

# ParaSport<sup>®</sup>

MAGAZINE

SUMMER 2023



PARASPORT  
ONTARIO

parasportontario.ca

## PARA FENCER

# Amber Briar

SPECIAL  
SECTION

Adaptive  
Fitness  
Solutions

Niagara  
Parasport  
Festival

Empowering  
Mental Health  
*with Recreation*

Challenger  
Baseball



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# The 3S80. Simply active.

## What is the 3S80?

Compact and robust, the 3S80 Sport is optimized for high-impact running. This lightweight sports knee joint withstands the high loads that develop and act on the prosthesis while running.



Find out more!



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2023

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# WELCOME

*“Alone we can do so little;  
together we can do so much.” – Helen Keller*

*With over a year gone by as Executive Director of ParaSport® Ontario, there are so many positive collaborative moments and impacts that we as an organization have been a part of, but there are still many gaps in the community that will continue to drive our new strategic plan moving forward.*

Our **vision** is to unify the parasport sector, promoting opportunities for ALL people with disabilities.

Our **mission** is to provide leadership, resources, and support to connect the disability community to adaptive sport and healthy living opportunities across Ontario.

This can not be done alone or in silos. It must be accomplished in a collaborative way across the disability community to achieve the greatest impact and create sustainable change. When people and organizations come together towards a common goal, the impact for the target audience is always greater.

This was not only true for the work ParaSport Ontario accomplished in the Niagara region to educate, expand, collaborate and grow parasport programs and services, but also in our continued efforts to grow and expand our Resource Hub with new clubs and community programs promoted for the disability community and to welcome new participants.

Thanks to generous sponsors, donors, and supporters we've grown the impact of our Play to Podium Fund again this past year with \$150,000 of adapted equipment being donated. Whether it's someone needing adapted equipment to start a parasport journey or to take it to the next level of performance, ParaSport Ontario (PO) supports individuals with a disability by removing the equipment barrier to participation.

The highlight of PO's community impact for me this year came from a mother whose son received new adapted sports equipment from us this year. "While it looks like a sledge to most," she said, "what it is to us is so much more. We see inclusion, fun, competition, companionship, body and brain simulation, smack talk, a healthy mindset and wellbeing. We also see a future for him that includes sport, something he has been missing the last two years."

As ParaSport Ontario embarks on its new three-year strategic plan, we will continue to be a connector in the disability community, providing leadership, resources and support, and taking what we learn each year to grow parasport programming in new regions across the province.

James Murphy  
Executive Director, ParaSport® Ontario



# ParaSport® MAGAZINE

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## OUR CLIENTS COME FIRST

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LV Physiotherapy



# ParaSport® Ontario Partners

*ParaSport® Ontario is proud to support the work of our Partners by promoting the sports and physical activity opportunities they provide to Ontarians with disabilities.*





# The Parasport Resource Centre

*An Online Hub for Adapted Sports and Recreation Possibilities!*

- Discover a new parasport.
- Find a club near you.
- Connect with athlete ambassadors.
- Ask an expert.
- Check out our resource library.
- Talk to our Information Specialist.



**IT'S YOURS TO DISCOVER!**

<https://parasportontario.ca>

Questions? Email us at [info@parasportontario.ca](mailto:info@parasportontario.ca).



## THE SHIRLEY SHELBY AWARD

For over 40 years, the late Shirley Shelby devoted herself to the Ontario Blind Sports Association (OBSA) and ParaSport® Ontario (PO) to ensure that individuals with a disability realized the benefits of sport and physical activity.

For Shelby's work in program and athlete development in blind sport, and her innovation and influence as a leader, she received numerous awards including PO's Ron Foster Award for her volunteerism, the Toronto Sports Hall of Honour Lifetime Achievement award, and perhaps her greatest honours – induction in the Ontario Blind Sports Association Hall of Fame and the Canadian Disability Hall of Fame.

In her honour, OBSA presents the Shirley Shelby Award annually to someone who creates positive social and cultural impact for blind sports across Ontario, and demonstrates leadership and community-building through volunteering.

The award, as well as the Gord Hope Award (Hope was a pioneer in blind sport) is presented at the OBSA Hall of Fame Gala, this year in November in Brantford. For more information on the Gala visit [blindsports.on.ca](http://blindsports.on.ca) or call (416) 880-8984.



## ABCs of Inclusive Attitudes

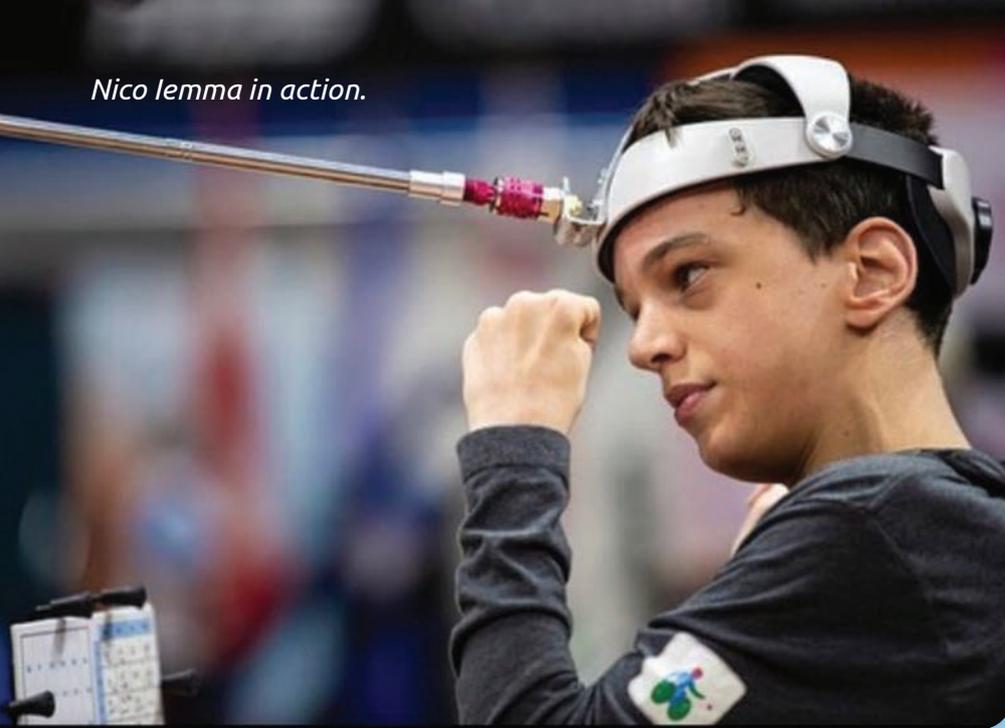
ParaSport® Ontario was proud to recently partner with Dr. John Freer from the University of Windsor, Dr. Monique Somma from Brock University and Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities on the ABC educational program research project.

The focus of the project was on encouraging positive and inclusive attitudes around disability in elementary students (Grades 4-6) through adaptive sport. ParaSport Ontario Ambassadors Chris Garner and Evan Swance-Smith delivered compelling presentations to a number of classes in the Niagara Region, teaching students about disability, diversity and parasport opportunities.

The in-class lessons were followed by ambassador facilitation of two lessons with roller sledges, whereby the students participated in sledge hockey drills and skills activities. The intent was to engage students with a parasport that everyone can play to lessen or alleviate preconceived notions and misconceptions associated with adaptive sport and youth with disabilities, and promote inclusivity and welcoming attitudes.

Feedback from participating teachers was overwhelmingly positive and ParaSport Ontario is excited to learn about the results and conclusions from the research project once completed.

Nico lemma in action.



## NEXT GEN BOCCIA BOYS

With his gold medal performance at the 2023 Défi Sportif AlterGo National Boccia Open in Montreal in April, Oshawa's Nico lemma and his father and Performance Partner Patrick represented Canada at the first World Boccia Youth Championships in July. Nico is a former Parasport Ontario's Youth Athlete of the Year Award winner.

The lemmas were joined by Brampton team member Carter Plumb and his Performance Partner, his mother Jennifer Knight, at the competition in Portugal that brought together young talents in boccia from around the world.

"Just being able to compete at an international competition in another country, especially in Europe, was an incredible opportunity and experience for us," said Patrick.

Despite their young age of 14, the duo have been on the radar at provincial and national levels for quite some time. This event was the first time that they competed outside of Canada.

**Boccia is a precision ball sport, similar to bocce, and related to bowls and pétanque. For more information, contact the Ontario Cerebral Palsy Sports Association; [ocpsa.com](http://ocpsa.com).**

## ALL ABILITIES LAWN BOWLS

The Aurora Lawn Bowling Club has introduced weekly lawn bowling sessions for people of all abilities. Lawn Bowls is a sport enjoyed by all age groups and all abilities, and promotes fitness, social interaction and all levels of competition. The All Abilities sessions encourage parents and care-givers to enjoy playing alongside family members and clients at the Aurora club's well-equipped facility. For further information, contact Alan Dean at (905) 726-9501.





# Cranking Across CANADA

**Quadriplegic Kevin Mills sustained a spinal cord injury in 2009 and is testing his stamina and strength in a months-long cross-Canada handcycling journey which began in St. John's, Nfld., in May.**

"I want to dip my tires in both oceans," Mills said with a smile. With the Atlantic behind him, the 43-year-old plans for the same in the Pacific with Victoria, British Columbia, the target destination by year's end. His pace is five to six hours a day on the road. With that, he'd become the first quadriplegic to arm-crank a handcycle across Canada.

