

SPORTS 'N SPOKES

January 2009

GET HEALTHY —
Fitness tips for the New Year

WINTER WONDERLAND:
Ability meets challenge

Ka-Boom!

A photograph of two wheelchair athletes in a gymnasium. On the left, a man in a red jersey with the number 11 is leaning forward, holding a yellow ball high in his right hand. He is wearing black shorts, white socks, and white sneakers. On the right, a woman in a red jersey with the number 13 is sitting upright in her wheelchair, looking towards the man. She is wearing black pants. The background shows a gymnasium with other people and a sign that says "America".

HAT TRICKS



by Dan Humphreys
photos by Ben Johnson

Indoor wheelchair soccer is a fast-paced, action-packed sport. During this championship tournament, teams were ready to rumble.

The 2008 BlazeSports Indoor Wheelchair Soccer (IWS) National Championships kicked off October 31–November 2, 2008, at the University of Georgia–Athens. The event, now in its twenty-sixth year, brought together the top four teams in two separate divisions—Open and A—to battle for the top spots in the country.

The Open Division, consisting of elite

Above: During the Georgia Blazers/New York Chariots contest, Blazer Gavin Cloy loses his balance trying to get to the ball.

teams, included the Georgia Blazers, Houston Challengers, New York Chariots, and the Houston Toros. The A Division, comprised of developmental squads, featured the DeKalb Blazers, New York Strikers, San Diego Heat, and C&R Medical of Pasadena, Tex.

The tournament format consisted of round-robin group play for each division in order to seed medal competition. After the prelims, teams faced off in single-elimination semifinal and championship matches.

In the A Division, the day's first contest looked to be a possible preview of the

championship game. The New York Strikers faced off against C&R Medical, and New York took a 2–1 lead into the half. After battling for 25 scoreless minutes in the second half, the Strikers earned a close 2–1 decision.

After a tough 3–2 win over the DeKalb Blazers, the Strikers finished group competition undefeated with a 7–1 trouncing of the San Diego Heat to earn the top seed in medal play. C&R was the second seed by virtue of great offensive output and solid defense with victories over San Diego, 9–2, and the Blazers, 12–1.

With the semifinals set, the No.1 seeded Strikers would face off against the No. 4 Blazers on one side of the bracket, while No. 2 C&R Medical would meet the No. 3 Heat on the other.

In the first semifinal, the Strikers took a quick lead, 6-0, at halftime. The Blazers managed a little offense in the second half, scoring two goals, but the Strikers found the net three more times, defeating the Blazers, 9-2. With their spot in the championship secured, the Strikers had to wait and see if they would have a rematch with their toughest opponent of the 2008 campaign: C&R Medical.

In the other semifinal match, San Diego showed they came to play, jumping out to a 2-1 halftime lead with two goals by Kendall Harmon. C&R once again relied on solid goalie play by A Division MVP Jazmin Almlie-Ryan in the second half to

shut down the Heat, while the offense fed off the solid defensive play and netted goals by Arthur Montross, Carlos Robles, and Johnny Banda for the 4-2 win over the Heat.

In the championship game, the Strikers and C&R Medical battled back and forth, once again engaged in a defensive battle that saw no goals throughout the first 25 minutes. In the second half, the solid Strikers team play created too many scoring opportunities for C&R, and the Strikers found the back of the net twice, once by Danny Baum and another by David Deas, to win the A Division national championship, 2-0.

In the third-place game, San Diego again overpowered the Blazers behind the offensive fury of Harmon, who got three hat tricks (scoring three times in a row) for nine goals. Christian Rod-

riguez tallied a hat trick of his own to lead the Heat to a third-place finish over the Blazers, 12-4.

Next Up

The Open Division began with commanding victories for the Houston Toros and the New York Chariots. The Toros, behind an offensive explosion and excellent goalkeeping by Ricardo Cedillo, defeated the Georgia Blazers. The Chariots proved they came to play by avenging their loss in the 2007 championship game. They led the Houston Challengers, 4-2, at the half with a hat trick by Christian Ekunwe and continued their great defensive play in the second, allowing just two more goals. The offense spread the wealth, scoring another five goals by five players to close out a 9-4 victory over Houston.

