|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Speak Up - Kōrerotia**  **Wheelchair sports**  **16 February 2022** | |
| Female | This programme was first broadcast on Canterbury’s access media station Plains FM and was made with the assistance of New Zealand on Air. |
| Female | Coming up next, conversations on human rights with Speak Up – Kōrerotia here on Plains FM. |
| Sally | E ngā mana,  E ngā reo,  E ngā hau e whā  Tēnā koutou katoa  Nau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”.    Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right.  This is “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia” and today we’re talking about wheelchair sports with Sally Carlton and a range of guests. So we’re going to be bringing really diverse perspectives to this topic. I’m really, really looking forward to this: it’s something I know very little about and I’m really looking forward to learning more myself. But also hopefully this will provide a bit of a platform for raising a bit more awareness about wheelchair sports and specifically today we’re talking a bit about wheelchair rugby as well.  If you could please introduce yourselves and tell us why it is that you’re taking part. Rebecca, perhaps we’ll start with you. |
| Rebecca | My name is Rebecca Rolls, I’m the Diversity and Inclusion Manager here at Sport New Zealand and part of that mahi is disability and the other key part is women and girls. But from an inclusion perspective obviously, right across the board. So that’s the perspective I’m bringing from a funder and also sports sector.  My sporting background has been in cricket and football, so I’ve played both of those at a high level and I’ve not had the pleasure of experiencing sport in a wheelchair but it is definitely something... Justin Muschamp who is on team promised me he will teach me. And also I guess the other piece of the puzzle for me is looking forward into how disability in sport recreation and play can become more inclusive. |
| Sally | The reason I was so keen to get Sport NZ as part of this conversation is to have that kind of overarching or broader framework. So I’m really glad that you’re able to take part today. |
| Rebecca | Happy to be here. |
| Sally | How about Dylan? |
| Dylan | Well my name is Dylan, I’m representing on behalf of Halberg and Halberg Youth Council. I have recently just joined the Youth Council like as of a few days ago so this is my first kind of official thing as a part of the Youth Council which is pretty exciting. I come from a background of wheelchair rugby. I’ve been playing for about, nearly coming up four years, so feel like every day I’m getting better at the game. I think the main reason I wanted to kind of come on this podcast is to raise awareness but also possibly get some traction around growing wheelchair sports as well, getting you know, families and young people involved with it. |
| Sally | Dylan, would you mind providing us just a bit of an intro to the Halberg Foundation? |
| Dylan | Halberg Foundation is a nationwide thing who provide funding and events for younger people around the country from ages 21 and under. And my position on the Youth Council, we’re basically a group of young people from 16 to 21 who are the voice for the younger people and we put our opinions forward and we basically run events around the country. |
| Sally | Very cool, thank you so much. So both Rebecca and Dylan are on Zoom but actually here in the studio we have two other guests as well. So Cody, perhaps we’ll start with you, if you could introduce yourself, please? |
| Cody | My name is Cody Everson, I play wheelchair rugby for the New Zealand Wheel Blacks and just recently got back from my first Paralympic Games which was pretty exciting. I guess I’m just coming on here for a wheelchair perspective and just to talk about the game I love. |
| Sally | I’m really looking forward to hearing more about your experiences in Japan, very cool. And finally we’ve got Greg. |
| Greg | Yeah my name is Greg Mitchell, I’ve been involved with wheelchair rugby for 15, 16 years now. I got involved through my brother who is in a chair so I don’t have a disability myself but I do play and it’s just a really, really addictive sport. So I always love sharing the joy of it and spreading the good word of it. I also sneak along with a little role as being coach of the Wheel Blacks. So it’s been a couple of years now and like Cody, just come back fresh from Tokyo. It doesn’t seem that long ago but at the same time it seems a world away from where we’re at now. |
| Sally | Well this has been a very good introduction to the different perspectives that I think you will be bringing to this show. Something that’s really struck me, Greg, and what you just said there, you don’t have to be wheelchair-bound to play a wheelchair sport. |
| Greg | Not domestically. So we have… here in Christchurch we have two or three people that are able-bodied - ABs we all get called - and we can play and because it’s based on a point class system, we just become a higher point class. We have lower functioning people to play with us. So domestically we can play but when you get international level you do need a genuine disability if you want to play the sport. |
| Sally | When you say the point class, maybe if you could just explain that. |
| Greg | So Cody here, he’s got reduced arm function and limited hand function. So he’s at the lower point class: so 0.5 / 1 point class, around there, is in your mid-point classes. The 1.5 to 2.5: stronger in the arms and shoulders, not too much still in the hands but it’s usually up to full strength in your shoulders and arms. And the 3s and 3.5s, they’re the guys that have the hand function, the trunk function which is a huge advantage, being able to turn and twist and extra speed and hit with your chair as well, is a bigger advantage as well in the sport. So they’re the higher functioning players and everyone adds up to 8 points as a total on court when you’ve got four players. |
| Dylan | Greg is a 4.5. |
| Greg | Yeah I get over half the team’s points when I play. |
| Cody | When Able Bodies play, very much higher so you’re a 4.5 so you’ve still got to make 8 points. |
| Sally | Could you have less than 8 points? |
| Cody | If you want to. |
| Greg | Yeah you can do, it’s like everything, it’s a compromise on function - and the less function you have, obviously the less ability you have to carry the ball and offload it easily. But smart quality players… New Zealand, we’ve played with a 7.5 point lineup for many years because that was one of our best line ups with the quality of players in those roles. |
| Sally | Great OK, we’ll talk a bit more about wheelchair rugby as we get on I think. Maybe just as we introduce this topic though, Rebecca I’d really love to hear from you from Sport NZ’s perspective, what’s the idea around the Disability Plan and I guess the driving force or the overarching goal behind disability inclusion in sport. |
