

## A (very) brief history of sporting wheelchairs: Video Transcript

If you have never seen the Paralympics or Adaptive sport, you might be wondering what a sporting wheelchair is. Simply put, sporting wheelchairs are wheelchairs that are used for sport. Pretty simple, right? But there are loads of variations of sporting wheelchairs, like chairs for basketball, rugby, skiing, and loads of other sports. So now you might be asking, 'where did all these chairs come from?' In this video I'm going to give a brief history of the sporting wheelchair.

In the mid 1940s, Disabled people - or people with disabilities - who needed to use a wheelchair began to play sports as part of rehabilitation. At hospitals and rehabilitation centres, sport was played in medical wheelchairs, because these were the only kinds of chairs available at this time. These chairs were not flashy or fast like what is used today. In fact, some of these wheelchairs looked like armchairs with wheels stuck on! To doctors at the time, this made sense, because they wanted to make sure that people using wheelchairs were comfortable and safe. However, they didn't realise that these wheelchairs were heavy and restrictive, and stopped disabled people from being independent and doing what they wanted. Because they were so heavy, for example, pushing these chairs all day long would have been incredibly tiring and made getting around a much bigger task than it should be. So, In the late 1970s, wheelchair users began to experiment with their technology. They were frustrated with these hospital style chairs and wanted something to suit their active lifestyle. Most importantly, they wanted chairs that would let them perform better in sports like basketball.

Wheelchair users started to modify their chairs in all sorts of ways, and this transformed the chairs from hospital equipment to sporting technology. For example, many people would remove unnecessary parts of the chair that added extra weight. This included things like the push handles at the back of the chair, or even the backrest itself, as some wheelchair users didn't need it. This meant that these disabled people had a lot of control over the look and function of the chairs they used for sport, and these modifications helped in their everyday life. Other developments also made a huge difference, such as increasing the camber of wheels. This means the wheels were placed at bigger angles to make the chairs turn faster and be easier to use. But many of the chairs used in basketball were folding chairs, meaning lots of weight was being used up by a folding mechanism that wasn't necessary for sport. This made a number of wheelchair users want to make their own wheelchairs from scratch. The big difference was that they made the chair into a box frame, which did mean the chairs couldn't fold anymore. But now, chairs were stronger, lighter and more responsive than ever before. Many wheelchair users all over the world started to make these types of chairs – inventions were made in America, Britain and all over Europe. Many of these creatives even started their own companies, making and selling wheelchairs to other athletes. But as sporting chairs got more complicated, suddenly disabled people couldn't use them for everyday life. They were becoming specialised, which means they were made for one thing in particular, usually sport. For example, as the wheel angle got bigger, sporting chairs became unable to get through regular doorways!

But this was a good development for these chairs, as now they were more suited than ever for each sport. At first, wheelchair users would have all used the same wheelchair for

everything. But as technology got more advanced, so did the sport itself. Now, the best athletes need better technology to beat the competition. Eventually, specific wheelchairs for basketball, tennis, rugby and other sports came on the scene, and they are all slightly different. For instance, rugby wheelchairs started out much like the standard hospital devices. But now, there are two types of chairs for different types of players to use, in which some players have longer chairs to grab opponents, whilst others are rounder to fit through small gaps. Rugby chairs are also often made of stronger materials, because in wheelchair rugby.... Well, they hit each other a lot! And the most obvious change is in racing chairs, which are now sleek and long three wheeled machines which you definitely could not use for anything else! This is all to show how far sporting wheelchairs have developed technologically, and how different these sports are today than when they first started.

As for the future of sporting wheelchairs? Top athletes have their wheelchairs custom made, in order to make sure they can perform to their absolute best. The downside to this is that these chairs are pretty expensive, unfortunately. But others are working to create cheaper chairs for new players across the world, ensuring that more people can benefit from adaptive sports. As well, new types of specialised sporting chairs are being made, like the colourful wheelchair motocross or WCMX wheelchairs used by Lily Rice and made by RMA Sport.

