning how to “do” disability in ways similar to the male players above, but she also acknowledged that “they probably don’t say certain things” (Interview, 12/10/05, page 2, line 55) and leave her out of some conversations because she is female. Ally explained a similar pattern of interaction: “I mean you don’t talk shop, but, um . . . Well, the guys have their conversations and the girls have their conversations” (Interview, 02/04/06, page 3, lines 111–113).

When becoming enculturated into the quad rugby culture, then, female players face many challenges. In addition to the masculinizing practices fostered by a frame of invulnerability, females may also be directly or indirectly denied access to storytelling and talk about how to “do” disability. The small percentage of female players helps explain this aspect of the organizational culture. Only six females out of 406 total players participated in sanctioned league play in the U.S. in 2006, making the percentage of females playing quad rugby less than 2% (USQRA, 2006). This overwhelming majority of males in quad rugby reflects the gender ratio of the population of persons with spinal cord injuries; in the U.S., 82% of this group is male (NSCIA, 2003). On most sports teams, the values perpetuated by “locker room talk” include a distinctly heterosexist, hypermasculine way of viewing the world (Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990; Whitson, 1990, 2002). Our research reveals that quad rugby teams are no different. While the female participants interviewed did not report feeling left out of team interactions, they recognized that “talking shop” about disability is inextricably bound with heteronormative guidelines governing discussions of gender and sexuality. In the next section, we highlight similar hetero-masculine characteristics in players’ sexually explicit off-court talk.

### *“Did You See the Freakshow?”: Ironically Communicating Masculinity and Heterosexuality*

When not discussing the game itself, wheelchair rugby players’ talk is like much sideline talk by ablebodied athletes (Kassing et al., 2004; Meân, 2001; Messner, 1992; Pronger, 1990); quad rugby talk is filled with macho posturing about athletic ability and jibes about sex and sexual orientation. Interestingly, like their on-court displays of athletic ability, quad rugby players’ off-court talk emulates ableist norms. Here, player talk coalesces in expressions of what we call “ironic masculinity”: ironic because the assertion of traditional, ablebodied masculinity comes by way of highlighting through talk a player’s “lack” of characteristics of traditional masculinity. Our use of the concept of irony, then, refers to the contrast between apparent and intended meaning. And while the players themselves may not intend an ironic framing, we critically read their ribald humor as possessing an ironic twist that ultimately

asserts conventional norms by pointing to the disabled body's inability to satisfy such norms.

On the sidelines at a regional tournament, Doug, an elite player on the Desert Demons, recounted how Boomer, a quadruple amputee player from another team, was eating a hamburger at a banquet dinner the previous night:

Turning to Steve and Meagan, Doug laughs, "Did you see the freakshow? Boomer was trying to eat a burger." Doug mimes the action, using his elbows as if they were the stumps of Boomer's amputated arms, awkwardly grabbing an imaginary hamburger and eating it. Meagan, Steve's ablebodied girlfriend, asks him incredulously, "Well, Doug. How else is he supposed to eat it? His arms and legs are gone."

Perhaps this is the line he's been waiting for, because Doug, smiling broadly, responds, "Chow down, you know." He pauses for effect and then continues, "Chow down like he's chowing on something else." Doug bends his neck, positioning his head close to the imaginary plate in front of him, and opens and closes his mouth, flicking his tongue with great gusto. It's obvious that he's miming the act of cunnilingus. (Field notes, 252, lines 53–60)

In this field note excerpt, Doug offers what he considers a solution to Boomer's inability to perform the basic bodily function of eating: the heterosexual sex act of cunnilingus. In essence, this sexual ability is discursively framed as heterosexual and offered as a counter, a "corrective" of sorts, to an inability to eat "properly" due to one's disability. Ironically, the assertion of traditional masculine norms is made possible through an acknowledgment of the lack of traditionally masculine characteristics, like possessing a strong, able body.

Players also discursively draw on their own disability to assert traditionally hetero-masculine norms. The first author encountered such an instance while conducting fieldwork with the Desert Demons.