| Rebecca | May I start off by saying imagine if we didn’t have to have a Disability Plan, if we didn’t need it, everything was available and everything was equal, that would be brilliant. My team and I often talk about doing ourselves out of a job. The Disability Plan is a really important piece of work and it’s one of the strategic priorities along with women and girls and integrity and inclusion for Sport New Zealand from 2020 to 2024. So in summary, it seeks to improve the wellbeing of disabled New Zealanders by addressing inequalities in play, active recreation and sport. So that’s straight out of the Strategy itself and it was developed following review in 2018, disability review in consultation with key partners, disability advocate groups - and Halberg would be one of them - and individuals aiming to sort of improve the range in quality if there’s an activity on offer for disabled, particularly tamariki and rangatahi to ensure they’ve got opportunity to be active. It also adds choice in there, there’s probably some perceptions around that choice isn’t as important but these guys will tell you also it’s equally as important.  So it’s got ten commitments and sort of sets out three outcomes which are working in partnership to create more inclusive play, sport, active recreation system. Invests to create better quality experiences and build systemwide capabilities. So those are kind of the three main pillars of it. Really a place where disabled people can have equal opportunities to achieve their goals and aspirations for fulfilling a potential as a result of everyone working together.  So that’s probably the high level overview. The Strategy for Sport New Zealand is “everybody active” and so obviously it ties into that and this plan and the commitments were written,.. so they were conversant with that. |
| Sally | Great and you’ve talked of kind of the high level stuff, how about from you others? Why do we want to encourage people with disabilities into sport? What are the benefits, I suppose, that can be derived from playing sport? |
| Cody | I think for me, coming from a sporting background before my injury and having my accident and then not really knowing if sport was going to be an option and then I guess finding wheelchair rugby - just getting into another team environment was massive for me. I’ve learnt so much in my time playing a sport and it’s not just wheelchair rugby, a lot of people find other sports that they enjoy but I just think sport is a massive part of New Zealand culture and also just you know, your everyday life, it’s nice to get out and be around other people. So yeah, I find disability sport has changed my life, especially wheelchair rugby. |
| Dylan | Kind of going off what Cody said: especially at like a young age it brings… I’ve always been disabled all my life, sport gave me an outlet to socialise. I wasn’t always a wheelchair rugby player - I tried many sports when I was younger - but the whole point of it for me at that time was basically to socialise. So I think to meet other people with disabilities is very important so you don’t feel so isolated. |
| Greg | I think the other thing too is within sport as well, you learn so much from other people in how to be included in things, it is inclusive and it’s a real tagline people use but you learn so much from other people. And the biggest thing I think I’ve got out of wheelchair rugby wasn’t for myself, it was watching two players in our team teach another guy how to be able to get out of bed on their own and that has changed his life. He doesn’t need someone to come around and be there every night to help him get into bed and out of bed in the morning to do that and that would never have happened without the help of sport and just being in a team environment and with people wanting to help each other rather than just being there to play sport. |
| Rebecca | Listening to these guys talk just reiterates it for me quite a lot but we know from data that disabled young people are less likely to participate in a range of sport and activities and that disabled adults spend 16% less time participating - and for me, someone who has always been active, it just breaks my heart. I feel like there should be the same opportunities for everybody and the benefits as these guys have just outlined, the same as anyone gets. You know, fun, enjoyment, competition, health, welfare, everything. |
| Cody | Literally every abled sport, there’s a para sport for it as well. So the opportunities are endless and it’s just finding that right sport for you but it’s also, you know, having that confidence or having that right outlet or seeing that person doing something to want to push you to do it as well. So yeah, I think going to the Paralympics and just seeing so many different sports, so many different disabilities... It’s like, I know for a fact there’s a lot of them in New Zealand that just haven’t got out there and tried it. So yeah, I think that’s a big thing, is just giving it a go and finding the right people. |
| Sally | Yes I think that’s right isn’t it, it’s the right sport but it’s also that group that goes along with it. |
| Cody | Yeah you’ve got to enjoy what you’re doing and also being around people that you get along with is a big thing and people that are going to support you in a positive way does really help and it does want you to be better and it can drive you to high honours and that’s exactly what happened with me was just seeing, you know, these guys in chairs doing awesome things and it’s like I want to be like that. And it doesn’t come easy - like, you do have to work for it - but that’s the beauty of a competitive nature is, you know, you always want to be better. |
| Sally | And how about in terms of actually enabling people into it? I imagine that there are a whole range of factors that come into play that make the journey into sport that much harder or that much easier. I’m thinking for example funding; like, do you need special wheelchairs to play sports and are those funded? You’ve talked about there’s a whole range of para sports but are they available in all the cities? That kind of stuff. What are the actual factors that can really help people get into these sports? |
| Greg | I think with a lot of things it’s the local Parafeds that can really help assist people into different sports. We’re really lucky here in Christchurch with Parafed Canterbury and they’re a huge supporter of us, having chairs that we can use to have new people get involved so you don’t have to shell out $10,000 for a new chair straight up. So if you can get along, get involved with that. Everyone has got spare gloves and straps and things like that so everyone is keen to help, they want to have other people enjoy the sport and get bigger numbers to help make it more enjoyable for everyone. So for rugby it’s great like that and Parafed have other things as well which go for tennis and basketball as well as boccia and plenty of other sports as well. I mean you don’t need too much for swimming - a pair of togs and a towel - but beyond that there’s so many things they can assist with and I’m sure the Parafeds around New Zealand are the same as that as well. |