In the second round, the Blazers found



New York Chariot Tom Dietz defends the goal from an ominous looking Jorge Torres (Houston Challengers).



Teresa Lannon (Georgia Blazers) scans the area before passing the ball around New York Chariots' Rene Rivera and Denton Johnson.

their offensive groove, scoring ten goals behind the steady play of 2004 U.S. Paralympic wheelchair basketball player Gavin Cloy and former National Team Handball athlete Nigel Hambrick, each with four goals in the game. Ten goals, however, would not be enough to overcome the Challengers' experience and solid play. Motivated by their first-round loss, the Challengers scored 16 goals (Jorge Torres, 7; Franko Guzman, 4; Willie White, 4, and Selvin Velasquez, 2) to defeat the Blazers, 16-10, and improve their record (1-1) and move into position to earn one of the top two seeds for medal play.

The Chariots, after an impressive win over the reigning champions, may have underestimated a hungry Toros team. The Toros jumped out to a 6-4 halftime lead behind a hat trick by Oziel Flores and goals by Tomas Lobo, Jesus Juarez, and Jesus Bahena. Ekunwe once again provided the majority of the offense for the Chariots with a hat trick in the first half, while a goal by Kate Peitz rounded out first-half scoring.

With the first half defined by offense, the second half would be decided by defense. The Chariots' Ahmad Karimzada and Nate Peitz found the back of the net to close the gap, while Lobo provided the Toros' only goal of the second half



In the championship game, Tomas Lobo (Houston Toros) is surrounded by Franko Guzman and several other Houston Challengers.

Paralyzed Veterans

that proved to be the game winner. The Chariots fell, 7-6, to the Toros.

In the final round of group play, the Chariots faced off against the Blazers, hoping to go through the back door to earn the first seed in medal play. The Blazers could never get into a rhythm, and the Chariots executed an offensive and defensive clinic, earning the victory (17-3). Now they awaited the result of the Challengers/Toros matchup to see who would earn the top seed in medal play.

In the final game of group play, the 2-0 Toros took to the court against the 1-1 Challengers to decide the top seed for the medal round. While these teams fielded exceptional goalkeepers, the contest was decided by the offense. With both teams hailing from Houston, they knew how to score against one another—and score they did. The Toros took a 7-6 halftime lead behind six goals by Oziel Flores. In the second half, Flores provided another three goals as did teammate Lobo. Jesus Flores rounded out the scoring to edge the Challengers, 13-12.

Punching the Ticket

In the first semifinal, the veteran Toros took to the court against the first-year Blazers and looked to duplicate their success from day one, a 15-4 drubbing of the Blazers. With a few games of experience under their belt, the Blazers looked for an upset and a ticket to the championship. The Toros, however, were just too much for the Blazers and punched their ticket to the big dance with a 16-6 victory behind 11 goals by Lobo.

"The Toros are a great team," says Blazers Head Coach Dan Humphreys. "We have learned a lot this year, and we now know where the bar is set in order to compete in the Open Division. Our plan is to take what we have learned and develop a season plan that will put us in a position to come back next year and compete with teams like the Toros, Challengers, and Chariots."

In the second semifinal, a rematch of the 2007 championship game, the Challengers looked to right their ship and earn their way to the finals to defend their championship in an all-Houston final. The Chariots wanted to duplicate

What Is It?

Indoor wheelchair soccer, also known as wheelchair team handball, is a competitive team sport, governed by BlazeSports America, for people with a variety of physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy, spinal-cord injury, spina bifida, traumatic brain injury, muscular dystrophy, amputation, and other physical disabilities. It combines aspects of team handball, basketball, soccer, and hockey to create a fast-paced sport that integrates athletes, including those who use power chairs, with different types and levels of disabilities to compete together.

Indoor wheelchair soccer takes place on a regulation basketball court with teams of six that include a goalie and at least one athlete who uses a power wheelchair. Players must dribble or pass the 10" rubber playground ball once every three seconds in order to advance up the court. The entire court may be used during an offensive possession, with no time limit requiring the team to attempt a shot on goal.

