

# MEETING EXPENSES OF WHEELCHAIR RUGBY: STRATEGIES EMPLOYED TO PROCURE FUNDING AND PROMOTION BY TEAMS AND PLAYERS

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## Abstract

Research notes that disability sport can be expensive, and finances are a limiting factor when examining participation rates. However, no research to date addresses the financial investment to participate in competitive disability sports or how these athletes and their teams finance participation. Therefore, there are two distinct purposes of this study: (1) to identify the economic investment and time commitment needed to fund-raise for wheelchair rugby and (2) to determine how teams and individuals fund wheelchair rugby. Results indicate that wheelchair rugby athletes and their teams fund sport participation through large-scale sponsorships, fund-raisers, and small-scale sponsorships. Additionally, athletes self-pay a substantial portion of their expenses, creating an exclusive level for participation given that wheelchair users are statistically more economically disadvantaged. Finally, some teams are effectively engaging in social media and website use to generate revenue for sport participation, but a substantive portion lacks a sophisticated electronic based marketing plan.

**Keywords:** *disability sport; sponsorship; sport marketing; wheelchair rugby*

## Background

Wheelchair rugby is a full-contact sport that provides for outstanding crashes and impressive hits (Eleftheriou, 2005); however, it offers much more than solely entertainment. For the athletes who have disability in at least the limbs (i.e., quads), it is widely acknowledged that wheelchair rugby provides intense and life-changing psychological benefits including self-acceptance, peer support (Goodwin et al., 2009) and improved self-image (Adnan, McKenzie, & Miyahara, 2001). Athletes also receive physiological improvements such as increased physical activity (Sporner, Grindle, Kelleher, Cooper, & Cooper, 2009) and increased strength (Berzen & Hutzler, 2012). Yet despite its numerous benefits, wheelchair rugby is largely inaccessible to many

eligible players due to a variety of socioenvironmental barriers and high costs of participating in the sport, including equipment, travel expenses, and fees associated with formal competition.

Players who want to compete formally and competitively are classified based on their function levels and register to compete on various club teams in cities across the United States and internationally. Currently there are 41 teams registered with the United States Quad Rugby Association (USQRA), the governing body of wheelchair rugby in the United States that manages competitions between club teams. Due to the limited number of teams and often the large geographic area between them, most competitive games are completed during regular-season tournaments. Most tournaments consist of 4-12 teams that fly or drive to a single location and play in 4-6 games over the course of a 3-day event.

Players who then want to continue to compete in postseason must play four games, of which two must take place before January and two after January but before the beginning of postseason. However, most of the teams ranked in the top 16 (those who qualify for nationals) play more than the minimum required games to qualify for postseason. Moreover, teams hoping to qualify for the National Championship must travel to a regional qualifier, then again to nationals. In short, the travel commitments for a player trying to qualify for nationals are extensive.

Necessary travel is a significant expense for a quad rugby player wishing to compete and is only one of the qualifications required to be on a national wheelchair rugby team. Each player must have a regulation rugby wheelchair, which is custom-designed and produced by few manufacturers. The expense of the equipment ranges between \$2,500-\$5,000 for a chair that will last 2-5 years (Eleftheriou, 2005). In addition, chairs require regular replacement of axles, tires, wheels, and tubes, as well as periodic spot welding.

Given these excessive equipment, travel, and competition-related fees, an important question arises as to how wheelchair rugby players are able to afford to participate in such an expensive sport. No empirical data exists on how



The Division I third-place Houston Texans pose for a team photo.

much teams provide in terms of funding, nor how individual players cover the expenses related to this sport. For this reason, there are two distinct purposes for this study: (1) to identify the economic investment and time commitment needed to fund-raise for wheelchair rugby and (2) to determine how teams and individuals acquire funding for wheelchair rugby. It is hypothesized that a combination of various sources of funding, both private and personal, must be acquired to successfully qualify for and compete in the national championships.