| Rebecca | Can I just add to that also? I think it’s so important that other people and sport have a welcoming attitude and that they understand the importance of providing that opportunity for choice, so not just one option. Because differences exist within the disabled community. So you know, it’s important to keep that but also, people facilitating to have the confidence to be involved and ask people directly what do you need, how can we help and that sort of thing and if you come at it from a social model as opposed to the medical one; it’s society that disables by not catering for impairments. And so in order to do that, you need to understand them and you need to communicate and have the confidence to do that. |
| Dylan | And the Parafeds have a great power over what people can do and each Parafed has their kind of strength which also can enable and disable in terms of those things. So for example, down here in Otago we don’t have huge, huge numbers. We kind of have three main sports that do well and each Parafed is very similar in that sense, that every Parafed has a sport they want to focus on and for us in Otago, it’s mainly the boccia and rugby. So in terms of wanting to grow the sports, sometimes it can be kind of harder to do it in those smaller regions so funding is very important. Especially if you compare a Parafed Auckland to a Parafed Otago, you’ll see massive differences in just the amount of funding the two regions get just based on size. |
| Sally | So Dylan just to pick up on something, you said boccia, what’s that? |
| Dylan | So boccia is like… think of a mix between bowls and pétanque. Basically you have six different, like, colours, like one person will be blue, one person will be red. You basically got to try throwing your bowl closest to the jack. Now the good thing about that sport is it’s basically made for anyone, like anyone can play it, you don’t have to have full hand function, there’s different outlets on how you can play the game so it’s quite an inclusive sport and I think that’s what makes it so good. As I played it from a young age because it was just so easy to kind of pick up and it’s a good way to get involved with sport. |
| Sally | Thanks so much. OK we might have our first break now, did anyone choose a song? |
| Cody | Oh I did but it’s Ed Sheeran. |
| Sally | That’s fine, Ed Sheeran is fine! |
| Cody | Ed Sheeran is OK?! *[laughing]* |
|  | **MUSIC BY ED SHEERAN – PERU** |
| Sally | Ko Speak Up – Kōrerotia tēnei, today we’re talking about wheelchair sports. Do we have a sense of how many people might engage in wheelchair sports in New Zealand then? Do we have a sense of how many people are wheelchair bound and then how many people might be playing wheelchair sports? |
| Greg | Hopefully that’s a Rebecca answer that question because I’ve got no idea. |
| Rebecca | I’ve had a crack at this, I talked to Justin Merchamp in my team and he looked at me blankly. We went onto the Stats website and without digging in massively deep, found the stat around 2013 - which is nearly ten years ago now - that 24% identified as living with a disability which is quite different from… if you think of the WeThe15 movement from Tokyo, that’s quite a lot more but potentially brings in a lot more in terms of invisible and intellectual disabilities. So in terms of the playing numbers in New Zealand, I don’t know if Greg, you’d know a bit more about that? |
| Greg | I mean playing wheelchair rugby as a squad for the New Zealand team, we probably choose from around up to 15 so not a huge number when you’re picking a squad of 10 to travel and you’ve got 15 to choose from. Domestically at the tournaments we could have around 40 to 50 representing different regions at tournaments |
| Sally | And in terms of the sort of amateur, I guess people getting together on the weekend. |
| Greg | Oh everyone is amateur. |
| Sally | Sorry that was perhaps the wrong term. |
| Cody | I think there were 25 other people at the tournaments, so there’s usually… within the Wheel Blacks, there’s about 15 that are kind of on the brink and then the others are kind of new coming in. Yeah, I think, like you said, 40 or 50 at a tournament. |
| Greg | Yeah it can really vary between different tournaments depending on what the style of tournament is as to what the ability. So if it’s… say myself isn’t playing and there might be other people in my region that require an able-bodied person to play, to be able to have the competitive team to be part of it. So sometimes if I’m not allowed to play because of the rules, that team might miss out or someone like that miss out on having a team so it can restrict the people involved. |
| Sally | Dylan, do you have a sense from the Halberg Foundation’s perspective, of young people engaging in wheelchair sports? Is it something that you see, I guess, a lot of or the majority of wheelchair-bound youth getting involved in? |
| Dylan | I wouldn’t have exact numbers but I do know it’s definitely, like, growing. Year after year Halberg run an event called the Halberg Games which is a basically weekend-based event which is held up in Auckland at Kings College and it’s an event that hosts a whole bunch of sports but it’s mainly for the… it has a competitive aspect but it’s also that kind of engagement and try new sports and finding your passion. But year after year the numbers are getting bigger in terms of locally and nationally. So I do know it is growing but I wouldn’t be able to have the exact numbers. |
| Sally | And are you guys seeing wheelchair rugby numbers increase as well? |
| Cody | Not lately. So it was… I think one of the most exciting things about qualifying for the Paralympics was the potential exposure and the new people watching that might be inspired or go wow that’s something that I could do and that was a big… I guess that was going to be really good for the sport but just with the whole Covid situation, we haven’t been able to get together or anything like that or have competitions. So right now, I don’t know anyone new who wants to get involved. |
| Greg | I’ve heard rumours there’s been a few people that have contacted around being involved and it could be volunteers to help out as well but like Cody said, we haven’t been able to… we had a development camp planned soon after to try and sort of build on the momentum through Tokyo, but that got pulled because it was going to be in Hamilton and they’d gone into a lockdown at that stage, Auckland was still in lockdown which is where a bulk of the people are, as well. Yeah, we’ve already had to cancel our first training camp because of travel restrictions or the likelihood of travelling and having to isolate at the moment is pretty tough, too. To say well we’re going to go up to a training camp for two days or three days and then stay at home for ten days, if we’re on the flight with someone with Covid, it makes it very tough to do that sort of thing. But going ahead, the calendar is still full for the year so it’s just hoping everything can settle down a bit and be a bit more understandable and workable going forward. |
