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Sports groups enable the disabled to lead healthy lives



Jonathan Heider, 11, of Green Bay, practices with a puck at the Cornerstone Community Ice Center in De Pere. B.A. Rupert/Press-Gazette

By Terry Anderson

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Jonathan Heider is 11 and loves sports — passionately loves sports.

As a quadruple amputee, he simply has to make some adjustments when he plays wheelchair hockey, basketball or rugby.

Perhaps the most significant change in the 14 years since the American with Disabilities Act was enacted has been a change in attitude — a rise in advocacy and a growing belief that participation is possible so long as adaptations can be made.

"It's fun and challenging," said Heider, a sixth-grader who lives in Green Bay. "I especially like wheelchair hockey. I like slapping the puck and shooting into the goal."

Earlier this year, a group of Green Bay-area families created the Youth Adaptive Sports Association to organize sports activities for children with physical disabilities. They recently met at the Cornerstone Community Ice Center, Ashwaubenon, to learn about sled hockey.

Check it out

- The Youth Adaptive Sports Association is sponsoring a picnic from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday at Memorial Park in Appleton. Food, beverages and shelter will be provided at the universal playground. This is an opportunity for families who are interested in recreational activities for youths with physical disabilities. For information, call Linn Heider at (920) 469-1595.

- The Fond du Lac chapter of Fishing Has No Boundaries is sponsoring an event for anglers with disabilities on Sept. 11-12 on Oven Island at Lakeside Park. For information, call Mike Damm at (920) 922-0763.

To learn more

- Options for Independent Living serves people with disabilities in these 17 Wisconsin counties: Brown, Calumet, Door, Fond du Lac, Green Lake, Kewaunee, Manitowoc, Marinette, Marquette, Menominee, Oconto, Outagamie, Shawano, Sheboygan, Waupaca, Waushara and Winnebago. For information, call (888) 465-1515 in Wisconsin, (920) 490-0500 in Green Bay, (920) 997-9999 in Appleton or go to www.optionsil.com

- For information on Fishing Has No Boundaries, call (800) 243-3462 or go online to www.fhnbinc.org

- For information about activities for people with disabilities, go online to www.accessoutdoors.org

- Also consider Sports 'n Spokes magazine

Going camping?

These state parks have cabins for people with disabilities: Potawatomi State Park, Sturgeon Bay; High Cliff State Park, Sherwood; Blue Mounds State Park, Blue Mounds; and Mirror Lake State Park, Baraboo.

"Part of my focus is that children who have limited ambulatory use have a tendency to get heavy if they don't have the opportunities for exercise and activity," said Linn Heider, Jonathan's mother.

"I want my boys — Jonathan and Brennan (also a quadruple amputee) — to be as active as they can be, because if they find things that they enjoy, they will become healthier, happier adults.

"I know there are hundreds of kids who are looking for sports activities and how do you do that?"

Before the local group was organized, Linn often would drive Jonathan to Chicago, where the Great Lakes Adaptive Sports Association regularly sponsors athletic events for youngsters with disabilities. The group offers a broad array of sports that might surprise those without regular contact with the disabled community.

Linn admires Green Bay's Jeff Pagels, an outdoor adventurer and former champion of the U.S. Disabled Ski Team, who encourages youngsters to do as much outdoor activity as possible.

"Terrain is a big thing. My kids have never been in the middle of the woods," she said.

There are efforts being made to make the outdoors more accessible to disabled people.

Earlier this month, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources opened a cabin at High Cliff State Park that's designed for people with disabilities.

It's the fourth such cabin in the state park system, but it won't be the last, predicts Werner Burkat, chairman of the DNR's Disability Advisory Council.

"These cabins offer opportunities for people with disabilities to enjoy the outdoors," Burkat said.

Burkat, a specialist for the Green Bay-based Options for Independent Living, said it's amazing how many activities are available because of adaptive technologies.

Options for Independent Living, which serves 17 counties in Northeastern Wisconsin has adaptive equipment — from golf clubs to fishing poles to a bowling ball with a retractable handle — that can be borrowed so that people can try an activity.

"There's so much out there, since ADA," Burkat said. "The possibilities are endless."

Credit also should go to interest groups whose passion for an activity has led them to extend support to people with disabilities, Burkat said.

For example, the Hayward-based Fishing Has No Boundaries has grown into a national organization with chapters in Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio, Kansas, Wyoming and California. Each group sponsors events that help disabled people experience the joys of angling.

"It started in 1986 when a local man who had been a third-generation guide broke his leg and realized how difficult it was to get around," said Pat Lindgren, office manager for the Hayward chapter of Fishing Has No Boundaries.

"The first event was 1988 and has grown by leaps and bounds. Our events are open to anyone with a mental or physical disability and we've had participants ranging in age of 3 to 102."

Last year, the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh became the first university in the country to have a chapter.

"I shudder to think what would happen to me physically and mentally if I wasn't as active I am," said Don Hansen, a Green Bay resident who is passionate about fishing, hunting and martial arts. He was born with spina bifida, a birth defect that has left him paralyzed below the waist.

"My dad was an intense fisherman and hunter as were my brothers, so naturally I wanted to tag along with the guys," Hansen said. "My parents would caution me to be careful but they never said 'No.'"

Hansen has set up a deer stand that can be reached by all-terrain vehicle. He also has obtained special permits that allow him to hunt from a standing vehicle.

While Hansen faces special challenges in his quest to enjoy the outdoors, the driving force that leads him outdoors is the same as most everyone else.

"It's nature. You're working with elements you can and cannot control," Hansen said. "Living in the city you have phones and fax machine and pagers that are always there, but this gives you a chance to relax.

"I can't think of anything that you can't do," he said. "I've seen double amputees who enjoy fishing and hunting, and high-functioning (quadriplegics) who do 5Ks, 10Ks and marathons. There's even a group in Madison trying to start a curling league for people with disabilities."