In order to address these uncertainties, players at a wheelchair rugby championship event in Kentucky volunteered to take a survey inquiring about their sources of funding. Answers were evaluated to determine percentage of funds acquired from each valid source. Prior literature was also taken into account in designing the research. First, previous relevant scholarship is reviewed to identify traditional sports funding tactics in collegiate, interscholastic (youth, or high-school level) and professional sports. Then, current knowledge of disability sports participation and its limitations are explored, followed by disability sport funding, promotion, and sponsorship. Understanding the numerous barriers of disability sport participation as well as current funding strategies for mainstream sports may help us discover how to provide greater funding for disability sport. This study is justified in that it will reveal how current athletes with disabilities have overcome economic as well as socio-environmental limitations in order to successfully compete in an expensive sport.

## Literature Review

### Sports Funding

While the academic literature has extensively covered professional, intercollegiate, and to a lesser extent, interscholastic sports patronage, little is known about small-scale sport marketing (Gibson, Willming, & Holdnak, 2003). Yet, these small-scale marketing operations can be more impactful due to the direct expenses participants might incur as they are often self-funded. One of the most under-researched contexts related to small-scale sports marketing is funding of disability sport. According to Cottingham, Gearity, and Byon (2013), there is a critical need to better understand revenue generating strategies and promotion of disability sports in order to provide equal sporting opportunities for athletes with disabilities, to overcome the lack of sponsorship and to eliminate cost-limiting factors linked to elite disability sport participation.

### Disability Sports Funding

Acquiring funding for disability sports has long been a lofty endeavor for athletes and practitioners. Compared to able-bodied sports, disability sports face distinct challenges in promotion and sponsorship, and despite some similarities in funding techniques between the two groups, disability sports receive disproportionately inferior resources. The same barriers dramatically affect disability sports in the contexts of promotion and sponsorship.

## Promotion

Promotion of disability sports through media outlets such as newspapers, radio, television, or the Internet plays an important role in funding, as media coverage has a profound effect in the management and success of virtually all sports settings. Over the years, disability sport promotion through the media has increased; however, it is not without its challenges. Disability sport often takes the back seat to other events or news deemed more significant. In a study examining newspaper coverage of the Atlanta Paralympic games in France and Germany, Schantz and Gilbert (2001) state that many of the articles written in French newspapers about the Paralympic Games did not consider the games a serious sporting event. Moreover, many of the newspapers analyzed in the study were found to have a low opinion on the media value in covering disability sports. With greater visibility also comes a greater need not only for organizational funding, but for sponsorships as well, which can be highly advantageous in the marketing and financial backing of disability sport. Sponsors tend to invest with increased spectatorship; therefore, many disability sport organizations are making efforts to increase spectator attendance (Cottingham, Byon, Chatfield, & Carroll, 2013; Cottingham, Garity, Goldsmith, Kim, & Walker, 2015). A study examining consumer behaviors at the London 2012 Paralympics states that having spectators is a vital component of the business model for the Paralympic movement (Ekmekci, Berber, Zaharia, & Turco, 2013). The sponsors of the 2012 Paralympic games were comprised of businesses including restaurants, beverage companies, and financial services, all of which offer products that are focused on meeting the needs of the event spectators (Ekmekci et al., 2013). Without the spectators at the Paralympic games, sponsors would have had little motivation to participate since they gain by advertising to large audiences.

Yet sponsors may be motivated by more than product advertisement opportunities and the potential to gain new customers. With the unfortunate reality that disability sporting events attract relatively smaller audiences, sponsors tend to think of supporting a disability sport event as an act of charity instead of using it as an opportunity to promote their brands (Cottingham, et al., 2013) because sports have a positive impact on the quality of life of people with disabilities (Lastuka & Cottingham, 2015). Additionally, sponsors may hesitate to support disability sport due to social pressure, that is, the uneasiness or discomfort around disability and the fear of outstepping the bounds of what is considered normal (Caro, 2012).