| Rebecca | Also I think why the Disability Plan means hopefully there are more opportunities now and in the future and leveraging off Tokyo and then Beijing will be really key for that for para sports more broadly and people start to realise as they get involved, more sports can be played. You have to think about the modifications that you might need to do to include someone. We’ve seen through the recent… Disability Inclusion Fund that we launched, it was a contestable fund and some of the applications for that were really encouraging around more wider sort of para sports from a play and recreation perspective. |
| Greg | I think what you were saying there about… it’s the coverage that para sport is getting now is making the huge difference and I mean if you’re sitting at home through lockdown last year and you were watching Paralympics because you couldn’t do much else, all of a sudden you see a sport and think I could give that a nudge or you could see someone from New Zealand already competing or doing well or winning medals and that. There’s the opportunities are out there now whereas you go back prior to 2008 for the Beijing Olympics, Paralympics,you didn’t see a lot of para sport anywhere. There was a half hour touch of the highlights package, there was none of the full channel coverage and things like that so that difference has made I think a big thing and definitely helped to open people’s eyes. To not only be involved as participants but as volunteers and just to know that there’s people out there and they’re working just as hard as disabled athletes, as the All Blacks and everyone else. |
| Rebecca | You just touched on it then in terms of the Paralympics: I think if you can see it, you can be it. And that is so cheesy but it is so right and it goes for sport, it goes for career, it goes for anything and now we’re seeing a few more sports do some side-by-side stuff as well and some of the national sporting organisations bringing in the para… like swimming and athletics and you get the athletics nationals and swimming and they hold their championships side by side. You touched on the Paralympics then, sled hockey is a pretty cool winter sport that some people might not have seen before and we’ll probably chat about Dylan Alcott and Sophie Pascoe being, I guess, those things you can see, just to raise that awareness and give that coverage. |
| Sally | Seeing as you touched on Dylan Alcott and Sophie Pascoe, I’d be really keen to hear what you think the impact of really high profile disabled sports people is. |
| Rebecca | I mean I think I just sort of touched on it then: it’s so important for people to have role models but I see those two, you know, as role models for anybody. Dylan Alcott is someone who has had success for so long now and he’s been awarded Australian Order of Merit but he is also someone who has been successful for a long time and played wheelchair basketball. He has written a book and to me, he is someone who projects to me that he expects inclusion and assumes that as opposed to sort of waiting to be invited in. And I think that’s so inspirational for young people. |
| Greg | I think part of that, as well, is you can start to see people like that, they’re actually building their career out of sport with a disability. Whereas in the past, there was just never ever chance that you were going to consider that sort of thing and people that are talented, they don’t just walk around, they have all sorts of disabilities and things like that. So to see people like that paving the way for others to look at making a career out of it or knowing that at least it can pay its way in different areas, it gives a lot more hope to people to take up that and really chase their dreams. |
| Cody | Yeah I think social media has got a bit part of that too, everyone is on their phones these days and seeing what their up to, you know, seeing the way they train and showing them little glimpses of their lives is pretty cool. So I’m sure a lot of people would see what they’re up to on social media and go oh wow, like that looks really cool, just seeing the way they train or something. Yeah, they’re two massive influences in the disabled community, they’ve done some pretty epic things to be honest. |
| Dylan | In terms of like idols and stuff, you know every kid has that idol in terms of like the Richie McCaws, the Irene van Dykes, those sorts of things - so for kids in wheelchairs to have someone they can look up to is definitely quite cool. |
| Cody | I heard I’m your idol, Dylan?! |
| Dylan | Yeah yeah but I’m not even kidding! Like in terms of like the Wheel Blacks and stuff, like anything I can learn from the Wheel Black’s perspective or just anyone in general, I always kick off and I’m always like looking at you know, the people who do it best at their game and you know, trying to work on things which is definitely what it should be. |
| Sally | Very inspiring, guys. Shall we have our song, then? |
| Dylan | Quite a good motivational song. It’s Rise Up by Six60. |
| Sally | Cool, thanks Dylan. |
|  | **MUSIC BY SIX60 – RISE UP** |
| Sally | This is Speak Up – Kōrerotia with Greg Mitchell, Cody Everson, Rebecca Rolls and Dylan Lloyd talking about wheelchair sports. I would like to think a wee bit more about wheelchair rugby and specifically the Wheel Blacks now. For somebody who doesn’t know too much about it, how would you describe the differences between wheelchair rugby and rugby that’s not played in a wheelchair? What are the main differences there? |
| Cody | I’ll let the coach do that. |
| Greg | You always dodge out of that one. They’re nothing alike to be honest, in the past I’ve described wheelchair rugby as a cross between American football, ice hockey and basketball. You play on a basketball court, it’s inside, nice and hard floor so you’re nice and fast on the chairs and you’ve got 40 seconds to score your goals, you’ve got 12 second once the ball is in from the baseline to get over half way and you’ve got to bounce it every 10 seconds or pass it and once the whistle goes, you can smash anyone as hard as you want and to the point, quite often the plan is… we send some players out there literally just smash people out of their chairs because it’s a way of getting a turnover. Yeah, you get one point per try, generally it’s similar to netball in the fact that you score goal for goal. So some games, when you get to the really intense like top games, they can be only one or two turnovers in a game and I think New Zealand, when we lost in the final of the world champs, we turned the ball over once and lost by three because the other team scored last each quarter to win the game. So there’s not a lot of turnovers at times in the really peak parts of it but yeah, other games you can certainly see a lot of free-flowing football. |
| Cody | It’s a game that you’ve got to see, like you can explain so much but until you actually see it in person, it can be quite confusing to hear. It’s fast, it’s fun, it’s competitive and you know, you have a good time getting smashed around, so yeah. |
| Sally | You mentioned it’s a game that you should really see. How would you suggest people see it? Especially now that we’re a bit home bound. |