Back in the 1940s, I don't think anyone could have imagined how wheelchair technology might have developed, and how different things are now. So while it is tempting to say that these wheelchairs are as good as they're going to get, maybe it's too soon to say.

And if you are interested in having a sporting wheelchair of your own, there are lots of good places to look! Sporting wheelchairs can be expensive, so you might not want to buy one before trying one out. I would recommend getting in touch with any local sports clubs or organisations where you live, as they might have some chairs you can try - from club chairs, second-hand models, or even current players letting you have a go! And to help with cost, there are a number of charitable organisations that can help with funding. Please look for the blog accompanying this video for some links and names of organisations.

Remember to stay curious and keep pushing hard!

## A (very) brief history of sporting wheelchairs: Video sources

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### Video Sources

- Clip 1 - Wheelchair Basketball | Canada vs Australia | Men's preliminaries | Rio 2016 Paralympic Games. Uploaded by Paralympic Games, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2016.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPSNfqAUjbs>
- Clip 2 - Wheelchair Rugby Gold Medal Game (USA vs CAN) | Parapan American Games Lima 2019. Uploaded by Team USA, 27<sup>th</sup> August 2019.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pmp5tUCVWj4&t=2235s>
- Clip 3 - Akira Kano | Men's downhill sitting | Alpine skiing | Sochi 2014 Paralympics. Uploaded by Paralympic Games, 8<sup>th</sup> March 2014.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2UkP0rySHA>
- Clip 4 - Athletics | Men's 5000m - T54 Final | Rio 2016 Paralympic Games. Uploaded by Paralympic Games, 11<sup>th</sup> September 2016.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=go5ldndview>
- Clip 5 (photo) - Physio.jpg. ©WheelPower British Wheelchair Sport. Used with permission of the National Paralympic Heritage Trust.
- Clip 6 (photo) - wheelchair basketball at SM6.JPG. ©WheelPower British Wheelchair Sport. Used with permission of the National Paralympic Heritage Trust.
- Clip 7 (photo) - Group.jpg. ©WheelPower British Wheelchair Sport. Used with permission of the National Paralympic Heritage Trust.
- Clip 8 (photo) - wheelchair basketball at SM5.JPG - WheelPower Photos. Used with permission of the National Paralympic Heritage Trust.
- Clip 9 (photo) - Star & Garter 48.JPG - WheelPower Photos. Used with permission of the National Paralympic Heritage Trust.
- Clip 10 (photo) - table tennis at SM.JPG - ©WheelPower British Wheelchair Sport. Used with permission of the National Paralympic Heritage Trust.
- Clip 11 - 1960 Rome Film - Wheelpower - HTY-FA-00138\_NPHT\_LOW RES\_Rome 1960\_8mm. Used with permission of the National Paralympic Heritage Trust.
- Clip 12 & 13- Stoke Mandeville 1984 Paralympic Games | Highlights. Uploaded by IWAS, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b0vhG9ahZMo>
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- Clip 15-19 - Paralympic Sports A-Z: Wheelchair Rugby. Uploaded by Paralympic Games, 10<sup>th</sup> June 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSzFmlWgVsM>

- Clip 20 - Men's 100m T54 | Final | London 2017 World Para Athletics Championships. Uploaded by Paralympic Games, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKBcCiUfdU>
- Clip 21 - Roma Sport Tom First Fitting Session Contour Body Mapping Basketball Wheelchair. Uploaded by RMA Sport, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCygdIM1ch4>
- Clip 22-3 - Lily Rice WCMX Roma Sport. Uploaded by RMA Sport, 18<sup>th</sup> October 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gq-mZ-8EyP8>
- Clip 24 - Wheelchair Basketball | Canada vs Australia | Men's preliminaries | Rio 2016 Paralympic Games. Uploaded by Paralympic Games, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPSNfqAUjbs>
- Clip 25 - Shingo Kunieda vs Alfie Hewett | US Open 2020 Final. Uploaded by US Open Tennis Championships, 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4aPB\\_CXahl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4aPB_CXahl)