Despite the challenges of the negative stereotypes and social perceptions faced by promoters of disability sport, many successes and great development in this area are underway. Literature shows that multiple disability sports governing bodies have made efforts to increase funding or have shown intention to do so in the future. One effective approach toward this goal has been to reach out to national sport governing bodies of traditionally able-bodied sports to promote their disability sports counterparts, successfully resulting in increased financial support as well as media coverage of disability sport. At the forefront of this movement is the In-



Eddie Crouch of the Lakeshore Demolition attempts to intercept a pass.

ternational Tennis Federation (ITF), which has contributed greatly to their corresponding disability sport: wheelchair tennis. Not only does the ITF provide coaching and equipment, but they also promote the sport by including a wheelchair tennis division when they host grand slam tennis tournaments. Thus, people who attend for the able-bodied tournament will be exposed to wheelchair tennis (Cottingham, et al., 2013). Additionally, they promote top elite wheelchair tennis players alongside able-bodied tennis players.

Another governing body working to increase disability sports funding is the United States Quad Rugby Association (USQRA). Like wheelchair tennis with the ITF, the USQRA is attempting to partner with the International Rugby Federation (IRF) to foster new sponsorships and create a more diverse fan base (Cottingham, et al., 2013). Following suit, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) has established a similar relationship with the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Research investigating the relationship between the IOC and IPC suggests that the growth and success of the Paralympic Games has brought about discussions between the IOC and IPC Presidents regarding the future of the Paralympic Games (Legg, Fay, Wolff, & Hums 2014). Currently, the International Olympic Committee gives roughly \$2 million a year to the Paralympic Games and has offered to increase that funding yearly by 50% if they are given management rights over the Paralympic Games (Magnay, 2011). Although the IPC may lose autonomy to an extent, this provision would allow the International Paralympic Committee to focus its efforts on developing athletes (Magnay, 2011). These developing partnerships between able-bodied governing organizations such as the ITF, IRF, and IOC and their disability sport counterparts are affirming evidence towards increased promotion and inclusion of disability sport into mainstream sport. In sum, literature has clearly illustrated that disability sport is out of reach for many potential athletes due in part to the lack of funding to pay for the expensive costs associated with participating in sport. To cover these costs, disability sport cannot rely on scarce local governmental funding as the majority of resources are allocated to able-bodied sport, nor can they depend on fair and accurate media coverage, which further propagates the



The Seattle Slam play lock-down defense.

skewed “supercrip” mentality and the idea that sponsoring an event merely is an act of charity. Thus, it is exponentially more difficult for disability sports to fight for sponsorships and the promotion they need to further grow their sport and gain spectators. Current disability sport practitioners generally have relied on support from national governing bodies of their able-bodied counterparts, but how athletes and teams of disability sport manage to close the financial gaps and cover all their necessary expenses is unknown. With little research of small-scale marketing and fund-raising, this study contributes to the current body of knowledge by utilizing surveys in its method to understand successful funding of disability sport.

## Methods

### Data Collection and Participants

Approval was first attained from the university official review board to conduct a survey of athletes at the Wheelchair Rugby Championship in Louisville, Kentucky, over a period of two and a half days. Wheelchair rugby athletes were asked to complete a 23-question inquiry of their sport funding and were entered in a raffle to win \$50 as incentive. Questions were developed with two elite wheelchair rugby athletes and then the survey questions were reviewed by a current and former member of the USQRA board. This provided content validity questions were comprised of seven point Likert scale design (i.e., questions related to effectiveness of media efforts) and categorical (i.e., how much of your rugby expenses are self-funded).

The national championship was comprised of the top 16 of the total 41 teams affiliated with the USQRA. While the vast majority of those who participated were from the top 16 teams, representatives from at least five other teams were in attendance and completed surveys.

Participants were between the ages of 21 and 55 years old. Participants were invited to take the assessment between games; completion of the survey lasted approximately 10 minutes. Athletes that requested help filling out the survey due to their disability (i.e., paralysis in their hands or a lack of fingers), were read out loud each question to ensure understanding. One hundred and four usable surveys were

collected, which represents approximately 58% of athletes competing in nationals. All participants signed consent forms before beginning the survey.

All data was collected anonymously to address the following research questions.

### Research Questions

- R1: How much of an athlete’s funding is provided by their club programs?
- R2: How are rugby teams funded?
- R3: How do individual athletes make up the financial gap between their expenses and what is provided by their club teams?
- R4: What percentage of players report maintaining a team Facebook page and website, and an individual but professional Facebook page and website?
- R5: Of those players who state their team maintains a team Facebook page and/or a website, or maintain an individual Facebook page and/or website, how effective do they feel these efforts are at garnering resources?

