

- ▶ HOME
- ▶ NEWS
- ▶ CALENDAR OF EVENTS
- ▶ ADULTS/SENIORS
- ▶ JUNIORS
- ▶ COLLEGE INFO
- ▶ TOURNAMENTS
- ▶ USTA LEAGUE TENNIS
- ▶ USTA JR. TEAM TENNIS
- ▶ TENNIS LINK
- ▶ PROGRAMS
- ▶ ABOUT US
- ▶ AWARDS
- ▼ WHEELCHAIR TENNIS NEWS

» **WHEELCHAIR TENNIS NEWS**

Jessica Sporte Interview
04/04/2010

INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA SPORTE

WHEELCHAIR TENNIS ATHLETE GRADUATING FROM GVSU MAY 2010

Q. When did you first get the bug to play wheelchair tennis?

A. When I was 10 years old I was introduced to wheelchair tennis at Wheelchair Sports Camp, hosted by the Grand Rapids Wheelchair Sports Association at GVSU. At age 15, I began attending a summer tennis program, and during my first year at college, I started traveling to tournaments. That is when the tennis bug really hit me.



Collegiate 2008 ©

Q. What motivates you to continue to work on your game and become the best athlete you can be?

A. The idea that attending the Paralympics in London in 2012 is within my reach. (Paralympics are held one week after the Olympics at the same venue as the Olympics. The Paralympics are for physical disabilities only unlike Special Olympics which are for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The Paralympics are also different than Special Olympics in that there are qualification rules which are similar to the Olympics) I am currently ranked 6th in the nation, and while I have a ways to go with my international rankings, participating in the 2012 Paralympics is by no means an impossible goal.

Q. What kind of sacrifices do you make?

A. I suppose the sacrifices I make are the same as any college athlete. Prioritizing becomes second nature. Friends, family, and tennis are high on the list. School is on both the front and back burner at times. I need to keep up my grades to keep my scholarships and yet I end up missing a lot of school to play in tournaments.

Q. What kind of practice schedule do you have?

A. My practice schedule varies from week to week but this is what I aim for: Monday-private lesson for 1 hour; Wednesday-2 hour practice at MSU; Thursday-2 hour match play with able-bodied women's 3.0 league and 2 hour practice with wheelchair players; Saturday-1 hour collegiate practice and 2 hour free hitting practice.



Jess vs AZ ©

Q. How do you sell w/c tennis to others and promote the game to those around you and the community?

A. Often simply playing tennis in a public area helps promote wheelchair tennis. Many people do not know that the only difference between wheelchair tennis and able-body tennis is that wheelchair players can take the ball off two bounces. By playing in the community and exposing wheelchair tennis, assists in promoting the sport. I have also joined a USTA Women's 3.0 league tennis team and come across a lot of people who are being exposed to wheelchair tennis for the first time. I would say another exposure point is one of my practices. Wednesday nights I have the privilege of practicing at MSU with their head tennis coach, Gene Orlando. Coach Gene requires his players to volunteer their time and hit with us for a practice. Thus, each week, an able-body collegiate tennis player from a top 10 university is being exposed to wheelchair tennis. Another area of promotion is through expo's. GRWSA has one of the best wheelchair tennis programs in the nation and often hosts wheelchair tennis clinics and expo's across the Midwest. I typically volunteer to both speak about my experience as a wheelchair tennis player and sometimes even participate in these events.

Q. What is so rewarding about playing wheelchair tennis besides winning a match?

I enjoy wheelchair tennis particularly because it is one of the only adapted sports that can be played with anyone. In other words, I do not need to find other wheelchair players in order to play tennis. I can play with family and friends or random strangers. I also enjoy the exercise-both mentally and physically. Tennis, as most people know, is a mental sport.



USTA MIDWEST
WWW.USTA.COM






EVER DREAM OF PLAYING IN THE US OPEN?

REGISTER NOW!

[CLICK HERE](#)

FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER YOU CAN COMPETE FOR A WILD CARD INTO THE US OPEN QUALIFYING TOURNAMENT.



Q. How does teaching the game, sharing with others what you know about the sport and volunteering help you become a better player?

A. In all areas of life, being able to teach something requires a previous understanding of the subject. Thus, if I am able to teach tennis to others, I know that I understand tennis myself. Also, sometimes just the act of reiterating what you know to others, helps ingrain this knowledge more firmly in your brain. I enjoy volunteering and teaching others how to play wheelchair tennis because without volunteers to teach me, I would not be where I am today.

Q. Does playing with or against able-bodied players help your game and how?

A. Yes, I would say it definitely helps my game. First off, if you can hit a clean winner or even make an able body player hit a forced error, you know that shot is a sure winner against a wheelchair player. Secondly, since able-body players can move laterally, they get to more balls and thus work on your consistency. Also, because they can get to more balls, you have to really work on your mental game in order to hit smart shots to get your opponent out of position. I joined a Women's 3.0 league simply for this reason. I know the balls coming at me from the other women are no threat, and yet, I must really strategize to get the ball in the right place so that my opponents cannot get me out of position.



