SPECIAL REPORT

NWBA CLASSIFICATION: THE PLAYER, COACH, AND CLASSIFIER PERSPECTIVES

by Tip Thiboutot, Ph.D., and Kathleen Curtis, P.T.

In July 1986, in an article published in Sports 'n Spokes ("Classification: Time for Change"), Tip Thiboutot, former player and current coach as well as international classifier, urged the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) to adopt Horst Strohkendl's international classification system, which consists of four classes and a 13.5-maximum point system. Thiboutot concluded that this system would "establish greater uniformity and more competition among players with similar disabilities." He noted that it would "streamline" the process used to select the US teams competing internationally, since the NWBA is the only member of the International Wheelchair Basketball Federation not using the international system.

US classifiers are burdened by the fact that they must use a different set of criteria when classifying players for international competition. Coaches are often forced to gamble when selecting a player for the US team. For example, an NWBA Class II player may be classified as a 2-, a 2.5-, or even a 3-pointer under the international system. Discrepancies between the function observed as part of a neurological examination and function in the chair often result in accusations of misclassification, player cheating, or classifier incompetence.

Our international selection committees and coaches deserve to be able to select a team and prepare for international competition with reasonable confidence that each player's ability is clearly identified with a specific classification, one that is determined by his/her movement in the wheelchair on the basketball court. "Surprises," such as a change in classification just prior to competition, become much less likely when coaches, players, and classifiers are all using the same criteria.

The athlete and the classifier see the classification process in the NWBA system differently. One player describes his perceptions of the experience in the following manner: "Having been pricked by pins, probed by the examiner's fingers, and ultimately dehumanized, the player is finally classified, almost always after lying both prone and supine on an examination table, subject to the analytic gaze of the classifiers, who are usually standing, literally 'looking



down' at the player. Let's face fact: The player here has been reduced to patient." To coin a term, the wheelchair basketball player has been "de-athleticized," since his/her classification is the result of a medical diagnosis and not an analysis of basketball skills.

From the NWBA classifier's point of view, the current process involves a routine muscle test and neurological examination, with one twist. Players often minimize their strengths, play up their weaknesses, and pretend that they lack balance, hoping their classification will reflect a more severe disability.

Effort, rather than ability, often becomes the variable NWBA classifiers are testing. In the current NWBA system, the classifier focuses on the player's neurological or orthopedic disability. Inconsistent player behaviors cause classifiers to question whether they are seeing the true picture. More than one classifier has been fooled into believing that a player has a more severe than previously estimated disability because of the minimal effort the player exhibited during the classification examination.

In contrast, a functional classification system allows the classifier to see the player in action and to assess ability during constant effort, under true competitive conditions. In essence, ability, and not effort, becomes the true focus of the functional (international) classification system.

In 1987, the inimitable Harry Vines, coach of the gold-medal-winning US wheelchair basketball team at the Stoke Mandeville Games, refused to allow his players to submit to medical classification, on the basis that it was demeaning. Prior to Vines's protest, international basketball players had rejected medical classification by instituting, via democratic procedures, Strohkendl's functional wheelchair basketball classification system. First implemented during the 1984 Paralympics tournament, this system requires that players be observed in scrimmage or competition by a team of classifiers. Players only un-

dergo medical examination if there is a discrepancy in the opinions of classifiers

or following protests.

In 1989, Sports 'n Spokes announced the formation of a new, independent wheelchair basketball conference, organized by Buddy Rogers of the Texas Paralyzed Veterans Association, who proposed, according to S'NS, that this new conference "will remove the inequalities and unfairness that some people feel is built into the game as it now stands" ("New' Wheelchair Basketball Conference," Basketball Business, November/December). The article added that this conference would have "no classification point system [and] no walkers...."

Both of the preceding examples reveal profound dissatisfaction with medical classification. In fact, the proposed defection in Texas is evidently "inspired" by a loss of faith in the NWBA's classification system, which is exclusively defined by medical criteria. Harry Vines's protest is mirrored annually on the faces of wheelchair basketball players who must submit to player classification at the National Wheelchair Basketball Tournament, not to mention all of the novice players who must undergo classification in order to be certified for NWBA competition.

In the international system, classifiers observe players (not patients) in competition, on the basketball court. Shooting, passing, rebounding, and pushing the wheelchair are the primary criteria. If, for example, a player demonstrates poor balance in a rebounding situation. he/she will more than likely be classified as a 1-pointer. Fair balance while rebounding leads to categorization as a Class 2. Very good balance produces a classification as a 3-pointer, while a player who rebounds a ball to the side by catching it with two hands without the support of the back of the wheelchair, thereby demonstrating excellent balance, becomes a 4-pointer.

ANALYZE THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

For example: A paraplegic who is paralyzed at the level of T10, having demonstrated significantly diminished trunk balance while rebounding or shooting, is more often than not classified as a 1.5 in the international system. In the NWBA, that player's medi-

cal diagnosis would compel classifiers to identify him/her as a Class 2. As a result, this player would compete for a position on a team with a paraplegic whose lesion is L2, a player who possesses good balance—balance that improves rebounding, pushing, and more than likely, the player's passing and shooting range.

Identical parallels can be drawn involving all four classes of the international system, including those applied to players with arm involvement and bilateral above-knee amputees. This system is, without question, more respectful of the athlete than is the NWBA classification system, which often reduces a player to a patient and a classifier to a detective.

The important issue that remains for the NWBA to determine is the point limit that individual team representatives would find most equitable. International competition stipulates that no more than 13.5 points are allowed on the basketball floor at one time. The NWBA has a choice, however; even if its delegates choose to adopt the four classes of the international classification system, the NWBA would not be bound to the 13.5-point limit. Delegates are clearly entitled to propose and vote on a higher limit of 14, 15, or even 16 points.

Let's get our wheelchair basketball players off the examination table and onto the basketball court, the only appropriate place to classify the player. Let's send the NWBA's classification system to rehab, where it can be stripped of its medical formulas and the patient will ultimately emerge as an athlete.

Let's adopt the international classification system, not only because it is more equitable than its NWBA counterpart, not only because it is more respectful of the athlete, not only because it will simplify the selection process for US teams competing internationally, not only because it will eliminate cheating during classification, but also to prevent further defections from the NWBA, such as the one occurring in Texas.

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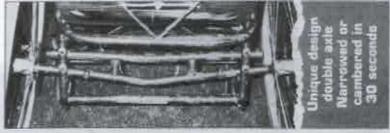
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