## Results

### R1: How much of an athlete’s funding is provided by their club programs?

Players were asked how much of their funding is provided by their club programs. Among the response options were: all, most, about half, less than half, and none. Only 8.7% of players claim that all or 100% of their rugby expenses are provided by their team, and 41.7% claim that most expenses are provided by their team. Collectively then, about half of the athletes surveyed (50.4% combined) state that most or all of their expenses are provided by their club team. Subsequently, the other half of athletes are left to pay for 50% or more of their expenses, and of them a combined 33.1% of athletes claim their club covers no or little funds, meaning they must pay for a majority or all of their rugby expense.

### CLUB PROGRAM CONTRIBUTIONS TO ATHLETE FUNDING

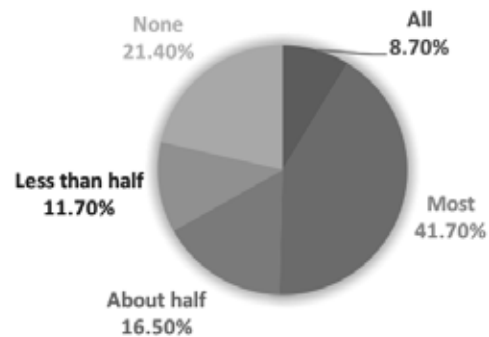


Figure 1. Club program contributions to athlete funding

### R2: How are rugby teams funded?

Players report teams use a complex and varied approach to finding sources to fund some or all of the teams. As pre-

viously illustrated, approximately 80% of the athletes report teams fund at least some of their expenses. More than half of the athletes (61.4%) reported relying on large sponsors for funds, and 24.8% reported reaching out to small sponsors and personal contacts. Other sources of support, such as fund-raisers or online donations, were used to a lesser extent by athletes.

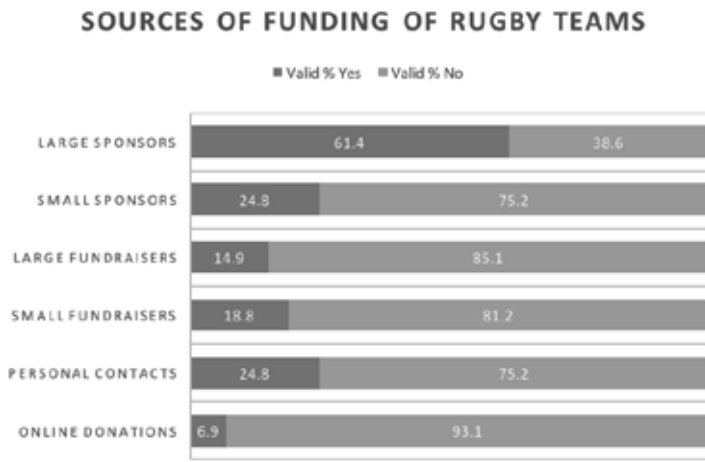


Figure 2. Sources of Funding of Rugby Teams

### R3: How do individual athletes make up the financial gap between their expenses and what is provided by their club teams?

Of the approximately 90% of athletes who noted they provide at least some funding for competition, the ways they managed their expenses were varied. A full presentation can be seen in Figure 3.