Mills grew up in Guelph and was a talented athlete of all sorts as a teenager including ranking among the best high-school runners in the country. A Humber College (Toronto) graduate as an advance care paramedic, he had hoped to one day join a police tactical team.

Although a rock-climbing fanatic as a young adult, it was a swimming injury while he and his wife and young son were vacationing in Cuba that claimed the athletic lifestyle he once enjoyed. Mills was hoisted up by a rogue wave and pounded onto the ocean floor resulting in a C4 spinal injury. Rushed to Havana for primary care, upon his return to Toronto he underwent more medical procedures at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, and then months of intense therapy at the Lyndhurst Centre

which specializes in spinal cord rehabilitation.

"I just wanted to be as active as possible in the ways that I could," he shared. To that end, Mills engaged in activity-based therapy which was so encouraging in terms of shoulder movement that his wife – Heather Cairns-Mills – opened Walk It Off Spinal Cord Recovery and Wellness Centre in their hometown of Newmarket, Ont.

On his cycle, Mills uses Quad Grips for hand control. Pedalling continuously, there is a power-assisted system – as you'd see on today's popular ebikes – that helps with propulsion, particularly on steep inclines.

It was Mills's personal trainer, Nikki Davenport, who works at Walk It Off as a kinesiologist, who came up with the idea of travelling across Canada. They've been biking together for five years with six marathons and two dozen half marathons to their credit.

Mills hopes his present marathon will encourage a more accessible world for those who have a mobility disability. "The whole idea is to promote accessibility, showing people that they too can do what I'm doing."

# Life in the FAST LANE

In the late 1960s, a new sport emerged in Canada that would change the lives of many with disabilities – wheelchair sport.

In *Life in the Fast Lane*, author Chris Stoddart recounts the rise of wheelchair racing, with him as one of its pioneers. Born with spina bifida, Stoddart witnessed the extraordinary transformation of the wheelchair from a heavy contraption to a light and sleek design meant for racing.

From his beginnings as a wheelchair basketball player to a three-time Paralympian and marathon racer, Stoddart shares his life journey as it parallels Canada's rise in wheelchair sports. In his book, he spotlights veterans of wheelchair sports who might have been forgotten over the years.

Stoddart grew up in Arthur, Ontario, and moved to Toronto for his university studies. During those years in Toronto he learned about wheelchair basketball, the beginning of an incredible journey as one of Canada's most successful amateur athletes. Having always loved writing, he hopes this book will promote the world of disabled sports, the sport of wheelchair racing, and the many athletes who made it what it is today. To order *Life in the Fast Lane*, visit [christopherleestoddart.ca](http://christopherleestoddart.ca).



## Recreational Respite

We are recreation therapists, social service workers and education assistants. We nurture social health and connectivity for children, youth and adults with disabilities by...

- Promoting Inclusion
- Encouraging Community Participation
- Advocating for People in their Communities
- Removing Barriers to Participation

### OUR SERVICES

- One-to-One Respite Support identifies barriers to participation or social connection.
- Group Programs (in-person and virtual) provides social connection, independent skill mastery and recreation exploration.



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Visit [www.recrepite.com](http://www.recrepite.com) or email [info@recrepite.com](mailto:info@recrepite.com)  
or call 1-877-855-7070.

# Niagara Parasport Festival



## All In for EveryBODY!

*ParaSport® Ontario believes there's a sport or activity for everyBODY! And that's what the Niagara Parasport Festival was all about... a two-day community sport and recreation event during National Accessibility Week in May showcasing participation for all. The "Para-mazing" event was hosted at the spectacular Meridian Community Centre in Fonthill, Ont.*



Among incredible keynote presentations and educational workshops, a Community Expo, Activity Challenges, a Meet and Greet Reception and more, the Sport Demo Arena was a big hit for all attendees too.

With a day dedicated to Niagara's secondary students, High School Day was a unique learning platform for students, teachers and education assistants. Program

content was specifically created to open minds to new perspectives about inclusive, adaptive sport and recreation, and disability diversity.

Highly sought-after keynote speakers from Ontario's disability community – like Niagara Paralympian Jeff Tiessen, renowned TedX "body positivity" speaker Talli Osborne and "Lady of the

Lakes" Marathon Swimmer Vicki Keith – engaged, educated and motivated the student audience.

The second day of the Niagara Parasport Festival shifted to a community focus with incredible presenters and lively workshops for Niagara's disability community, and municipal, healthcare and activity leaders.

The Sport Demo Arena, facilitated by Ontario's top-tier sports leaders, was in action again with over 20 adapted sports and activities to learn about and try.

Sports like sitting volleyball, wheelchair basketball, VOLT hockey, paragolf and sledge hockey were hosted by sport experts and ambassadors. Similarly with other local offerings from Special Olympics Niagara and the South Niagara Canoe Club, to Challenger Baseball and wheelchair curling –





Photos by Ruth Wanless and Brilynn Ferguson

and not to forget celebrity therapeutic Miniature Horses Blaze and Trooper – it was eye-opening for many visitors to see how much the Niagara Region offers in the way of adapted sport and activity.

Presented by Meridian, ParaSport Ontario and the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the event challenged attendees to be difference-makers in their community, for others and themselves. Said Tiessen, the event manager: “This event was unlike any other in the province, and probably the country. There’s so much excellence in Niagara when it comes to parasport. By connecting communities in the Region and across the province through the Festival, Niagara will unquestionably stand as a model of inclusivity in sport and recreation for all, and for all of Ontario.”

Tiessen added that, “The Festival was also special because it is the lived-experiences of advocates and champions of parasport that make for an authentic journey into diversity and inclusion education. And with ‘All In For EveryBODY’ as its theme, the Niagara Parasport Festival has paved more pathways for participation for the Region’s disability community.”



# Pathways to Participation

Thank-you to the community, sponsors and participants who supported the development of the incredibly impactful Niagara Parasport Festival. And special thanks to our special guests MPP Sam Oosterhoff, Councillor Diana Huson, Niagara Region, and the Town of Pelham Mayor, Marvin Junkin.



The focus for this festival was about new ideas and new standards for participation for all. That doesn't end with this two-day event. We expect that it has left a lasting impact for engagement for years to come with respect to diversity, accessibility and inclusion in the Niagara Region.

With all that has been accomplished in Niagara with our dedicated work in the Region over the last three years, we will not only continue to build upon these adapted sport and recreation learnings and frameworks, but will now look to extend them to other regions across Ontario.

Always with the goal of increasing and supporting quality adapted sport and recreation opportunities, we also aim to remove barriers to participation with continuing education and awareness.

ParaSport® Ontario supports all members of the disability community, regardless of age or stage in life, to find, connect with, and participate in adaptive sport and recreation programs of their choice. In that, our mission remains focused on providing more pathways to participation for all, all the while connecting community stakeholders for more impact and sustainable change.

James Murphy, Executive Director  
*ParaSport® Ontario*

Presented by



# Message from the Ministry

The Niagara Parasport Festival illustrates the true power of determination and commitment. The planned activities and learnings over the two days reminded us of the importance of inclusion and participation in sport.

This event would not have been possible without the enthusiasm and dedication of many local community volunteers and provincial parasport advocates. Your efforts provided an important opportunity for local athletes, students and educators, family and friends, healthcare professionals and community leaders to participate in and experience adapted sport activities.

Your efforts are helping connect people, places, and resources in the Niagara community. I want to highlight the efforts of the Town of Pelham, Meridian Credit Union, ParaSport Ontario and the Ontario Trillium Foundation in making this festival possible.

I want to especially thank local Paralympic medalist and world-record holder, Jeff Tiessen, Managing Director of Special Projects at ParaSport Ontario, for his leadership and vision to organize the festival, along with his colleagues, Executive Director James Murphy and Events Manager Daniel Vieira.

Our government values the importance of accessible communities and parasport programs and initiatives and has provided almost \$1 million in funding to ParaSport Ontario since being elected to office.

As well, our government continues to invest in a number of inclusive and accessible community projects through the EnAbling Change Program.

On the heels of Niagara hosting a successful 2022 Canada Summer Games – which featured a number of select parasport events – we witnessed how the power of sport has the potential to unify our region and inspire greatness on a national stage.

Niagara welcomed more than 5,000 participants during last year's games, which played an important role in the recovery of our regional tourism sector. ParaSport Ontario was a key part of the events and festivities throughout the games.

With the enduring legacy of the Canada Games Park at the Walker Sports and Abilities Centre in Thorold, Niagara again played host to another important sporting event with the Niagara Parasport Festival at the Meridian Community Centre in Fonthill.

Having attended the funeral of Hon. David Onley, the 28th Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, this past January – a life-long champion of accessibility – his legacy comes to mind. As Ontario's first Lieutenant

Governor with a physical disability, David Onley adopted accessibility as the overarching theme of his mandate.

I want to conclude by citing David Onley's definition of accessibility as "that which enables people to achieve their full potential."

I firmly believe the Niagara Parasport Festival will help provide opportunities for local residents and visitors to our region alike to achieve their full potential as a community together.

Sam Oosterhoff  
*MPP for Niagara West*



# Premier Presenters



A professional performance choir composed completely of adults who live with a disability, the Momentum Choir brought the audience to its feet with O Canada.



International TedX presenter **Talli Osborne** took to the stage with her captivating message of finding body positivity with hers, one that does not conform to norms.

## Body Positivity



### Transformational Teaching

World-renowned marathon swimmer **Vicki Keith** shared incredible life experiences and her progressive approach to leadership with respect, responsibility and relationships.



