

Nano-Managing Life through Sports

Jyoti Chugh Verma, my friend from The Times of India, gifted me an unforgettable recreational experience of a lifetime. She took me sailing off Gateway of India in the mid-1980s. The joy of the early morning winter breeze with the soft waves lapping close and the sweaty activity of managing the sails and observing the beauty of the ocean and skies in the stillness are memories embedded for life. Nostalgia!

Thirty-five years later, Mumbai's beautiful coastline and yachting as a sporting recreational activity is today out of bounds for people with disabilities on wheelchairs. Such is the case for almost every kind of therapeutic sports recreation in India. We Indians may be proud and excited about our 19 Paralympian winners but we see only their smiles not the struggles, strife or misery that lie behind their successes. That they bring laurels to their country is only an afterthought as they are persons with disabilities.

Personally, I have always been adventurous and sporty, representing my school in basketball, throwball and baseball. During college, I coached for badminton, played garba and dandiya as well as visited discotheques and danced to peppy music!

Recreational wheelchair sports rehabilitation has been an integral therapeutic group activity at our NGO Nina Foundation too. The needs, aspirations and dreams of a human being remain unchanged, disability notwithstanding. In fact, the very first milestone for us was sponsoring wheelchair cricket and throwball trophies for our national sports in 2000!

I dream of golf courses, athletics, dirt biking, swimming, archery, wheelchair racing, and green parks - all with a sign that says 'Open for All!' The new definition of 'winners' are those humane people who empathise, enable and execute infrastructure design and projects, enabling every citizen to participate in every recreational activity right from the thinking phase. Thinking holistically and bringing about wheelchair access to locker spaces, to sports stores rackets, bat-ball washrooms, changing rooms, cafes et al. There needs to be training for all coaches, trainers, lifeguards and all the staff including the security personnel who seem to think that 'wheelchairs harm the curated basketball, tennis or badminton courts; but they do in fact, hurt the self-esteem and confidence of the wheelchair user!'

As part of social community service, we should also encourage our youth to volunteer and support players with disability, wheeling them from their home or workplace to the gymkhana, stadium, court or ground and relieving their family members. This new breed of empathetic doers can convert them from mere cheering spectators to true winners. Enabling such an India – with the freedom to live, work and play - would be the real respect and honour to eighty million persons with disabilities in the country. Work-life balance, fitness, exercise, a break from routine, going out in the sunlight, socialising and releasing endorphins or 'happy hormones' – everyone needs these!

One of the items on my bucket list is to play badminton with my brother Dhaval like we did in our younger days. Indian Gymkhana is close by, I have my sports wheelchair and racket, and Dhaval is ready to serve. The only hitch is that the court is on the first floor without an elevator! Do I hear some empathetic players make this accessible for all? Let us keep in mind that a fit mind and body is for the benefit of all... not just for mine!

In the words of Harry Allen Overstreet: "Recreation is not a secondary concern for a democracy. It is a primary concern. The kind of recreation people make for themselves, determines the kind of people they become and the kind of society they build."

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