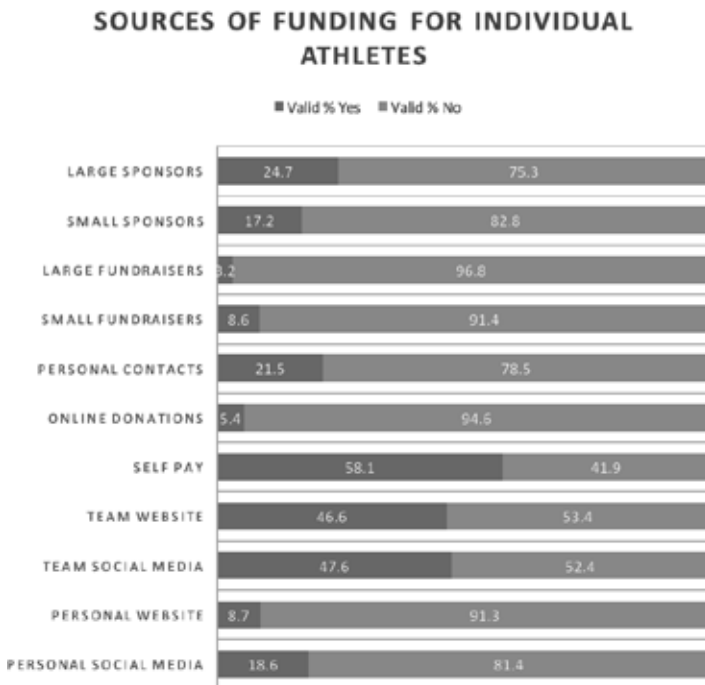


Figure 3. Sources of Funding for Individual Athletes

Because so few wheelchair rugby players maintained an individual social media account or website, we elected not to analyze their perceived effectiveness. Of those who reported their team maintained a website, only 20% said that the website was highly effective (6 or 7 on a 7-point Likert scale). However, 27.5% stated their website was highly ineffective at raising funds (1-2). Of those who reported that their team maintained a social media presence, 17.5% stated their social media pages were highly effective, and 22.5% felt their social media pages were highly ineffective.

## Discussion

### The Funding Burden

Survey results found that roughly half of the participants pay for 50% or more for their expenses, and from this representation, 33.1% of these athletes reported that they must pay for almost all of their rugby expenses. Considering that the cost of equipment alone can range between \$2,500-\$5,000 per chair (Eleftheriou, 2005), the addition of travel expenses, tournament fees, and other costs pertaining to the sport can quickly become overwhelming for athletes who do not receive financial support for their rugby expenses. From the literature reviewed on sponsorship of disability sport, it can be inferred that the lack of sponsorship available for disability sports can be a contributing factor as to why so few wheelchair rugby athletes receive funding from their club programs. For example, the relatively small amount of marketing of disability sports combined with low attendance at disability sporting events limit the amount of sponsors disability sports receive (Cottingham et al., 2013). Because few sponsorships for disability sports in general exist, wheelchair rugby programs are unable to provide more funding for their athletes. It can also be inferred that the relatively low representation of athletes reporting that they receive significant support in funding from their club programs places a financial burden on the athletes that could potentially be detrimental to their long-term participation in the sport. Further research on the relationship between wheelchair rugby athletes who pay for almost all of their participation and competition related expenses and retention of participants in the sport could provide information on how the burden of rugby athletes funding their own competition expenses impacts their enjoyment and/or participation in the sport over time. Athletic participation has a positive correlation with employment for people with disabilities, retention in sports or activity programs such as wheelchair rugby is crucial, and changes in sponsorship and funding are needed in disability sports to make participation easily accessible and not financially burdensome on individuals wanting to participate in the sport long term (Lastuka & Cottingham, 2015).

Considering the preceding literature regarding low levels of employment and income for those with disabilities (Kreider & Pepper, 2007), these results indicate that low income is an inhibiting factor for athletic participation. These barriers are not limited to disability; a poll conducted by University of Michigan found that nearly one in five parents of lower-income households reported a decrease in their child's school sports involvement due to the cost of partici-



Jeff Odom of the San Diego Sharp streaks by as his teammate sets a pick.

pation (C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital National Poll on Children’s Health, 2014). Because expense is a significant barrier to athletic participation, it is imperative for teams and athletes to seek more reliable sources of funding.