Waiting in line at the airport with the team, Steve offers me a piece of Starburst candy. I take it and thank him, unwrapping the piece quickly. Watching me intently, Steve says, shaking his head, "Look at that. Do you have any idea how hard that it is for me, something as simple as that? You need to do it like we do it." Steve illustrates the way quads have to unwrap Starburst candy: holding the piece on the flat palm of their hand (as flat as they can make it) and only using their mouth. Pretty soon, the team is racing each other to see how fast they can unwrap pieces of candy with our mouths. Jokes abound about the guys' oral sex "technique" as evidenced in the unwrapping. (Field notes, page 385, lines 84–90)

Similar to Doug's comments, Steve's assertion of masculinity works because he is able to embody his "failings": his inability to unwrap a piece of candy like a "normal" person. Certainly, the joke Doug made in the previous excerpt could have been made by an ablebodied person. In the latter case, though, such a joke would just be cruel. With Doug, it garnered laughs because of his in-group status. Further, an ablebodied person unfamiliar with the cultural and medical complexities of disability may not even understand to what extent a quadruple amputee may be able to perform a sexual act in the same way an ablebodied, heterosexual male might. Doug's instantiation of masculinity works precisely because Boomer *can* perform the sexual act. Steve frames his inability to perform a mundane task like a "normal" person as an ability to

perform a “normal” heterosexual sex act. The ironic twist here is that because he must use his mouth in ways most “normal” people don’t, he exceeds at sexual uses of his mouth often associated with able-bodied sexual activity.

These communicative performances of enculturation (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1983) embodied in stories about living with a physical disability and ribald humor with an ironic twist accomplish much. They ensure that team members know the attitudes toward gender and sexuality that are a part of quad rugby’s culture. They also communicate particular relationships between disability and sexuality. These messages not only have consequences for the female partners of the male players, they may also have an impact on the ways in which female players are enculturated into the sport. In all instances, enactments of sport serve, in the words of Kassing et al. (2004), as “social lessons” (p. 377). These lessons provide guidelines for the way players should act. In our conclusion, we argue that the lessons learned in quad rugby incorporate values that have implications for understanding disability, the community of sport, and the broader collectives in which we live.

## **Conclusion**

Earlier work examining elite disabled athletes has emphasized the ways that sport participation undermines ableism, promotes identity politics, and fosters social change. For example, Huang and Brittain (2006) write that

being an elite disabled athlete is a shared cultural identity composed of challenging stereotypes and building solidarity and recounting new stories. . . . In accordance with the disability movement, elite sport provides the collective context for political identification. It involves processes during which elite disabled athletes challenge dominant perceptions of disabled people as incapable, powerless, and passive and the embodied experience gained from sport enables disabled people to construct the terms for themselves as an example of consciousness raising. Elite disabled athletes thus transform themselves into active and creative agents for social change by redefining the very meaning of disability. (p. 371)

Our study confirms that participating in quad rugby is a communicative act that sends a message to the community of sport and beyond challenging ableist assumptions about disability, masculinity, and ability. The sport’s hyper-masculine aggressive physical contact, “Mad Max” wheelchairs, and on- and off-court bravado undermine the ableist tradition linking disability and emasculation. Playing and winning in the sport decouples ableist associations of disability and incapacity, for participation provides visible and tangible evidence of persons with disabilities performing with athletic skill and prowess. These messages are communicated as much to the players themselves as to spectators, and they inform the rehabilitation of identity from self-loathing and stigma to acceptance and pride. Becoming disabled in an accident or through illness is a traumatic experience that one typically experiences through frames shaped by ableist thinking, and adapting to such life-changing circumstances requires a different perspective. Organized wheelchair rugby creates a social network that allows quadriplegics to share experiences, discuss adaptive

practices, and communicate acceptance of their conditions. For many newcomers to the “rugby lifestyle,” the sport provides an empowering view of disability that resists the ableist expectations of the disabled body. As a result, the talk among team members plays an important role in the rehabilitative function of the sport.