| Cody | Yeah so we usually have about three to four tournaments a year, there’s actually one coming up in Dunedin that Dylan can probably touch on a bit more. Yeah so that’s the main times to come and see games and we usually chuck it up on social media, your Facebooks and Instagrams and things like that so yeah, head over to the Wheel Blacks and chuck them a follow. But yeah, Dylan, if you want to touch on the next coming up one? |
| Dylan | So the BASH tournament is more of a social tournament in terms of invitational sort of thing. So players come along and you get basically randomly drafted into teams so it’s normally a good way to start the year, catch up with the people you see every year and also get to know a few people as well because that was the first tournament I ever went to. It was kind of my first taster as a little 15-year-old boy, playing the game so it is also a good learning experience, to learn from the more experienced players and if you are in Dunedin and you want to come and check it out, it will be in the Edgar Centre on the 19th and 20th but of course if we are under a Red Traffic Light [COVID restriction] so there will be no spectators so I probably have to add that one in. |
| Rebecca | Can I ask a question? I think I know the answer - but can it be mixed? Like, women as well? |
| Cody | Yes women, their usual point grade, if they’re like a 2-pointer, they get moved down a 1.5. So a lot of teams have women in there and they drop half a point which can be quite… how do you say it… |
| Greg | Quite tactical. You can get a lot more function on court at the same time if you can have someone with… allowing you the extra half a point between the other three players. |
| Cody | Great Britain done it really well and they ended up winning gold at the last Paralympics so yeah, very tactical. |
| Rebecca | That’s quite forward thinking, there’s no men’s and women’s, it just is and yeah, you just use it tactically. |
| Cody | Yeah it’s cool and oh some of the girls in the world aye, they can hit hard. |
| Greg | In New Zealand we’ve got quite a good range of female players, Maia Amai-Marshall, she’s played in the Wheel Blacks for many years, she hasn’t been available for the last couple through health issues but she’s been multiple times winning best in class and that’s a male and female point class thing, she’s won that multiple times at different events and possibly even the world champs one year. |
| Sally | I really like the idea of it being mixed and I like, Rebecca what you said, it’s very forward thinking. |
| Rebecca | Definitely. |
| Sally | How about in terms of the practical considerations? I imagine that with all the bashing that’s going on, you might need some kind of guards for the legs? |
| Cody | Yeah so I actually work at a wheelchair company, Melrose Wheelchairs, and we build wheelchairs from everyday wheelchairs to sports chairs, literally any wheelchair sport we build. And rugby chairs are one of our biggest sellers because it’s one of the biggest sports and you can get two types of chairs, aluminium or titanium and yeah, they do get a bit of a beating so often we travel with a mechanic who is there to fix anything that breaks or anything like that. Sometimes there’s welders on site so in case you get a crack or anything in your chair, you need it welded up. So it’s not a cheap sport to play when there’s not a whole lot of funding around so you do rely heavily on good equipment the first time. |
| Greg | I think the thing with the equipment, it’s all custom-made for rugby. I think aircraft-grade aluminium and when you’ve got someone who is 80 to 100kg literally jogging or running full speed into someone who is 80 or 100kg, there’s a heck of a crash in there and the chairs, they stand up to it but you’re looking at every two to three years, quite often, having to replace. And so in 15 to 16 years I’ve played, I’ve destroyed a few and they’re expensive, you’ve got to find a way to keep funding that. I mean, tyre wise, you can sometimes pop through 15 to 20 tyres as a team in a game. So your poor mechanic on the sidelines is doing a lot of work to keep everyone running. |
| Cody | Like Greg said, the chairs are all custom made for you so you are quite barricaded, like, into the chair. So other chairs, they’re not going to smash your legs or anything like that, it’s specifically made for you which is another good thing for safety reasons, I guess. |
| Sally | You mentioned that funding is an issue and you also mentioned that it’s quite expensive with these chairs. You’ve also mentioned earlier on that there are Parafeds that assist people with these sorts of costs but I guess is funding a barrier. And what are some of the other barriers for people getting involved? |
| Greg | I think with every sport there’s a barrier of funding. There’s only so many dollars in the pot to go around and when you start, say have a chair that’s worth $10,000, that could cover a whole team or a whole club for a year and you’re just talking one person to push around on a basketball court. So yeah, it makes a big difference when you can get that extra funding. But like down in Dunedin, they’ve got multiple players starting the game, they were getting three or four chairs, you could be $50,000 a year just towards new players getting custom made chairs so it does make a big difference. There’s a lot of different trusts and foundations and things you can apply to but yeah, you’ve got to factor in as well travel costs for tournaments as well and gym hire every week. As I say, there’s a lot of dollars involved with everything and it’s not just wheelchair rugby, it’s every sport. So it’s being mindful and being smart with your resources. |
| Sally | What are the kind of skills that you need, or the passions? What got you into it in the first place? |
| Greg | I was kind of lucky in a way that I got sort of dragged along by my brother, his team was short one day and he’s got cerebral palsy, always been in a chair from a young age so I’ve played in his chair and pushed it around, I’ve got ball skills so that was kind of me pretty well sorted from the start and it was easy to get in and if you’ve got any sort of ball skills it’s great. If you don’t, it doesn’t matter. There’s roles for different people within the game as well. Some of the low pointers, they literally will not touch the ball in the whole game but they’re some of the most important players to have on court because they can free up all the glory boys out there scoring the points and make them look so much better than they are and save a lot of the huffing and puffing at the end of it as well. So yeah, being involved like that and getting into it that way was really good for me and as I say, I feel a bit of a cheat at times because I can get up and walk away from it all but at the same time I’ve stopped playing my own sports over the years just purely for the enjoyment factor and the team environment that’s being a part of. |