### Funding Sources

Results show that many participants rely on a variety of sources to support the funding needed to compete in wheelchair rugby. With over 90% of the athletes surveyed reporting a reliance on at least a portion of funding to come from their respective teams, and knowing that there is a lack of sponsorship in disability sports (Cottingham et al., 2013), it can be speculated that enhancement of disability sport funding and sponsorship could aid in the advancement of disability sports. As mentioned previously, it can be inferred that an increase in areas such as spectatorship, media coverage, and marketing of disability sport could potentially lead to an increase in sponsorships for disability sports. Of the wheelchair rugby athletes surveyed, 61.4% listed large sponsors as a funding source followed by 24.8% reporting some funding coming from smaller sponsors and personal contacts. Online donations were the least noted funding source by athletes with only 5.4% of athletes reporting this method as a funding source. This representation of funding sources for wheelchair rugby athletes is paramount to the continued research on not only the sources of funding and sponsorship in wheelchair rugby, but can also provide insight as to what other disability sports may be encountering in terms of assistance in funding for their sports. The data indicates that there is a potential for growth in sponsorship and funding opportunities particularly from certain sources such as online funding. As mentioned earlier, increases in disability sport spectatorship and media coverage could be significant factors for growing future sponsorships for disability sports. Furthermore, with online donations being the least represented reported source of funding, efforts should be made to examine how athletes could potentially expand their funding from online donations, possibly by being provided training

on maintaining an active personal or team web page or social media profiles.

### Funding and Social Media

The current hand-held device technology trend is changing the way that sports are produced, marketed, delivered, and consumed; therefore, it is imperative for sports organizations to become more sophisticatedly sociable in order to reach a greater fan audience and sponsors (Santomier, 2008). As corporate practices to communicate with customers evolve, professional sports teams have incorporated social media practices into their marketing strategy to further generate revenue, build relationships with customers and stakeholders and to promote their brands (Filo & Karg, 2015). According to Ioakimidis (2010) online sports marketing is currently the best medium to build a fan community for professional sports teams; it is recom-

mended that teams develop effective online marketing and a more sociable presence in order to gain financial resources.

Most participants are not successfully developing their online marketing and social media presence. Only 20% of respondents noted their websites were highly effective, and 17.5% said their social media efforts were highly effective. We can speculate that part of their lack of success through online sources is due to lack of resources and knowledge on how to develop a digital brand. It is also possible that scarcity of media engagement of sporting websites is due to financial constraints and the high costs of maintenance for such services, which explains their underdevelopment of social media (Ioakimidis, 2010). The lack of presence in this digitally driven society poses a huge economic and human relations disadvantage for sports teams that do not effectively engage in social media. While adaptive athletics programs do lack sophistication in this regard, we have seen smaller scale sports programs effectively navigate social media, including Division II athletics departments (Truman, Cottingham, Bogle-Jubenville, & Lynch, 2014). Adaptive sports teams would be well served to invest resources in learning and advancing their understanding in digital media promotion while adaptive governing bodies should consider sponsoring educational seminars in promoting digital branding.

### Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

Our findings indicate that sports marketing sophistication is lacking for at least some teams and individuals participating in disability sport. Furthermore, because athletes are often expected to cover a substantial portion of their costs to participate in a very expensive sport, the sport itself may be exclusive. Our recommendations are for the USQRA to develop a template website and provide an address to teams not currently hosting a website. These ready-made templates are common and easy to manage. In addition, we recommend that the USQRA incentivize the use of social



James Sa of the San Diego Sharp accelerates to the goal past two Med Star Punisher defenders.

media. A possible incentive would be to provide a discount in dues for teams who reach an appropriate threshold. While this sample is limited to quad rugby, we would assume that social media is utilized similarly by athletes with disabilities in other sports. We recommend examining participants in disability sports explore whether this is a common theme. In addition, research should examine in depth what specific strategies athletes with disabilities use to promote on social media, what types of fund-raisers are most common and successful, and how that work is delegated between teammates and stakeholders. In short, understanding the breakdown of funding and financial expectations of athletes in our paper provides important information in understanding how competitive disability sport financially functions. As the study of disability sport management is growing, these findings will provide a baseline for those examining the business of disability sport including sponsorship, marketing, and fund-raising. Future research should investigate what programs or efforts are most effective at garnering resources, what specific strategies are used to attract major sponsors, what fund-raisers are most effective, and how specifically social media efforts are managed. A better understanding of these issues would allow practitioners to more effectively procure resources and remove more of the financial barriers to participation.

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