But our investigation also reveals the ways that quad rugby culture maintains ableist and masculinist ideals that often contrast with the ideological stance of disability rights activists in the U.S. The sport frames quadriplegia with a utilitarian view of the body and a daredevil masculinity, both of which accept rather than reject the dominant cultural definition of disability. In effect, the players aggressively adopt a hypermasculine attitude and employ ableist values of strength and physical accomplishment in order to become more “normal.” Sport has historically been shaped by ableist norms of the body (Cherney, 2003); we show here that quad rugby culture reflects some of these ideals. Others have shown how previously excluded sport participants sometimes sacrifice political efficacy when they seek to be accepted as valid athletes. For example, Price and Parker’s (2003) study of a rugby team for gay and bisexual players concluded that “struggling for recognition and acceptance within a sporting culture defined by heterosexist definitions of normality” limited the team’s “ideological potential . . . to challenge heteronormative discourses in this setting to any significant degree” (p. 122). We locate the same dynamic at work in wheelchair rugby. This dynamic illustrates the pervasive strength of the values created and displayed by the community of sport. While communication in the quad rugby culture may increase feelings of self-esteem and empowerment that come with claiming agency over one’s disability and learning to “do” disability on one’s own terms, the values of heterosexual masculinity and ability communicated through participation in the community of sport reify values used in contexts beyond the community of sport to oppress those with physical disabilities.

When assessing the impact of stigma, Goffman (1963) suggested that those individuals who most closely approximated normality would be the leaders and heroes of the stigmatized group. But the DRM directly challenged this logic by taking pride in visible disability and selecting leaders whose bodies and prostheses clearly marked them as disabled. In the movement, appearing “normal” can hinder one’s opportunities to “claim disability.” In our analysis, quad rugby avoids stigma much like Goffman predicted, as the players’ athleticism and hypermasculinity moves them toward acceptance in an ableist and heterosexist culture instead of challenging the values of those ideologies. In a sense, the sport of wheelchair rugby does not smash stereotypes as much as communicate the message that such ableist constructs do not apply to its players. Put a different way, quad rugby players *pass* in ableist and hypermasculine society: they have athletic qualities prized by the values of the community of sport and the broader dominant culture that allow their acceptance but can undermine the more radical message of pride and claiming disability advocated by the DRM. This article points to the need for future research on disability sport and elite disabled athletes as challenging ableist assumptions and values.

By examining the ways quad rugby communication potentially perpetuates social exclusion through gendered talk, this study suggests a direction for further studies of

disability sport. Kassing et al. (2004) call for more research that examines the ways communication may foster or deter participation in sport. Notably, there are some quad rugby players who refuse to take part in the sideline talk offered in the above excerpts. While these cases rarely showed up in the ethnographic data, a few instances of unwillingness to engage in “locker room talk” about sexual exploits points to another layer of resistance that could be uncovered in future research.

This article also extends thinking about disability, gender, and sexuality by locating their intersections in sport communication. Given the high rate of injury from serious athletic participation (Messner, 1992), the way traditional gender roles are enacted in sport communication (Meân, 2001) and the contested yet pervasive nature of heterosexuality in sport (Pronger, 1990) are important considerations in sport communication research. In extending such thinking, our work begins to fill the lack of research on disability and sexuality (Shakespeare, 1999). The status of sport as a “powerful cultural institution” (Kassing et al., 2004, p. 380) enables a form of gender “rehabilitation,” but it also suggests that the complex interaction of heterosexist masculinity and ableism is firmly grounded in widespread assumptions about sport, its definition, and its meaning.

Ultimately, quad rugby participation as communication and player communication about their participation illustrates that sport’s highly influential status as a pervasive cultural institution works as a double-edged sword in the rehabilitation process. Physically disabled quad rugby players may find participation empowering while their participation simultaneously fosters potentially harmful and exclusionary attitudes about ability and gender. As the sport continues to “smash stereotypes,” sport communication researchers must continue to look at what is left “standing” in its wake.

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