| Dylan | For me, I’m finding wheelchair rugby was kind of because of how I work, they were running I guess a demonstration at the time and it was basically very simple. You just had to weave through the cones and catch the ball and then Cameron Leslie who was a para swimmer as well as a Wheel Black was tackling you at the other end and I think as soon as there was like a few tackles, I was like damn this is a cool sport. For me also, like rugby being a huge part of my life, always wanting to play rugby but of course it’s never going to happen. Wheelchair rugby is my outlet to get that sort of, I guess, rugby experience. Yeah. |
| Cody | I guess for me, I grew up playing sports and I was playing rugby when I had my accident and that’s why I’m in a wheelchair so it was just… For me, once I had that accident and getting into hospital, I think it was literally the first three or so weeks I had someone coming in and asking me if I know about wheelchair rugby and at that point I still thought I was going to walk and play normal rugby again and then eventually that kind of went away and I seen wheelchair rugby and I was like wow, this is a pretty cool sport and for me it was all about getting back involved with a team. I’d always been around people playing sports so getting back into that environment was massive for me and then playing for your regional team Canterbury and then eventually getting the opportunity to go to a Wheel Black camp and potentially make that team and travel the world and play against international teams, it was kind of like the dream was always to play top rugby but now the new dream is to represent your country in wheelchair rugby and that was massive for me and when I got that opportunity I definitely took it. |
| Sally | So someone came to you and asked if you had heard about it? |
| Cody | Yes Sholto Taylor who is actually… he was actually a gold medal-winning wheelchair rugby player in Athens, I believe, in 2004 and he was still in the squad at that time. So he was a massive benefactor for me and also a massive support for me while I was in hospital. He was a life coach, so he kind of supports you through your stay… I stayed there about six months. Yeah he was massive for me and just that’s how I got into wheelchair rugby and learnt about it and met a whole bunch of other people with disabilities, really. |
| Sally | Is it more or less 50/50 people who have had disabilities for their whole lives versus people who have had accidents, or is it just anyone at different points in their lives? |
| Greg | It changes over the years. At the moment it’s probably more people with spinal injuries but we try and claim any amputee we can because that seems to be like, internationally, that’s where it’s all at. If you can find an amputee, you’ve made a big difference because of the extra trunk function they have. But yeah, these days there’s a lot of people are having… there’s been some really terrible words, I can’t even use some of them now because… descriptions of people but you do get a lot of people come along with some very bizarre disabilities from different teams and it just fits their mould and skillset which is a big part of it. |
| Sally | I think it’s really cool isn’t it, that it can be altered I guess, to fit that person. |
| Cody | Yes it’s like everyone… when it comes to wheelchair rugby, like everyone is different. Like not even just wheelchair rugby, like any para sport, every single person is different within the Wheel Black squad. We’re all different and we’re all an asset because we’ve got different functions that work better than others and when you bring it all together it works and it is quite cool to see some people go like do something and so oh wow, like you should not be able to do that but that’s impressive. So it is pretty cool and it make you kind of want to try and do it. |
| Greg | It is like a real fruit salad of disability that sort of goes together and mixes and matches to make it all work. |
| Sally | Just one final question then for this segment which is around the idea of amateur and professional sport. So wheelchair rugby, the Wheel Blacks is not a professional team even though you are on the international stage representing Aotearoa. I’d be really keen to hear - and Rebecca, you may have something to add here as well - around the idea or the differences between amateur and professional and what that might mean in terms of the coverage and the funding and all these things we’ve been talking about so far? |
| Rebecca | Yeah it’s a really life-long question, I think and as we… If I can speak a little bit from a women in sport perspective: We’re just starting to see now the benefits of actually investing in the sport. I think for too many years, and para sport is no different, people have been waiting to see some sort of value or something to hang their hat on that means I can get something out of this sport. But it actually works the other way around: you need to invest in the sport to generate the product and the rest will come in terms of participants, commercial opportunities and professionalism. And it is so different. In amateur sports, men, women, non-binary, they have challenges. You have to work, for a start, so you’ve just got to balance everything in and around it. And like, I was never paid to play sport so I had to have a career at the same time and that’s a completely different lifestyle to a professional athlete. The trade-off being, potentially, that a professional athlete navigates a completely different world as well. Like you’re pretty much public property, you’re all over social media and that can be its own corrosive disease these days, it can be really, really problematic so there’s a bit of a trade off in between but I think what’s pleasing lately is people are starting to see the value of it in the commercial… these opportunities and I think earlier touched on Sophie Pascoe, how she’s made a career out of what she is good at and Dylan Alcott is another example. And so I think we’re getting there, it’s taking too long but what I do know is that there is so much sitting there that has so much value that I think it will happen naturally. |
| Greg | I think within a lot of sport, like I said earlier, there’s a lot of times where there’s just not enough money to go around, there’s only so much in the TV dollars that’s going to sponsor things and I mean business, it’s hard to find people that have got spare money these days with the likes of Covid. But we still see it with international teams, there’s professional teams out there: the coach for the Japanese team, he’s Canadian, he flies over to Japan to coach the Japanese players; the Australian players; the GB players, they’re all paid and some of them are paid pretty well too. I was cringing when I heard what the Canadian coach was getting paid when I was a volunteer! And you can see those really top elite teams, they have paid roles within their team, whether it’s the paid sports psychologist, we’re amazingly lucky with our sport psych comes in on board and gets involved and gives us time for free and we have so many people like that. Our strength and conditioning coach again gives us time for free. Myself, I’ve volunteered. Leading into Tokyo I was doing the best part of 30 to 40 hours a week on rugby stuff on top of a 40 hour a week job and having a young family, there’s only so much you can do and so long you can do it for.  All the players, I think, are working within the team so you’re trying to fit people’s programmes to what time they have and you always want more from the players to be able to do that extra bit but you just can’t fit it all in at times and if you do go to a professional thing, there’s no limit because everyone wants more. You get paid, everyone wants more money, every sport is the same so there will never be a perfect situation for everything - but at the same time, if you can get that where people can cut back on some of their commitments to work and be able to put more quality time into their training rather than fitting it around their work and other commitments, it could make a big difference to things going forward. And as I say, three of the top four teams are professional teams effectively at the moment and they are that step ahead of where the rest of the teams are at. |