### BEYOND THE STATUS QUO

With the purpose of moving minds past the status quo, **Donna Herrington** delivered a powerful message of breaking through the barriers of misunderstanding and disengagement.

## Enlightened Ableism

Brock Professor and founder of SNAP (Supporting Neurodiversity through Adaptive Programming), **Dr. Maureen Connolly** spoke candidly about ableism and program participant behaviour challenges and suggestions.



## COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS

Four-time Paralympian and gold and silver medalist **Darda Sales, PhD**, enthusiastically discussed expectations for inclusive community programming and participation.

## Activities for Seniors

Niagara Region's **Jeannette Beauregard** and **Melissa Murray** offered experiences related to keeping seniors moving through physical and recreational activity at home and in the community.



## ADAPTED YOGA

Every body is different in shape and ability. **Robynn Nierop** of Imagine Yoga and Wellness demonstrated how to work with your body, not against it, with adapted yoga practice.



## Adapted Dance

**Elisha MacMillan**, founder of Rhythm is for Everyone, uses rhythm and movement to improve physical and emotional well-being. Her workshop was a drum and dance experience that met diverse needs.



*Experts in finding their own pathways to participation in adapted sport, four renowned Niagara para-athletes shared their*

*parasport journeys, addressing trials, tribulations and those who were instrumental in getting them there, and why.*

## Para-Athlete Panel

**Amber Briar**, a Brock University Kinesiology grad, has always been active in multiple sports but her chosen one is fencing... para-fencing, also known as wheelchair fencing. She returned from a competition in Brazil

earlier this year with a bronze medal. She's a member of Brock's Center for Adaptive Physical Activity advisory committee and always a great advocate for adaptive physical activity and sports.

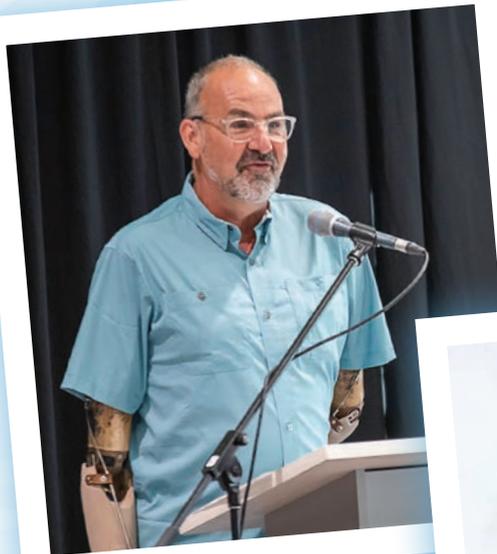
St. Catharines's **Tess Trojan** is a two-time world golf champion (2015 and 2019 Special Olympics World Games). A Special Olympics athlete for 22 years, she's played basketball, bowled and speed skated too. She's an inductee in her High School's Athlete Wall of Fame – the first athlete with an intellectual disability to be inducted. A Niagara College grad, she's on Brock University's Centre for Adaptive Physical Activity advisory committee and was a member of the Niagara 2022 Canada Games Accessibility Committee.

**Julian Caverley** is a long-time athlete with the Brock Niagara Penguins parasport club in basketball, swimming and most notably boccia, in which he's a provincial bronze medalist. And now, he's a



# Disability Literacy 101

Inclusion champions **Jeff Tiessen** (3x Paralympian, publisher and author) and Variety Ontario's Director of Access and Awareness, **Archie Allison**, shared their lived-experiences to take participants on an authentic journey into diversity and inclusion education.



competitive sledge hockey player as well in the Niagara Sledge Hockey League. The Niagara College student loves to educate and motivate other post-secondary students and give back to his community.

**Chris Garner** was first introduced to adaptive sports as part of his rehabilitation after the amputation of his leg. A lifelong musician, sports was new territory for him! But he found success in sledge hockey, sitting volleyball, and then paragolf. In the fall of 2022, he returned from a U.S. tournament as the Men's Overall Adaptive World Champion in Long Drive. His goal is to compete on the World Tour.

*From left to right, Amber Briar, Tess Trojan, Julian Caverley, Chris Garner with Tracy Schmitt.*



# Community Impact Awards

*ParaSport Ontario's Community Impact Award is presented to individuals, organizations and corporations. It recognizes the valuable contributions made to individuals with disabilities and the disability community. Recipients embody the spirit of diversity and inclusivity with respect to ensuring pathways to participation in sport, recreation and physical activity for persons with disabilities.*

## Jim and Loretta Davis

This Niagara Falls couple's untiring work in Niagara across multiple sports for participants and athletes with disabilities is remarkable. Their commitment to ensuring that there are opportunities for adapted sport for anyone who wants to play is non-stop. Even through the pandemic, they kept their Brock Niagara Penguins athletes connected with a number of virtual nights every week. They organize, coach, play and promote. And they're passionate. They're proud ParaSport Ontario Ambassadors on top of that.



## Angelo Angelopoulos

Affectionately known as the "Zamboni guy", Grimsby Peach King Centre staffer Angelo Angelopoulos was as much of a teammate in the Niagara Sledge Hockey League as anyone. Always ahead of everyone else in getting sledges ready to go on the ice as soon as he was off of it, he was ready to lift, carry, push, or pull whatever and whomever necessary. So helpful, so supportive, and such a friend of the league even for just an hour every Monday night... making a huge impact on the sledge hockey community.



## Ridley College

The Niagara Sledge Hockey League (NSHL) has played regular season games in five different municipalities, but no rink is as much the hub and the home for players as Ridley College. With Jay Tredway, the school's assistant headmaster, championing inclusion all the way, this is what he had to say that meant a great deal to NSHL players: "Ridley College strives to be the most active school in the nation and we are so pleased to be part of the Niagara Sledge Hockey League and so incredibly proud to be the home for the St. Catharines team. Ridley College is your home. Welcome home."

## Meridian Credit Union

Meridian is Ontario's largest credit union, and second largest in Canada. That's no surprise when you see arenas and performing centres that include Meridian in their names. But what you might not see are the 381 community organizations and non-profit partners that Meridian employees supported last year. And you may not see the financial support that they provide to initiatives like the Niagara Sledge Hockey League. And you might not see their chief operating officer personally presenting a para athlete with his or her own piece of adaptive sport equipment as part of the Meridian Play to Podium Fund. Meridian is impacting communities on many levels and ParaSport Ontario is proud to be one of its partners.



## Wendy Foote

Hockey has been a passion of Wendy's since she was a child, spending Saturday nights on her grandfather's knee watching the Toronto Maple Leafs. When she came across an advertisement for a startup sledge hockey league, she immediately felt that same passion. Her support of the Niagara Sledge Hockey League from day one was instrumental in its launch. It needed players – non-disabled too – to build teams and Wendy delivered by introducing her entire women's hockey team to the new league to give sledge a try. And entering Season III, Wendy and some of her team remain as valued players, teammates and leaders.



# Sports Demo Arena

## Adapted Games

Presented by Inclusive Communities Canada and Variety Ontario  
[inclusivecommunitiescanada.org](http://inclusivecommunitiescanada.org)  
[varietyontario.ca](http://varietyontario.ca)

## Athletics

Presented by Niagara Olympic Club  
[niagaraolympic.ca](http://niagaraolympic.ca)

## Boccia

Presented by Brock Niagara Penguins  
[brocku.ca/niagara-penguins](http://brocku.ca/niagara-penguins)

## Canoe/Kayak

Presented by South Niagara Canoe Club  
[sncc.ca](http://sncc.ca)

## Challenger Baseball

Presented by Niagara Children's Centre  
[niagarachildrenscentre.com](http://niagarachildrenscentre.com)

## Disc Golf

Presented by PDGA Women's Committee  
[pdga.com](http://pdga.com)

## Handcycling

Presented by Ontario Cycling  
[ontariocycling.org](http://ontariocycling.org)

## Ice Sledge Hockey

Presented by ParaSport Ontario  
[parasportontario.ca](http://parasportontario.ca)

## Mixed Ability Rugby

Presented by Abilities Centre  
[abilitiescentre.org](http://abilitiescentre.org)

## ParaGolf

Presented by ParaGolf Ontario  
[paragolfontario.ca](http://paragolfontario.ca)

## Roller Sledge Hockey

Presented by ParaSport Ontario  
[parasportontario.ca](http://parasportontario.ca)

## Community Expo

### Abilities Centre

[abilitiescentre.org](http://abilitiescentre.org)

### Accenture

[accenture.com](http://accenture.com)

### Alectra

[alectrautilities.com](http://alectrautilities.com)

### Camp Maple Leaf

[campmapleleaf.ca](http://campmapleleaf.ca)

### Elections Canada

[elections.ca](http://elections.ca)

### HandiCup

[handihelp.ca](http://handihelp.ca)

### Hollister

[hollister.ca](http://hollister.ca)

### Home Care Supplies

[tcare.ca](http://tcare.ca)

### Inclusive Workplace & Supply Council of Canada

[iwsc.ca](http://iwsc.ca)



### **Sitting Volleyball**

Presented by Ontario Volleyball Association  
[ontariovolleyball.org](http://ontariovolleyball.org)

### **SNAP**

Presented by Supporting Neurodiversity through Adaptive Programming  
[brocku.ca/applied-health-sciences/kinesiology/snap](http://brocku.ca/applied-health-sciences/kinesiology/snap)

### **Special Olympics Sports**

Presented by Special Olympics Ontario  
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# Accessing Niagara Wonders

Submitted by  
Tourism Partnership Niagara

*Niagara is a breathtaking destination that captivates travelers from around the world with its awe-inspiring natural beauty.*

Niagara Falls offers numerous accessible attractions and activities that ensure everyone can enjoy this remarkable destination. Here are some accessible activities for your next Niagara vacation.