A 10' semi-circle "crease" extends from the center of the goal line of the 5' x 5'5" goal and designates an area only the goalie can enter. If the offensive team enters the crease, it loses possession of the ball. If the defensive team enters the crease, a delayed penalty (similar to hockey) is called, and the offense continues with possession until it scores or the defense gains possession. At that time the play is whistled dead and the ball returned to the offense with a throw-in from the sideline.

Throw-ins must be made with both hands over and behind the head, with exceptions made for a player's functional ability, and must be executed within five seconds of receiving the ball from the referee.

A penalty shot line extends the width of the court, parallel to and 12' from the baseline. If a personal foul is committed by the defense below the penalty line, the offensive player is awarded a penalty shot that must be taken from behind the penalty shot line. Personal fouls, similar to wheelchair basketball, include ramming, hooking, and holding.

their success from Friday and head to the finals with a 2-0 record against the defending champions.

Once again the two teams provided a great show for the crowd. Matching each other goal for goal, the Challengers entered the half with a slim 5-4 lead behind three goals from Guzman and two from Torres. For the Chariots, Ekunwe was never able to get on track in the first half.

In the second half, Ekunwe found his shooting groove, notching two goals. Eddie McGhee added another to put the pressure back on the Challengers. Rising to the challenge, Guzman and Torres each found the back of the net once for the Challengers, and the game ended in a 7-7 tie. With the score knotted after 50 minutes of regulation, the teams entered a ten-minute, sudden-death overtime period.

BlazeSports Tournament Director Frank Hughes describes the atmosphere: "Everybody in the gym found their way to the court for the overtime period, and you could feel the intensity and the excitement with every shot."

The veteran goalkeepers were not overwhelmed by the pressure and denied every shot on goal to send the game to a shootout. In the shootout, each team chose five players to take a penalty shot. At the end of the shootout, the team with the most goals won.

Torres, first up for the Challengers, beat the goalie to put the pressure on the Chariots. The first four New York shooters were unable to match Torres's success. The Chariots, with only one shooter left, needed a stop and a goal in their final attempt to send the game to a sudden-death



Trying to stay away from defenders, Christian Ekwu (center, New York Chariots) lets the ball rip toward the goal.

shootout. The Challengers' final shooter, Guzman, took the ball at mid-court, pushed his way to the penalty shot line, and let loose a screamer that found the upper left corner to seal the win, 7-7 (shootout: 2-0).

The championship game matched the Houston Toros against the Houston Challengers. While putting your money on Houston was a sure bet, which Houston team would prevail and become the champion? In group play, the Toros narrowly edged the Challengers, 13-12, and the final provided just as much excitement.

The Challengers posted a 7-4 half-time lead, with White scoring four goals. In the second half, the Toros' Cedillo denied all but one shot on goal by the Challengers, bringing the Toros back into striking distance. The Challengers would not be denied, however, and Torres scored the Challengers' only goal of the second half. It proved to be the game

winner, as the Challengers defeated the Toros, 8-7.

In the third-place game, the Chariots took out their frustrations over their semifinal loss on the Blazers and posted a 16-5 win.

Give It a Shot

Programs that offer wheelchair basketball should also look at indoor soccer as an introductory and inclusive sport that helps athletes develop fundamental skills and attitude.

BlazeSports plans to expand the tournament in 2009 to offer a Junior Division Championship. Jeff Jones, director of BlazeSports Institute for Applied Science, says, "A grass-roots effort focused on developing more A Division and junior teams, and, ultimately, a Junior Division, will be the catalyst that brings the sport to a new level. Ten years down the road we want to be hosting a national cham-

pionship with 16 teams in each of three divisions: Open, A, and Junior. That is where we need to be. It is our hope BlazeSports America can establish a productive working relationship with USA Team Handball to assist in the future growth of this exciting sport at the national and international levels."

Contact: BlazeSports America, 770-850-8199 / info@blazesports.org / www.blazesports.org.

S'NS

Dan Humphreys has been involved in disability sports since 1999, coaching and directing national and international events and competitions.