| Sally | We’re going to think about… I guess the future of disability sports as we currently see it, Sports NZ disability, plan of disability review. |
| Rebecca | So the review came out with findings of the future of disability in sport and active recreation sector. So I talk about it from a play, active rec and sport and that what Sport NZ covers off. Here we’re talking about wheelchair rugby, or wheelchair sports, but I actually think it’s quite close together in the disability sport sector. So as the guys have said, everyone is an amateur but the pathways are pretty condensed so it’s exciting from that perspective.  But one of the things that came out of the Plan was a scoping project to understand the roles and responsibilities of the different agencies and highlight gaps and opportunities and what came out of that was sort of three key areas that Sport NZ are concentring on as we move through the Plan. Those are leadership, so we heard a lot from the sector that they want Sport NZ to lead disability sport and recreation sector but also help grow leaders and empower the partners and the Parafeds and SO’s that sort of thing, to be able to lead themselves. Gaps: identifying the gaps and the provision of opportunities. So that’s been a key focus of the disability inclusion fund is some of the criteria is bring us applications that bring new stuff to the table like they’re innovative or you’ve demonstrated how it would reach anywhere that isn’t currently being reached so it’s more inclusive and get creative around that. And then also just looking at duplication. I think like any system there’s opportunities to reduce duplication and make sure that if there are the same things being provided, that there’s enough efficiency across the board so that you’re maximising the reach and so you’re not kind of losing out on someone being able to access an opportunity because you’re sort of doubling up somewhere.  Those are the broader things and the other thing that sort of crept in of course in the meantime is Covid and what we’re really aware of through some recent data that we’ve… well we probably knew it anyway but data has confirmed it is that minorities are really disproportionately affected through Covid and can miss out on much, much more. So disability sports like all sports needs to make sure that the general guidelines that have been issued works for them and you know, that they access help if they need to make sure that what they can deliver is safe. We touched earlier on some of the limitations and problems that it creates, so it is a real challenge and so we’re looking to support people through that and also what we’ve seen is there’s much more in, I guess the shift from organised sport and clubs into sort of what we call out-the-door stuff like so much more outdoors and more kind of less formal stuff. So just working through that with the disability sector to understand what it means and what’s possible.  Speaking of Covid, so we’ve been trying to put together a disability hui which was first set in for October and then it was moved to November and then it was in February and we’ve had to push it out each time. So it will be hopefully October, November this year where we get a lot of participants in the sector to come and just connect and meet as part of that leadership pillar of the disability plan. Have got some really good speakers coming along to that, Dame Sophie Pascoe is one of them, got a physio coming in, Dwyane Carl who is on our board so just some real mix of voices that we can bring together.  So I guess in summary, I just really want to create that choice and more opportunities, wheelchair sports included, even increase the number of wheelchair sports, that would be quite cool and understanding that disability sport has some of the same barriers that normal sport does in terms of volunteers and that sort of thing but really concentrate on building those numbers and creating that confidence I talked about earlier, so that people can work in this space and have the confidence to do so. Yeah and also just that welcoming attitude because you know, being a young girl growing up playing a male-dominated sport, I certainly encountered the opposite of a welcoming attitude quite a lot. So I can understand how that really impacts on someone’s desire to participate. So moving that forward in times to come as well. Sorry! A really long-winded way of saying that looking forward to the future and like I said before, maybe doing us out of a job. |
| Sally | Anybody else, what are you hoping to see as we move forward? |
| Greg | What I want to see - and it’s something I’ve sort of started doing a little bit with Cody at times - is it is a bit more in the schools and seeing… like, the Parafed in Canterbury have a trailer full of chairs and I’ve been to my kid’s school a couple of times. Generally, it’s seen as if you’re in a wheelchair you’ve got to be careful and softly, softly approach and they jump in and start smashing each other, it’s the greatest thing ever. So to see them and to be able to interact with people and one day I think there was just over 200 kids had a go in a wheelchair. You don’t get that chance at home generally so to be able to do that and do more of that I think is a really key thing because it takes away some of the stand-off behaviours of people because they’ve seen what it’s like, they’ve been involved in it, they’ve met people that are in wheelchairs, they’re not the scary taboo thing in the corner anymore, they’re becoming just a general part of society. And again, the media coverage of stuff is helping with that so it’s becoming a more mainstream thing which doesn’t keep it as that isolated, separated sort of situation. So to me that’s something I’m keen to be more involved with and do a lot more of in the future because I know how much my kids have loved it, the teachers that have been involved with it have loved it as well. And I mean my boy, he’s 11 and he’s adamant he’s going to play wheelchair rugby this season for Canterbury. So yeah, he's keen as mustard. So Dylan, finally there’s going to be smaller than you, mate, out there. |
| Dylan | I was just about to say that, I was like, “Yes, I’m not going to be the smallest person out there!” |