**Marvel at the Falls:** Begin your adventure by witnessing the incredible power and beauty of Niagara Falls. The Niagara Parkway offers accessible pathways and breathtaking views of the falls. Soak in the scenery and feel the mist on your face. For an up-close experience, consider embarking on the Niagara City Cruises boat tour, which provides wheelchair-accessible boarding and an unforgettable ride to the base of the falls.

**Discover Niagara-on-the-Lake:** Take a short drive from Niagara Falls to the charming town of Niagara-on-the-Lake. Known for its historic sites and vineyards, this quaint town offers accessible attractions such as the Fort George National Historic Site. Explore the well-preserved fort and immerse yourself in Canadian history. Additionally, enjoy traversing the picturesque streets of classic Old Town Niagara-on-

the-Lake, lined with boutique shops, galleries, and accessible eateries.

**Explore the Niagara Parks:** Niagara Parks is committed to providing inclusive experiences for all visitors. Journey Behind the Falls offers an accessible observation deck where you can witness the falls from a unique perspective. The Floral Showhouse, Butterfly Conservatory, and the Botanical Gardens are also accessible and offer beautiful natural displays to enjoy. Don't miss the accessible White Water Walk, a boardwalk that provides stunning views of the Niagara River rapids.

**Accessible Wine Tasting:** Niagara is renowned for its vineyards and wineries. Several wineries in the region offer accessible facilities and tours. Plan a visit to wineries like Peller Estates, Inniskillin, or Château des Charmes, where you can savour award-winning wines and enjoy guided tours with accommodations for guests with physical disabilities.



Photo by spirithegobarnet

**Fallsview Casino Resort Entertainment:** This vibrant venue offers accessible entrances, ramps, elevators, and seating arrangements. You can enjoy thrilling casino games, live performances, and a variety of dining options.

**Accessible Transportation:** To navigate around Niagara Falls with ease, WEGO bus service offers wheelchair-accessible vehicles and designated stops at major attractions. Additionally, accessible taxis and private transportation services are available for a more personalized experience.

From witnessing the power of the falls to exploring historic sites, enjoying wine tastings, and indulging in entertainment, there is something for everyone. With a commitment to inclusivity, Niagara warmly welcomes all visitors.

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a vibrant floral dress, is walking through a vineyard. She is smiling and looking back over her shoulder. The vineyard rows stretch into the distance under a clear sky.

# Niagara

*Where The*

**SCENERY**

*Becomes The*

**SCENE**

A woman with long dark hair, wearing sunglasses, a denim jacket, and a yellow dress, is looking up and to the side. She is standing outdoors with a blue sky and clouds in the background.

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# Meridian Credit Union

*Meridian is Ontario's largest credit union, and second largest in Canada. With more than 75 years of banking history, Meridian boasts 89 branches and 15 Business Banking Centres across Ontario.*

With a commitment to those communities in the form of wealth and health, Meridian employees supported 381 community organizations and not-for-profit partners through volunteering, donating and fundraising activities in 2022. The financial institution is also committed to growth in an adaptive culture at Meridian, one that embeds diversity, equity and inclusion organically into its cultural core.

ParaSport® Ontario was pleased to be one of those partner organizations in 2022 and again in 2023 with Meridian's support of the Niagara Parasport Festival as its presenting corporate sponsor.

Tyler Sanders, Senior Manager of Credit Card Operations and Compliance at Meridian, and an advocate for accessibility, says community partnerships like this have tremendous value.

"It's opportunities like the Festival where we can be involved in supporting accessibility in the community for our Members and showcase active living and health which is a perfect synergy for us," says Sanders. "We've always had a focus on the health of our employees and Members, but that extends to the health of our community partners as well."

Community involvement has always been a thread in the fabric of how this corporation does business. "That's why social impact in the communities in which we work is so important to Meridian," Sanders emphasizes, adding that "Meridian's support of the Festival is a great extension of our involvement in the Canada Summer Games in Niagara in 2022."

From a disability perspective, Sanders is part of Meridian's internal M-Access initiative which is primarily focused on accessibility – financial and physical at the branch level. "We're an engaged group with our own experiences. We give a voice to ways that we can improve accessibility within the organization, conceptually and practically, and provide education to our employees as well."

Sanders's involvement in M-Access is a product, in part, of his own lived-experience. His son uses a wheelchair for mobility and lives with multiple disabilities. From that perspective, he's proud that the group works from the position of equity. "Equity is our platform for inclusion, and we don't over-sensationalize that," he affirms.

The Sanders family is very involved in the Niagara parasport community, with an ongoing relationship with the Niagara Children's Centre. Sanders's son plays boccia with the Brock Niagara Penguins and VOLT hockey, a variation of the sport for youth with limited mobility, offered by the Centre. His wife, Michelle Sanders, runs the local Challenger Baseball program and serves as chair of the City of St. Catharines's Accessibility Committee.

## Community Impact Award

**For its support of accessibility and inclusion across Ontario for persons with disabilities, ParaSport® Ontario was pleased to present Meridian with a 2023 Community Impact Award. The award recognizes the valuable and meaningful contributions made to the disability community. Recipients embody the spirit of diversity and inclusivity with respect to ensuring pathways to participation in sport, recreation and physical activity for persons with disabilities.**



# Garage Bond

Interview By Jeff Tiessen

*In just two short years, para fencer Amber Briar has thrust herself from the confines of her garage training to competition on the world stage. With her father David as her coach and training partner, the dad-daughter duo has parlayed their passion for the sport into a play for a spot on Canada's Paralympic Team next year. Here's what the 22-year-old Brock University Kinesiology graduate from Mississauga, Ont., had to share about her parasport pathway.*

Photos by Bilynn Ferguson

**PO:** *What do you love most about para fencing?*

**AMBER:** I love the physical aspect of the sport and the mechanics, but it's such a mental game too. I love the strategy part. You have to adapt to what your opponent is doing, and what you are doing, constantly and really quickly.

**PO:** *In the parasport world, particularly here in Canada, para fencing is a fringe sport. So, why para fencing for you?*

**AMBER:** I come from a fencing family. For whatever reason, my mom encouraged my brother and sister and me, and my dad, to get into fencing.

We've fenced since we were little kids, but we were into all kinds of other sports too. My brother was on the national team at age 16. All of us kids fenced at university on the varsity teams, me with the Brock Badgers. My dad never fenced until we started, and he's an official now.

**PO:** *Parent coaches at the high-performance level aren't unheard of, but it's not that common either. How did your dad come to be your coach?*

**AMBER:** Mother of necessity. There isn't anybody else. Para fencing just isn't as developed in Canada as it is in other countries. Four of us recently competed at the Para Fencing World Cup in Poland. But we've only had a

women's team for the last couple of months because you need three fencers to make a team. Canada doesn't have a men's team.

Because we are so separated geographically, we train separately. And we train with no opponent which is so tough. It's tricky. One of the pioneers in our sport, Sylvie Morel from Québec, is retiring because she just doesn't have anyone to compete against or coach her.

As a student, I just can't go to train in other parts of the country during the school year. Even getting more people involved doesn't equal more training with fellow para fencers. It's a money thing too. I can't afford

# for Father-Daughter Fencers

a coach. I'm lucky that my dad is a pretty good fencer so he's my training partner too. He really took to it. He has a real passion for it. He's always been eager to learn more about the sport and has a good sense of how to para fence. We have a frame in our garage and we train together every morning when I'm home from school.

**PO:** *Father-daughter coach-athlete and training partners. Any challenges that come with that?*

**AMBER:** More positives than challenges actually. Sure, we disagree sometimes, but we leave it in the garage. A positive thing is that he knows me so well and knows when I'm not really receptive to coaching comments, especially right after I lose a bout. He has more realistic movements than typical able-bodied fencers which really helps me for skill development. He knows my strengths and weaknesses and coaches to those. It's been a real collaborative process between the two of us.

**PO:** *Your training must benefit from being part of Brock University's Varsity Fencing Team during the school year?*

**AMBER:** Of course. But against my teammates – able-bodied fencers sitting in the frame – I'm winning every bout. I should not be winning every bout. I know it's a pessimistic way of looking at it, but I'm not being challenged to help me improve.

**PO:** *Besides the obvious of para fencers competing from a stationary frame, are there differences from typical, or able-bodied, fencing?*

**AMBER:** Yes. One of the biggest to me is that typical fencers have a little bit of time to slow down and think during the bout. Para fencers don't have the walk-back time to the en garde line. Everything is happening so fast in our bouts. After a point, it's game-on right away. Everything happens so fast.

The movements are different for para fencers too. Able-bodied fencers are always moving their feet. For us, it's all about upper body movement. That's something I didn't appreciate about para fencing before I started competing. There is so much force on the metal frame.

**PO:** *You began fencing as a typical "stand-up" fencer right?*

**AMBER:** I did. Most of my life I was a typical fencer. But with my cerebral palsy I could never get to the level I wanted to in able-bodied fencing, in big part because of my balance problem. I can't move fast enough or push hard enough. My disability came with certain limitations. And I didn't know para fencing existed for the longest time.

