

As Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer were rightly applauded for their epic match at Wimbledon another open tennis tournament is about to start in England. Competitiveness, determination along with a high standard of dexterity will be played at the Nottingham wheelchair British open tennis 22nd to 27th July 2008

Qualification to this prestigious event is by injury to the spine that renders the legs immobile. For the uninitiated the medical term is paraplegic, meaning the loss of movement in the legs and in some cases hands and trunk movement.

The expression 'He has good wheels' when describing a sportsperson literally applies to these competitors. Their wheels are their specially designed wheelchairs that enable them to twist, turn and change direction in a blink of eye to chase the tennis ball down.

My own personal experience was over twenty years ago when I was invited to teach wheelchair tennis at Southport paraplegic hospital for spinal injuries, a stone throw away from Royal Birkdale this year's home of the British golf open. In those days I would teach on the sea front to enthusiastic pupils. The hospital had one outside court that was regularly windswept from the Irish Sea. It was 'links tennis' as the ball would change direction several times before landing on the court. This did not dampen the spirits of my pupils. They would just get on with it. On one occasion a ball was struck with such venom that it damaged the catheter bag of the opposing player resulting in and I'll be as genteel as possible, mother natures natural fluid being dispersed all over the court.

As Vince left the court with his catheter bag now emptied, he uttered the words, 'I'm pissed off. I had break point on John's serve. Give me a minute I'll be back.'

Instead of trying to lessen the embarrassment we both roared with laughter. These guys did not want sympathy they wanted to learn tennis. Vince was the joker and an international playboy. We had both contacted chicken pox at a similar age. He was 30 years of age and had caught it off his daughter. The virus had attacked his spinal cord, causing permanent lost of leg movement. I was 29 years old and was left with only a few scars on my back.

After the tennis coaching we would depart to the local restaurant. One night Vince suggested that we all go to his regular night spot.

'Thanks Vince, but I think I'm inappropriately dressed in trainers and tracksuit.'

We were all in our tracksuits but you knew this guy would be able to get into the Royal garden party at Bucking palace if he had to.

'No problem I know the owner.' Vince always had an answer. He led the way

We followed him to the nightclub with some of the off duty nurses and doctors in tow. The entrance was a single door and a narrow staircase going up to the first floor of the club. The security doormen standing outside waved us through and carried the guys up the steep flight of stairs one by one.

As I said Vince would live life to the full. He continues to play today.

The hospital is has now been converted into luxury apartments.

Wheelchair tennis began life way back on 17 January 1976, 18-year-old Brad Parks was injured while taking his first warm up jump in a local acrobatic skiing competition. The accident left him a paraplegic and he realised that he would be a wheelchair user from then on.

Brad read an article about a Jeff Minnenbraker from Los Angeles, who had been playing tennis in a wheelchair made out of steel tubing.

He started to play tennis in the May from his wheelchair and teamed up with Jeff to promote wheelchair tennis throughout the USA. A two bounce rule was added but the court dimensions remained the same.

Over 30 years later the International Tennis Federation (world governing body of tennis) has continued to develop and promote wheelchair tennis throughout the world. I caught up with an old friend, ITF wheelchair tennis manager Mark Bullock.

Mark explained to me the new the state of the art technology wheelchairs to help mobility on the tennis court.

'Since those early days of Brad Parks the wheelchairs are now a lightweight with camber on the wheels to allow the chair to turn faster. The top players are playing in custom made chairs. Players in the quad division (players whose arms are also affected by their disability - often tetraplegics) may tape the racket to the hand due to lack of hand function.' Mark said. The cost one of these new 'Ferrari' wheelchairs will set you back near \$3500 and it is made out of titanium. Watching a player manoeuvre this wheelchair you can see the importance of speed and lightweight is paramount to get to the ball.

Mark's job takes him all over the world and the count is 50 countries up to date. He went onto explain, 'As Tennis manager I'm responsible for the development and promotion of wheelchair tennis world-wide. My role includes developing new programmes, monitoring existing schemes, offering advice to nations, tournament supervision (NEC Wheelchair Tennis Tour, Davis Cup Group IV), coach education, organising the ITF Wheelchair Tennis Coaches Workshop, responsibility for the ITF international junior programmes, working with the media and sponsors.'

'I started as tennis a development officer for Nottingham council. Tim Reddish who was the Sports Development Officer for People with a disability. We did some projects in Nottingham schools for the blind, deaf, children with a learning disability and children with a physical disability. Around the same time I saw a demo of wheelchair tennis at the 1991 Fed Cup in Nottingham. Soon after I started to coach a wheelchair player and then Jayant Mistry who was then British No. 2 asked me to work with him. I travelled with Jayant to many events. In 1995 I was appointed as the assistant National Wheelchair Tennis Coach for GB.'

It is estimated that over 5000 participate in the sport in over 100 countries
There are now different categories Men, Women, Quads and Juniors and the top players are professional and full time. There is more than USD1m on the NEC Wheelchair Tennis Tour.

Shingo Kuniede (Japan) currently men's world number one and Esther Vergeer women's world number one who will be competing at Nottingham this year.
The Beijing Paralympics Games Sept 8-15.

On a personal level Mark has an interest in a player Samanta Almeida, the Brazilian No. 1, later this year he will marry her.

'We first met at the Brazil Open, a part of the NEC Wheelchair Tennis Tour, in 2004. We have been together as a couple just over one year. I don't coach Sam. We play together for fun. If I win I have to sleep on the sofa!!! We plan to enter some doubles tournaments together.'

Times have changed since my time at Southport. There are more indoor courts for participants and training is more detailed. To find out more information on wheelchair tennis, go to

<http://www.itftennis.com/wheelchair/> and
ITF coaches education programme <http://www.itfcoaching.com/Physical-Conditioning-for-Wheelchair-Tennis/player.html>