| Greg | But that’s the thing, there’s things like that which it’s great to see the involvement and just the pure enjoyment that people get from being involved in that sort of thing which is so different but so enjoyable at the same time. |
| Sally | And again sport is such a good medium to break down some of those barriers. |
| Greg | It’s a real leveller as well, you put someone in a wheelchair and if you’ve never been in it, you can get smoked by someone who is in it all the time. |
| Dylan | Talking about bringing it to schools. I did a similar thing in Year 13, I just finished school last year and you do the whole like teachers versus students sports week sort of thing and my sport developer wanted to add something I wanted to do. So I organised a teachers versus students wheelchair rugby game and as Greg was saying, it’s like a leveller, it was pretty cool to actually be competitive with my schoolmates and stuff because growing up, I’ve never actually really played with any of my friends obviously in sports so it gave me a cool opportunity to show off what I loved to the school as well as the teachers and the students because I think getting that exposure is what really grows any sport, any activity. |
| Cody | Where I want to go and where I see is I want to compete with those top teams in the world. Like, I want to be able to get out of New Zealand again and play international rugby and just you know, after finishing Paralympics and getting home was kind of like oh man, I want to improve, I want to get better, I want the team to get better, I want new people to get involved to help us get better. So that’s a big drive now is you know, being one of the best teams in the world, that’s what I want. |
| Dylan | In terms of like the coverage and stuff, having like Paralympics on TV, I think myself it was kind of a similar thing watching all these teams do it. It kind of gave me more drive, you know, to one day put on that black jersey and do what Cody and the rest of the boys were doing. It definitely gives me that goal and that’s definitely what I want to see myself doing for the future. |
| Cody | I want you training every day, Dylan, seven days a week. |
| Dylan | I’ve been going to the gym regularly. |
| Cody | Nice. |
| Sally | Just a final question then, we’ve spoken quite a bit about how Covid has impacted everything but in this case particularly wheelchair sports. We’ve also touched how it might be an enabler as well: Greg, you mentioned people sitting at home during the lockdown with not much to do other than watch TV and Paralympics being aired at that particular time. Do you see any other potential opportunities in where we are at the moment? |
| Greg | I’d like to say a lot of opportunities but I feel that there’s a lot more barriers at the moment. With wheelchair rugby particularly, we’ve got a lot of people that are immune and respiratory compromised. We were probably the strictest of countries with the rules and regulations in Tokyo, within the New Zealand team, the rugby team was by far the strictest rules. We were disinfecting, sanitising everything on the plane, the aisle chairs, the seats, the trays, the windows, the pocket in front of you, everything like that. We had all sorts of rules. The guys got sick of me at times bagging them for things but the goal was to get there, get home, get safe and we did and it’s just trying to make it a practical thing going forward. So it’s tough when you’re trying to clean everything down to that degree because according to MIQ, the top of the surface was clean but the bottom of the table wasn’t, things like that, there’s a lot more to it than just wiping the top surface. And when you’ve got people that are risk like that, you do have to go that extra mile and as I say, we’ve already cancelled one thing this year just for the fact that we will do something online and one of the main topics is around how are we going to deal with things with Covid and what, as a team, we can set as a realistic measure to make sure we can stay safe amongst it. So I’d love to say there’s a lot of opportunities but at the moment it does seem to be more barriers.  Potentially one opportunity is with the lack of spectators being allowed at events, whether we can get some more TV coverage. We had Sky Sport cover the Asia Oceania Championships in Auckland previously, that was phenomenal - quite bizarre seeing yourself on TV, got used to that, one that’s for sure - but at the same time it is a chance to get around and if we can spread that again, it’s just that snowball effect of growing awareness. People with a disability being able to be involved in it that might not necessarily be able to be at that level. I mean like myself, I can’t play at that level but I still love the game and be a part of it so it’s the big growth opportunity still. |
| Rebecca | I sort of touched on Covid in the last spiel about the future but I guess one thing I’d reflect on from a wider sector perspective is that first of all no one really knows what’s going to happen this year, no one really knows. I’ll stop there, it’s as simple as that and we’re not going to be able to sort of force things back to how they were. So it’ll be a case of people understanding the environment and what those limitations and barriers are that we just described and adapting to it and creating opportunities or choices out of that. And that might sound a bit trite because like I understand the barriers are completely different for disabled sport but yeah, I guess with everything, sometimes that organic evolution has to happen just for people to be able to get those benefits we talked about earlier around that inclusion that the social aspect of welfare, the health, that kind of thing. And make sure people stay okay until we can go back to normal, whatever that looks like. |
| Greg | I think you say about normal, there’s not really an old normal anymore, it’s going to be the new normal. |
| Sally | Just as we finish up then, any final thoughts you would like to add in? |
| Cody | Get into a para sport. |
| Dylan | There’s outlets all around the country, all you’ve got to do is Google your local region, add Parafed and there will be a Parafed network close by, talk to your local Halberg advisors, there’s outlets for everyone and just give everything a go because you never know what your passion might be. And as I say, like I tried three sports before finding rugby so don’t give up on your first attempt and I guess just keep trying because eventually something will happen. |
| Greg | I think a big part of it is just find something you enjoy, be active and have fun in it, that’s the key of everything isn’t it. Just enjoy what you’re doing while you’re out there. |
| Sally | I’d like to say tēnā koutou, thank you so much everybody. This has been such a really heart-warming show. With any luck we can turn the circumstances that we have at the moment, which are challenging for everybody, into some positives as well and the Wheel Blacks will be overseas representing New Zealand soon enough we can only hope. Thank you so much, it’s been great. |
| Cody | Thanks for having us. |
| Greg | Thank you, it’s been good. |