**PO:** *So, how did you transition to para fencing?*

**AMBER:** I was at an international training camp in Stratford [Ontario] when I was a kid. I was 14. My parents

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*"In therapy, I was told that I was "awesome" but it didn't translate to school or the playground. I struggled with that. Being supportive is important, of course, but it seemed like I was supported by default regardless of what I did."*

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never signed us kids up to win anything. It was all about learning and participation and having fun. Just trying our best and gaining something from it.

We were practicing footwork one morning, and because of my disability I can't do the footwork properly. I can't put my left foot down like I'm supposed to. The coach just did not understand. She was trying to hold my foot down and telling me that I'll never be a good fencer if I can't keep my left foot down.

I was sobbing in front of 100 people. I kept saying "I can't do it. I can't do it. I can't physically do it." Weird coincidence though. The national coach for wheelchair fencing at the time was at this camp and approached me. He suggested that I try para fencing. I was interested but it was a big commitment for me because training was in Québec. I didn't have the equipment either.

It wasn't until after graduating high school, when I took a year off before university, that I started wheelchair fencing. I went to a Parapan Am Zone competition in Saskatchewan. My dad started learning from other coaches. I was able to get a chair, the fencing

frame. I paused again when I started university. And then Covid. So, really, I've just gotten back into it. I'm glad though that I approached the sport on my own terms and pace.

**PO:** *Being born with a disability, and therapy being a regular part of your life when you were younger, were other parasport opportunities presented to you?*

**AMBER:** I grew up going to physiotherapy. It was very positive, particularly after a surgery when I was 16, for functionality and muscle strength and mobility. Never did anyone suggest parasport as an opportunity for me.

But there was something else that wasn't very helpful as well. I do a lot of volunteer work now and something that I make sure I don't do is what I experienced in therapy over and over. I'd go to these appointments and see people I knew since I was three years old and I'd always come out of the appointments feeling really chuffed and confident because everyone was constantly saying "Great job, Amber! Well done, Amber!"

But in school, in gym class, I couldn't do a "great job." It was confusing.

In therapy, I was told that I was "awesome" but it didn't translate to school or the playground. I struggled with that. Being supportive is important, of course, but it seemed like I was supported by default regardless of what I did. In the classic beanbag-toss game I was always told "good job" whether I sank it in the hole or not. Life's not like that though. It could have been encouraging in a different way.

**PO:** *Did you find that this attitude prevailed in the university environment as well?*

**AMBER:** Sometimes. I remember a class activity calling for us to run a 5K. But there was no way I could do a 5K. I could really hurt myself. So, it was suggested to me to walk it. So I did. But it was hard for me as my friends, with good intentions, ran by me saying "Good job, Amber!" It made me feel even more different.

**PO:** *What was the learning experience like in your program? Was it inclusive of the disability community?*

**AMBER:** So much of the conversation in my kinesiology program was focused on athletes from an



able-bodied perspective. I found myself frustrated that future activity professionals were not learning about people with disabilities, especially those who might work in a rehab environment.

There's definitely a scenario in the school system of not understanding what accommodation for me really meant. Which at times made me question myself and if I was in the right place, studying the right things... when it's not being talked about and there aren't others like me in the program.

I always made a point of introducing myself personally to the professors, explaining that I have CP and what that meant for what I need. But for those who don't have experience with disability, personally or in their friend or family circles, a lot of important issues go over their heads. And we as people with disabilities are in a tough spot when we bring attention to it. We don't want to sound like we're complainers.

So, that's the focus of my upcoming Masters work in Health and Science Rehabilitation at Western, where I'll be researching cerebral palsy and looking at better representation of the disability community.

**PO:** *Let's get back to sports. You were active as a kid in all kinds of sports. What's your advice for young adults for getting started to be more physically active?*

**AMBER:** Starting any sport is generally quite intimidating when you know that you can't do things like a typical person. You walk into a workout class and you're doing things differently, or can't do something, and you can see people wondering why. I made the decision about not letting myself feel embarrassed about this. Honestly, I still get very nervous about doing new physical things. I keep reminding myself that this is for me, and it is going to benefit me. You can always decide not to return. But accept that you're going to do movement differently.

It's always good to introduce yourself to the instructor and share your situation. You owe it to yourself to at least try. Maybe you need to force yourself first, but give yourself some leniency, and build up. And as time goes on, you make friends and it becomes much easier. Or, start with something simple, like going for a walk.

There is no one single proper way to do anything in life. Even people with

the same disability do things differently. Your best, is always your own best. It doesn't have to be the same as anyone else's.

**PO:** *Back to para fencing. What are your hopes for yourself and for the sport?*

**AMBER:** As we get closer to the Paralympics in 2024 there are a number of competitions coming up, an important one for me in Italy in October. I'd love to go to every competition, but financially and as a student I have to pick and choose.

I'm trying to be realistic. Many fencers who I compete against are training full-time and have been doing it for a decade. I'm quite new to the high-performance side of the sport. You live and learn. I don't want to put pressure on myself and not enjoy it. I'm trying. Let's see what happens. I'm young and I have time.

As for the sport itself, it's a challenge to find training opportunities. I've seen what other countries are doing, and it saddens me that we don't have the same opportunities for para fencers here in Canada. I hope that changes.



# Magic of a Different Variety

By Jeff Tiessen

*Perched atop Scarborough's most western bluff, Variety Village is a sprawling facility like no other in the entire world. Beyond its bricks and mortar, what's found inside its doors is a physical space that exemplifies accessibility and a core community of staff and volunteers that exudes inclusivity.*

Variety Ontario is a charity, part of Variety International, a global agency. Variety Village is the flagship facility that realizes the mission of Variety Ontario, which is, supporting kids with disabilities by providing them with access to adapted sports and physical activities.

Variety Ontario is unique amongst all of the Variety chapters worldwide

in that no other country has a year-round, multi-purpose facility like Variety Village. But again, it's more than the building. It's about its programming and sport leaders and integrated teams and the expertise to introduce kids of any ability to a plethora of adapted sports.

Variety CEO Karen Stintz describes "the Village" as a magical place. "It's one place where kids with disabilities feel included and accepted. We break down the barriers for these kids so they can access sport and physical fitness. It's not about their limitations here; it's about how we can enable and empower them. Variety Village is where the charity's mission comes to life."

And now, Variety Village is committed to spreading that magic to other communities throughout Ontario. With a lens on bringing a culture shift around alleviating barriers to other facilities across Ontario, Variety is doing that with its four-plus decades

of experience and learnings in hand.

A tremendous amount of that expertise resides with Archie Allison, the facility's Director of Access and Awareness and Variety staffer for the better part of those four decades. "It's a 'pathways to participation' ideology," he shares. "It's about people with disabilities seeing people who look like them and feeling that they can be part of something. For sports leaders and educators it's discovering the thought process around what makes something accessible and inclusive and how they can be better at it."

"We are fortunate to have a core management team that has been at Variety Village for decades and has lived this culture," Stintz notes. "It provides us with such a strong foundation and a continuity of the culture we want to live here. Families don't come here because it's a shiny place; they come because of our people."

Sharing the magic province-wide is happening, essentially, through

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1. IC user survey (Countires; US, UK, DE, ML, FR, IT), Jan 2016 (n=2942)

2. Clean Intermittent Urethral Catheterization in Adults – Canadian Best Practice Recommendations for Nurses. Developed by Nurses Specialized in Wound, ostomy and Continence Canada, Canadian Nurse Continence Advisors, Urology Nurses of Canada, and Infection Prevention and Control. 1st Ed. 2020.

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two programs. Variety pioneered a VOLT hockey program with Variety players representing Canada's first team. It's a game played by kids with levels of disability that would generally preclude participation in other adapted forms of the sport, utilizing a unique sport-specific motorized chair designed and manufactured in Denmark. Expansion plans include 10 other cities by year's end.

Adding locations involves community engagement and onboarding coaches. Stintz emphasizes however, that their support goes beyond new teams in places like Thunder Bay, Hamilton, Peterborough, Niagara, Barrie, and Brampton. "We're building champions in these cities because now families can see their kids engaged and can start advocating for more opportunities for them."

The second program is what Allison refers to as Camp Expansion. "We're creating an opportunity for kids who can't come to Variety for camps so they too can have the camp experience at one of their choosing," he says. Partnering with organizations like Boys and Girls Club, Camp Awakening and Camp MapleLeaf for example, Variety supports kids with disabilities outside of the Greater Toronto Area by subsidizing their camp fees. "Two different programs and models," he adds. "We're breaking ground with VOLT hockey and working with existing programs for

the camp experience."

Adds Stintz, "we learned a lot in the last five years with our hockey program. Initially, we went into a community with the program infrastructure and hoped to see the program grow organically. But we found that without the coaching and wrap-around support for the program, it became more of a TRY IT day and lacked the engagement that we had hoped for it. Now our introductions in new communities are more intentional. Now we are providing the chairs, coaching manuals, coaching support, and opportunities for regional tournament play. Now we are getting buy-in."

Variety's community development model involves multiple stakeholders in those regions such as colleges and universities, sport organizations and the municipalities. "Much of what I do is bring what we have learned in Scarborough to other cities," offers Allison. "I'm training staff. They want to know more and do more. They might already have some existing adaptive programs but what often lacks is collaboration and connection with one another. So, it's about bringing people together, listening for what they need and supporting them with resources and ideas."

Stintz underscores the fact that Variety Village's rich repository of lived-experience stems from helping people with a wide range of disabilities and abilities everyday.