Jess Sporte at Grand Valley State University
©

Q. You are the first GVSU student athlete to play wheelchair tennis for GVSU how does that feel? What are some of your greatest matches or tournaments you've been to?

A. I think it is awesome to have been able to play as a student athlete for GVSU. I can't take all the credit for starting this club at GVSU. Bryan Wilkinson, a GVSU alumni and current GRWSA team member, had a significant role in the start of wheelchair tennis at Grand Valley. I think that the best part about starting a program at GVSU is the fact that other schools are following our lead and starting their own programs. During our second year as a club sport, UTSA released a manual on how to start a collegiate program based off our success at GVSU. I've had so much fun and have learned so much at every tournament, it is hard to just pick one.

However, I think that the year GVSU brought home the collegiate nationals title was the best memory at the Univ. of Arizona.

Q. What benefits does representing your school have and how can we help encourage younger students who are contemplating college and then on top of it playing a sport?

A. I think the best part of being able to represent your school is the representing part. Being able to have that school pride and saying, "I play for Grand Valley State University" is an honor. The uniforms are pretty sweet too J. As for prospective students, I think that having a wheelchair sport offered at GVSU is a great incentive. I don't know of a single student who is not involved in at least one club or organization at GVSU and having a sport specifically for a student with a mobility impairment is awesome. Being able to prioritize is the key to success in life. I often refer back to the story of the Mayonnaise Jar and 2 Beers when people question me on how I manage school, tennis, family, living with a disability, and life in general. The story goes like this:

The Mayonnaise Jar and 2 Beers

When things in your life seem almost too much to handle, when 24 hours in a day are not enough, remember the mayonnaise jar and the 2 Beers. A professor stood before his philosophy class and had some items in front of him. When the class began, he wordlessly picked up a very large and empty mayonnaise jar and proceeded to fill it with golf balls. He then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was. The professor then picked up a box of pebbles and poured them into the jar. He shook the jar lightly. The pebbles rolled into the open areas between the golf balls. He then asked the students again if the jar was full. They agreed it was. The professor next picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else. He asked once more if the jar was full. The students responded with an unanimous 'yes.' The professor then produced two Beers from under the table and poured the entire contents into the jar effectively filling the empty space between the sand. The students laughed. 'Now,' said the professor as the laughter subsided, 'I want you to recognize that this jar represents your life. The golf balls are the important things---your family, your children, your health, your friends and your favorite passions---and if everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full. The pebbles are the other things that matter like your job, your house and your car. The sand is everything else---the small stuff. 'If you put the sand into the jar first,' he continued, 'there is no room for the pebbles or the golf balls. The same goes for life. If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff you will never have room for the things that are important to you. 'Pay attention to the things that are critical to your happiness. Spend time with your children. Spend time with your parents. Visit with grandparents. Take time to get medical checkups. Take your spouse out to dinner. Play another 18. There will always be time to clean the house and fix the disposal. Take care of the golf balls first---the things that really matter. Set your priorities. The rest is just sand.' One of the students raised her hand and inquired what the Beer represented. The professor smiled and said, 'I'm glad you asked.' The Beer just shows you that no matter how full your life may seem, there's always room for a couple of Beers with a friend.'

Q. If you could in a few sentences share with someone who was thinking about playing wheelchair tennis, what would you offer him or her?

A. I would say that tennis is a great outlet. Whether you're working on your game, or just need to release some energy, tennis is there. Even if you're by yourself, you can hit against a wall. The best part of wheelchair tennis is that there is inclusion with able bodied players. Out of all the tournaments, I play in every year; only 1 is in the state. Every single other tournament is out-of-state because there are so few wheelchair athletes. However,

while this will stop players from other sports, such as basketball, from playing, this is not the case with wheelchair tennis. It's one of the only adapted sports that can be played side-by-side with able body players.



Jess on Court
©

Q. What are your post-graduation tennis plans?

A. I currently have an internship lined up for this summer at Hines VA Hospital right outside of Chicago. However, even during my internship, I plan to hit with one of the top wheelchair tennis players in the nation who lives near Chicago. After that, if finances allow, I plan I focusing my time and effort to bettering my game to hopefully qualify for the Paralympics in 2012.

Q. Has tennis helped you with your outlook on your career?

A. My ultimate career path is to become a motivational speaker to kids with physical disabilities. Having grown up missing a leg due to cancer, I understand the challenges faced by kids with disabilities. Being a nationally and internationally ranked tennis player has shown the world that having a disability does not have to stop a person from living life to the fullest. This May I will be graduating with a B.A. in Therapeutic Recreation. Therapeutic Recreation is all about reintegrating people back into society and introducing them to new leisure activities after a life-changing event. By playing tennis, I am able to show the world that life does not end after a disability.

next



Copyright 2010 by United States Tennis Association. All Rights Reserved.
[Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)