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Friday, August 5, 2005

'A sense of pride'

Camp gives youth in wheelchairs opportunities to play sports
By KASEY WONDERGEM | Staff writer

As the team handball tournament raged Thursday at an athletic camp at Grand Valley State University, bouncing balls and bursts of laughter filled the gymnasium as the campers tried to follow the rules of the fast-paced game.

At this camp, there was an additional rule -- the players couldn't leave their wheelchairs.

Thursday was the third day of the annual Junior Wheelchair Sports Camp, which runs through today at the university's fieldhouse in Allendale.

Waiting to test his passing skills before Thursday morning's soccer match, Jacob Wise demonstrated a lesser-known talent he discovered while attending the camp for the first time last summer.

"I'm really good at picking up a basketball with my back wheel," Wise said.

The 13-year-old from Holland was diagnosed with bone tumors in his arms when he was a toddler. The condition does not require him to use a wheelchair, but it makes it difficult for him to play basketball and other sports with his classmates at Eagle Crest Charter Academy.

Wise said attending the sports camp has allowed him to strengthen his arms and his self-esteem.

"I wanted to get a sense of pride because I was able to do the sports," Wise said. "It's a ton of fun having that pride."

Nearly 70 youth ages 6 to 18 are participating in the program. Six live in the Holland-Zeeland area.

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PASS: Mayleah Koop of Zeeland, left, passes the ball to a teammate during a game of wheelchair handball Thursday morning at the Grand Valley State University fieldhouse in Allendale.

Sentinel/Dan Irving

Now in its 20th year, the camp, which is sponsored by the Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association, began as a wheelchair tennis camp. It now offers a variety of sports for children.

The program has been a unique opportunity for Mayleah Koop.

"I like being around people (like myself) who I don't usually get to see much," said Koop, 17, of Zeeland.

The Unity Christian High School junior was involved in a bus and train accident at age 4.

Koop is also a three-year member of the Grand Rapids Junior Pacers wheelchair basketball team.

Curt Bender, who has run the camp's tennis programs for the past 13 years, is a competitive wheelchair tennis player. The Zeeland resident, who played softball and other sports before a spinal cord injury in 1989, joined a wheelchair tennis league through the sports association in 1992.

"If you put your mind to it, you can do pretty much anything," Bender said.

The camp is meant to be an eye-opening experience, said Maria Besta, president of the sports association and a recreational therapist who has directed the camp since 1998.

"The camp provides kids the opportunity to try a variety of wheelchair sports they didn't really realize they could participate in," Besta said. "It's empowering to know that you can do things your able-bodied peers are doing."




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Brad Dykstra of Holland sweats a bit as he tries to stay ahead of the ball during a game of wheelchair handball Thursday morning at the GVSU fieldhouse.

Sentinel/Dan Irving

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