"And we're helping community facilities and camps that have a commitment to inclusion and accessibility but just don't have the opportunities to understand how to break down the barriers," she explains. "The intention is there, and they want to be able to deliver on their commitment, but they just don't have the experience. That's where we can help, because we do have the experience. Archie [Allison] will provide real, tangible experiences to help remove their trepidation."

It's an exciting time for Variety. Coupled with VOLT hockey and camp expansion designs, there is much more experiential capital that Variety has to share. Legendary Variety Flames swim coach Vicki Keith, best known for her world-record-setting marathon swims across the Great Lakes and now for her Transformational Coaching program, has her sights set on expanding Variety's swim program province-wide as well. Allison is doing incredible work with adapted baseball – Challenger Baseball. Adapted golf is a big hit at the Village and growing in popularity too.

So much magic to spare. And if it means that there is a new opportunity to play and belong and have fun and make friends for kids with disabilities, where before there was none, Variety is there to share. Visit [varietyontario.ca](http://varietyontario.ca) to learn more.



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# FITNESS FORWARD

## Professional Help from a Personal Trainer

By Jeff Tiessen

*Peter Morel is fully aware that not everyone has fitness goals. He knows that not all programs work for everyone. Same with fitness equipment. But he also knows how to design an adaptive exercise solution for anyone.*

Morel is founder and co-owner of Top Shape Fitness Inc. which is an Ottawa-based gym by the same name. His company also offers a slate of in-person and virtual personal training. Add to that the latest offering of train-the-trainer instructional courses.

Born with spina bifida, which typically results in different forms of paralysis, Morel has been a wheelchair user for most of his adult life. He's an award-winning fitness expert and recognized as one of the best adaptive exercise specialists in the world.

He translated his lived-experience in the disability community and his passion for fitness into a 25-year career as a certified personal trainer, consultant and educator. That's how he knows that one approach doesn't work for all people. And that's what motivates him to create modified approaches to fitness for his clients and colleagues who need adaptations or instruction about alternative fitness solutions, respectively.

In his early years in the profession, Morel was enlisted to research fitness facilities throughout the City of Ottawa for accessibility. "Gyms were inaccessible," he remembers unconditionally. "There were physical and attitudinal barriers. The biggest issue was that these facilities didn't know how to work with someone with a disability. That's what propelled me to do the pioneering work that I first did in the industry... bringing adaptive personal training to people with disabilities in their own homes.

Today, his course – TopShape Adaptive Fitness Certification – teaches fitness professionals to perform proper evaluations on clients across a wide variety of disabilities. With over 1,000 certifications to his credit, Morel says that his workshops and seminars manage misconceptions that trainers have about working with clients with disabilities.

"They often believe that everything needs to change for a client with adaptive needs," he notes. "That's not true. At the core, training programs are the same as for anyone else; they just need modifications to accommodate specific disabilities. I teach them about the questions they need to ask and how to design a program accordingly. Simply, it's about modifying a general fitness program to be an adaptive fitness program."

His work in the industry is about building champions too... encouraging trainers to look for people with adaptive needs. "I want them to utilize their new tools and confidence. I want them to pitch facility owners to include more adaptive equipment on the gym floor. I help remove their fears."

But Morel acknowledges that there still is not a lot of promotion to the disability community from fitness facilities, and that lends to fears in the disability community about what's behind those gym doors.

Start with a phone call to the facility he advises. "Make that first contact. Explain your unique circumstance. Find out if the gym is accessible, and if someone on staff has knowledge and experience in adaptive fitness and training."

Morel emphasizes the importance of asking for a tour of the facility to see if it's a welcoming environment. "Many facilities believe they are accessible but they're not. But there's tons of equipment in a gym that wheelchair users and others with disabilities can use, if they know how to use it."

An advocate of physical activity for all the standard reasons

of course, Morel adds a less topical health factor that he knows well from experiences with rehabilitation and physiotherapy.

"Nothing stays still," he states firmly. "You either progress or you regress. Nothing stays static. You get to a level of physical health after physiotherapy but if you don't do anything after that you begin to regress. If you're not walking or weight training for example, your body begins to regress toward injury mode. You need to keep progressing with exercise to keep range of motion, ligaments supple, and muscles strong. The choice is up to you. Which way do you want to go?"

Morel stresses that it's important for clients with disabilities to share specifics about their disability, like core strength, balance, fatigue issues, as examples. Personal trainers draw from a good foundational knowledge of anatomy.

"It's the disability that we're working with or around," Morel shares. "Of course, there's going to be some





*“Nothing stays still. You either progress or you regress. Nothing stays static... The choice is up to you. Which way do you want to go?”*

experimentation but be clear on what you need from us. Trainers know their equipment; it's just a matter of transitioning that to someone with a mobility or functional disability in a gym or in a home-based adaptive program. My job is to take the guesswork out of it so your workouts are more efficient and you're reaching your goals. A personal trainer is just another specialist to add to your team of healthcare professionals.”

Whether you are just looking to lose a little weight or get in better shape for your sporting endeavours, personal trainers can create a practical training solution, customized to meet your individual needs. Maybe it's time to call Morel!

## MORE ON MOREL

Certifications include American Council on Exercise, Canadian Society of Exercise Physiology, Ontario Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences, YM-YWCA of Canada, Master Course Conductor for Hockey Canada. He is a Certified Open Water Diver (PADI) and was instrumental in starting an adaptive rowing program with the Ottawa Rowing Club and was a member of Canada's National Adapted Rowing Team. He was a board member for Sledge Hockey of Canada, and is a member of the City of Ottawa's Accessibility Advisory Committee. He's also a consultant for Soldier On, helping disabled veterans return to fitness programs and adapted sports. Visit [topshapeinc.com](http://topshapeinc.com) to contact Peter Morel.



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# Selling Accessible FITNESS

*Paul Gabay sells fitness equipment. He also sells accessibility and inclusion. His company, Resolution Fitness, offers expert industry advice and professional fitness equipment for commercial and home settings. In addition to traditional health club machines, Resolution Fitness specializes in adaptive and wheelchair accessible fitness products.*



From his 20+ years of experience in the industry, Gabay understands why there aren't more people with disabilities working out in community fitness facilities and workplace or condominium gyms. He stresses that the industry needs to look beyond what the leading popular gyms are doing to make a space inclusive. "It's not the gold standard when it comes to accessibility," he says.

"What I've learned over the years is that people with disabilities are not represented well in gyms, and because of that, they're not being considered by fitness professionals," he observes. "It's a negative feedback loop."

Gabay explains that it's a matter of degrees of separation. Fitness professionals with no connection to the disability community are not thinking about the disability community. "If facility managers were more aware that there is gym equipment – universal and adaptive – for people with disabilities then they would understand the business case for making their spaces accessible."

His job is to sell equipment to facilities, but at the same time Gabay acknowledges that over-packing equipment in gyms lessens accessibility by limiting access to machines by wheelchair users, for example. But accessibility isn't just limited to disabled members. "It makes for better workout space for everybody," he adds. "I'm working to inspire decision-makers to pay more attention to accessibility on a number of fronts."

And so begs the question: how does he do that? How can that sensibility be achieved? "The easy answer is money," he asserts, "that, being a reason to take action. Many believe that they're doing a good job with no idea of the potential customer base they're excluding."

Education is important too. "Many fitness facility owners design their

gyms in their own able-bodied image," he notes. "There really aren't many gold standard examples or models to build on outside of the rehabilitation space."

Gabay says that inclusion education needs to start in school. Students who are preparing to work in the health and fitness industry need to be thinking about all populations and how to serve them by exploring new approaches.

Also important says Gabay, is the disability community's role in pushing for full access to gyms. "I don't have a disability, so I can't speak for the community, but the community needs to put pressure on their local facilities. Show up at your local gym. Ask for a tour from the manager. Look at everything... the weightroom, the washrooms, doorways. Share your goals with them. Ask them what they can do for you. If the equipment that you're looking for isn't there, ask them why not? I know that that's not something everybody wants to do. But it's a level of discomfort that needs to be put on the facility."

And his inspiration for taking up the accessibility cause? "When I started selling fitness equipment my approach was addressing gaps and filling the gaps. I went to trade shows and flipped through catalogs to find unique products, instead of pitching one brand of treadmill over another brand of treadmill."

Gabay found a lot of equipment that is universally accessible for everyone, not just people with disabilities. In this space he could differentiate himself in the sales world, and decided to fill the niche of universal and specialized equipment.

"I could try to sell a standard elliptical machine to a condo owner, or I could try to sell them something that works for everyone in the building. A machine made with a seat that can be removed for a wheelchair user to access it. It made perfect sense to me. For sure, someone in that condo building was a wheelchair user who might want to use the condo's gym. I believe I'm starting to fill the gaps."

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# Adaptive FITNESS

## Understanding Its Portability

By Jess Silver  
*Flex for Access*

*For many who have an interest in sport, there is an equal interest in understanding what athletes do to prepare. But before anyone engages in an adaptive fitness program, it's important to understand what adaptive fitness means. This goes for the seasoned athlete and the aspiring athlete, and their coach or personal trainer too.*

Adaptive fitness means learning about the participant's disability and modifying a fitness program according to that individual's unique functional and mobility needs.

In keeping with the idea that a training regimen looks different for everyone, it is also crucial to recognize that many exercises can be performed anywhere, with or without complex state-of-the-art fitness equipment. This is very important for individuals with disabilities because it accounts for barriers related to, for example, infrastructural accessibility and space considerations both at home and within facilities... especially for those who use mobility devices like wheelchairs and walkers.

The portability of adaptive fitness also ensures that the cost of pursuing it isn't as evident as an obstacle for individuals who encounter financial barriers.



What is meant by portability of practice? It refers to exercises that can be accessed from a facility or online or with an app – resources which make learning about adaptive fitness easier.

Some of these resources can be found on ParaSport® Ontario's Resource Hub (<https://parasportontario.ca>) and through advisory experts, like myself. Or, look to other adaptive fitness information and consulting sources such as Flex for Access for example, which features the *Adapt to Empower eBook* (@flexforaccess; [www.flexforaccess.ca](http://www.flexforaccess.ca)). There are also plenty of adaptive fitness influencers on Instagram. Check out Ben of Adapt to Perform (@adaptperform) where you'll find many exercise variations and resources for those with a mobility disability.

Where to start? Preparation regimens often consist of mindfulness and mental resilience techniques for enhanced relaxation and focus. Programs include nutrition, training and recovery. While there are standard or recommended practices like the one that emphasizes that a balanced fitness program consists of mobility, strength and conditioning exercises, and nutritional attention, it's important to remember that each athlete's journey to better health, or high performance, is unique. Sleep is import-

ant too. What cannot be forgotten is that engaging in adaptive fitness is essential for every parasport athlete, whether it's for sport or recreation.

An important element to the success of any program is one in which the strength and conditioning coach or trainer understands and works with the limitations associated with specific disabilities and how the disability impacts individuals specifically. And with that, working toward not limiting an individual because of these factors.

An example of this might look like this for someone with cerebral palsy: working on strengthening underactive muscles like the glutes in the lower body, which stabilize the hips and legs, or working on keeping tight muscles like the hamstrings loose, with resistance band exercises like leg extensions for the glutes and leg curls for the hamstrings.

Performing isometric stretches and exercises, like side steps, squats or banded leg/hip openers, that encourage leg flexibility while sitting or standing are important. Exercises that are conditioning-focused like wheelchair sprints or seated jumping jacks or rowing, for example, are fundamental to the performance of a wheelchair track athlete.

It's also helpful for adaptive athletes to connect with others who are

looking to be active, or are already active, in adaptive fitness. Sharing experiences is motivating. Exploring questions and discussing barriers together helps to educate and design pathways to improve access to programming. Connection builds and reinforces community.

As it currently stands, individuals with disabilities find it challenging to source resources and programs, and most parasport clubs struggle with member retention. Connection to industry experts and increasing educational opportunities for exposure to, and engagement with, adaptive fitness will help lead to more informed participants who are willing to pursue adaptive fitness to strengthen their parasport performance.

It's important to note that gyms, fitness and recreation centres and universities and colleges should prioritize ensuring that their facilities are accessible to individuals with disabilities. This includes adaptive equipment and space considerations, as well as informed instructors and trainers.

Examples of adaptive equipment to consider are: the Concept2 Rower, SkiErg, Perform Better Cable Tower, Invictus Trainer (cardio) and an Active Passive Trainer which is like an ergometer.

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**About the Author:** Toronto's Jess Silver is a communications professional, author, fitness enthusiast, advocate and founder of Flex for Access, a non-profit organization for disability awareness and fitness and sport promotion. Flex for Access's vision is to help society's perception of disability evolve to allow all individuals, regardless of limitations, fitness level and interest, the ability to engage in exercise and sport.



# Play Ball

Submitted By Meghan Saundercook, Jays Care Foundation

*Jays Care's*  
**CHALLENGER  
BASEBALL**  
*is a BIG HIT*

*Jays Care Foundation, the charitable arm of the Toronto Blue Jays, believes baseball should be accessible to all children and youth across Canada. That's what Challenger Baseball is helping make possible.*



In partnership with Baseball Canada and Little League Canada, Challenger Baseball is an adaptive and inclusive program that ensures that athletes living with cognitive and/or physical disabilities have the opportunity to play, develop, learn and compete.

Challenger Baseball teaches athletes core life skills inherent to baseball, including teamwork, communication, determination, resiliency, inclusion, support and courage. The program ensures that every athlete has the opportunity to play in a fun and safe environment where they learn to become more independent, build confidence, improve their communication skills, and achieve their own personal goals.

Challenger Baseball is operated through community leagues and schools across the country. During the summer months, community leagues take place for 8-12 weeks and are run by a volunteer coach and player buddies. They provide one-on-one support to allow parents and guardians the opportunity to celebrate their athletes from the sidelines.

Throughout the school year, Challenger Baseball takes place in partnership with integrated and specialized

schools and a variety of community-based organizations. This year, there were 118 leagues, 179 schools, and 41 community-based organizations participating in the program. There are currently more than 13,000 athletes with disabilities playing in Challenger Baseball programs across Canada!

The program is important to parents too: "My daughter Abby has been a part of Challenger Baseball for ten years. She has made so many friends through this program. To feel like you never belonged and one day find a program where you do, we have been involved ever since! It brings joy to my daughter knowing she is not alone and that there are other kids just like her."

"Challenger Baseball is so much fun," shared a program athlete. "I have made so many new friends and don't feel as shy as I used to. I've been so much happier since I started playing. Thank you for giving me a place on a team where I feel accepted and able to play despite my disability."

Challenger Baseball is always looking for volun-

teers to help bring inclusive baseball to athletes all across the country, and volunteers often report that this is one of the best experiences of their life. Anyone registered as a Challenger Baseball coach, teacher or programmer can receive in-person training from Jays Care, adaptive equipment, merchandise for their players, and a wide variety of coaching tools to support their athletes. If you're interested in volunteering for a Challenger Baseball league in your area, visit [JaysCare.com/ChallengerBaseball](https://www.jayscare.com/ChallengerBaseball) to learn how you can get involved.

Do you have an athlete interested in joining the roster? Challenger Baseball is a wonderful place to be for athletes of all abilities. All leagues run on slightly different schedules and are run by dedicated volunteers who will make every effort to bring you onto the team for the next available season. Find a list of Challenger Baseball leagues in your area at [JaysCare.com/ChallengerBaseball](https://www.jayscare.com/ChallengerBaseball).



## Jays Care Affiliate School

Jays Care Foundation works with educators across Canada to launch award-winning extracurricular programs in their schools. Once educators register for the Affiliate School program, they take part in a virtual training session and commit to at least two hours of extracurricular programming per week, for a total of eight weeks. As an Affiliate School, Jays Care provides a specialized equipment kit, Blue Jays t-shirts and hats for students, a best-in-class program manual, and help every step of the way.



Jays Care offers a variety of programs for Affiliate Schools, including the Challenger Baseball program. This adaptive program is ideal for schools that are motivated to create introductory sport programs specifically tailored to the needs, strengths and hopes of students with disabilities. In this program, baseball or softball is used as the vehicle to enhance four main program objectives: connection, courage, independence and love of physical activity.

If you're an educator and interested in registering for the Affiliate School program, visit [JaysCare.com/schools](http://JaysCare.com/schools) to learn more about how you can get involved.

## Ontario Cerebral Palsy Sports Association

***Sport and physical activity help people of all abilities reach their full potential in life.***

To support this philosophy, OCPSA, the governing body for the sport of boccia in Ontario, has developed the Boccia Bratz program.

Boccia Bratz is an 8-session program led by trained instructors. Teachers, coaches, volunteers or community recreation leaders can deliver this inclusive program... training session, lesson workbook and equipment kit included!

It's great for therapeutic settings, summer camps, schools, municipal programs and more!



***Does the Boccia Bratz program sound right for you?! Visit [www.ocpsa.com](http://www.ocpsa.com) for more information and apply to get involved!***



# RECREATION

## A Key to Disability Empowerment and Mental Wellness

By Lauren Presutti, MEd, EdS, LLMSW  
Mental Health Therapist,  
River Oaks Psychology



*I have always embraced the motto, “work hard, play hard.” I appreciate my dedication to professional goals as a mental health therapist, but my career would certainly crumble to pieces if I did not have outlets for play.*

We often think about play as an important part of childhood, but playtime is actually an essential part of our mental wellness throughout our whole lifespan. Having appropriate outlets for play and recreation at every age is critical because it helps us to manage stress, build relationships, improve our confidence, foster our creativity, and strengthen our social identity.

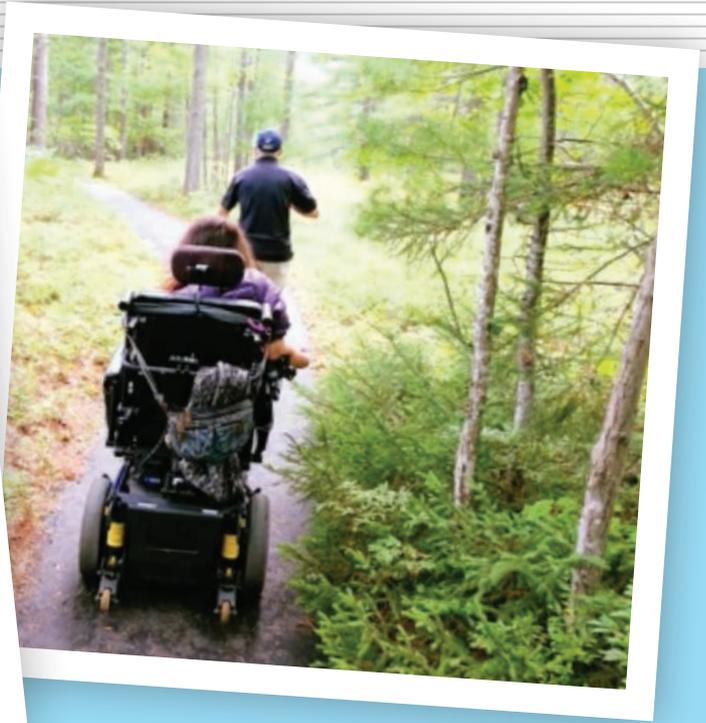
I’m a firm believer in taking “mental breaks” from our day-to-day responsibilities so that we can practice

better self-care and find greater joy through non-productive activities that are simply about having fun... things like connecting with others, feeling fulfilled, and expressing ourselves. Recreational activities alleviate the everyday stresses of life and have been shown to reduce mental health symptoms like anxiety and depression.

But for many people with disabilities, chronic illnesses, or medical conditions of any kind, it can be hard to access recreation without appropriate support and resources. I experienced

this firsthand living with a neuromuscular disease. I was diagnosed with a form of muscular dystrophy when I was two years old. I started using my first power wheelchair at age five (it was painted hot pink and I couldn’t wait to speed through my neighbourhood!).

I wanted to get out there and play with the rest of the kids, but I frequently experienced barriers that left me wondering where I fit in or if I even belonged with my peers on the playground. Thankfully, my resourceful family connected me with professionals



that taught me how to adapt my environment so that I could experience recreation in accessible ways. I also attended a muscular dystrophy summer camp for many years that helped me develop skills for recreation.

Living in a small town where I felt largely accepted by my community was also helpful, as well as having an outgoing personality. I learned how to educate my non-disabled friends on how they could include me despite my limitations. Because of the support structures I had in place, I was thankfully able to integrate socially into my school and community.

I can barely move my muscles, but I was passionate about throwing myself into mainstream life. In fact, growing up, I often got in trouble whenever I got my wheelchair STUCK in muddy backyards and soggy fields with my friends! I just wanted to play with everybody else. Our playtime was always worth it.

When I moved away from my small town bubble to attend college, my world changed significantly. I experienced enormous challenges living on

my own during college, from needing to employ caregivers to assist me with activities of daily living, navigating barriers around my campus, facing difficulties with classroom accommodations, and overall, just trying to fit in at a large university with people who didn't always understand disability.

Again, I was fortunate to access resources and connect with people who helped me find outlets for recreation and social connections. Most helpful to me was connecting with students at my university who were studying therapeutic recreation. I expressed my interest in trying new things, and for the first time in my life, I learned about all kinds of organized adaptive sports that I had never heard about before. Even more than that, my motivation for adapting all sorts of traditional activities skyrocketed.

With the help of many supportive people, I tried everything from adaptive downhill skiing, power wheelchair soccer, kayaking, horseback riding, roller coasters, para-sailing, and more. Being able to try new things

boosted my confidence and inspired me to study abroad during college. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think it would be possible to travel by plane, but with growing confidence I pursued it and traveled with people assisting me.

Through all of these experiences, I learned how much was possible for my life despite being so severely limited by my muscles. At one point, I even tried riding on a snowmobile by having my friends rig up a way to strap my body to the seat.

There were great life lessons that I took away from all of these experiences: always try new things; push yourself beyond your comfort zone; don't be afraid to ask for help; and believe in your ability to succeed.

My personal experiences with adaptive recreation, combined with my professional training as a mental health therapist, have given me a unique perspective. There are many people who advocate for disability inclusion, and many people who advocate for mental health awareness, but few people are specialized in the



intersection of these areas. Mental health needs of those with disabilities are sometimes overlooked. It's often very hard for individuals with disabilities to feel included in society because the world is not designed for disability. Individuals with disabilities are constantly having to adapt themselves to their environments.

Sometimes non-disabled people are unconsciously uncomfortable around people with disabilities. It's often exhausting for individuals and families affected by disabilities to always have to explain their needs to people who don't quite understand them, to adapt themselves to the world at large, and to feel an overwhelming sense of difference from the mainstream community. Add to that, disability stigmas and stereotypes are so powerful that it can be hard to build meaningful connections through social outlets. This often leads to feelings of isolation, loneli-

ness, low self-confidence, anxiety and depression.

Recreation can be the key to alleviating these challenges. If you or someone you know is experiencing mental exhaustion due to disability-related challenges, loneliness due to feelings of isolation, or depression due to a lack of enjoyment in day-to-day life, I urge you to consider opportunities for recreation.

It doesn't matter the type of recreation. Everyone has unique needs and interests. It might be an organized adaptive sport or maybe finding accessible trails to hike on. Or maybe you want to find opportunities to engage in arts and crafts. Every single type of recreation – no matter what it is – can be extremely beneficial for your mental health. For those living with disabilities, recreation is critical to empowerment.

I consider it my passion and pur-

pose in life to bridge the conversation between disability empowerment and mental wellness so that more people with disabilities can establish meaningful connections with others and be included as equal citizens.

How can we create meaningful connections between those with and without disabilities in a way that benefits everyone? Recreation is an excellent starting point, especially when your involvement in recreation offers opportunities to be a part of a wider social atmosphere, to build confidence and new skills, and to find feelings of personal joy and fulfillment that lead to stronger relationships.

*Article was first published by Recreational Respite. Email [info@recrespite.com](mailto:info@recrespite.com) to learn how Recreational Respite can help you remove barriers to recreation and social connection in your community.*

**To learn more about author Lauren Presutti and her firm River Oaks Psychology, visit [www.riveroakspsychology.com](http://www.riveroakspsychology.com).**



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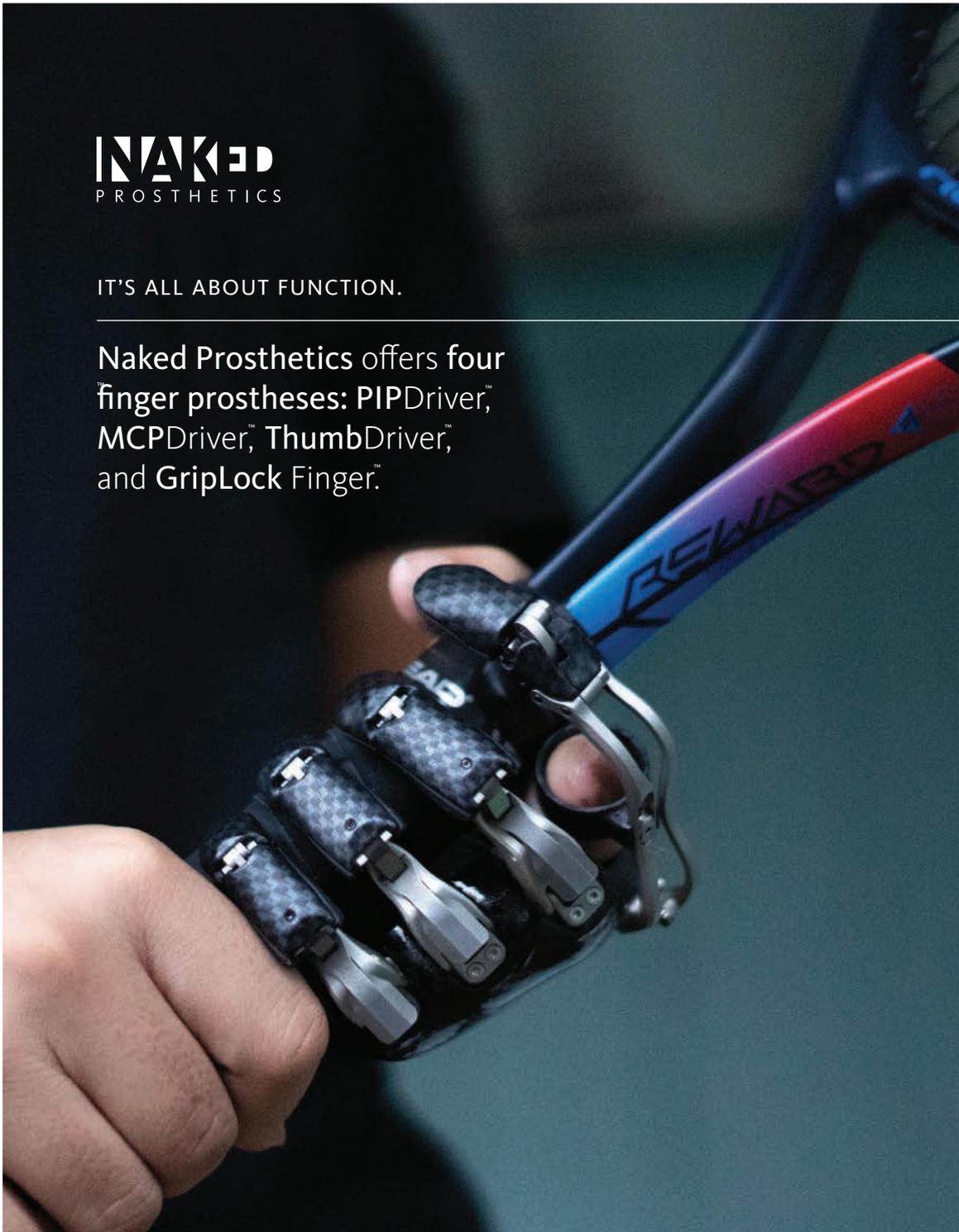
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