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Bump and grind

Quad rugby is known as murderball for a reason

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To the unaccustomed eye, the scene looked chaotic. Wheelchairs bashed into one another, and players batted an uncooperative ball that refused to settle into anyone's possession. But slowly, as seconds ticked by, the beauty of quad rugby -- popularly known as murderball -- unfolded.

These were round robin matches of the National Veterans Wheelchair Games at Sullivan Arena, where three teams battled for two spots in tonight's 9 p.m. championship game.

Two of the blue team's four players had their chairs lodged against William Groulx, a star of the white team, shutting him out of the action.

As Groulx struggled to free himself, Johnny "Quadzilla" Holland of the opposing blue team capitalized on the confusion and swatted the ball free. Teammate Scot Severn broke away from the pack, scooped the ball up and scored an uncontested goal for the blue team.

The action churns wildly, but for a team that's played together as a unit for less than 24 hours, it was a strategy that would carry the blue team into the finals.

"One of the toughest parts is figuring out everybody's abilities in such a short time," said Severn, who has played two seasons with a U.S. Quad Rugby Association team, the Great Lakes Storm, in Michigan. "A few of my teammates I know. But for the most part, we adapt as we go."

In a sport in which the athletes' intensity is matched by the speed of play, two leaders quickly emerged: Army vet Severn of the blue team and bronze-medal winning 2004 Paralympian and Navy vet Groulx of the white team.

Quad rugby is being hailed as perhaps the fastest-growing wheelchair sport, thanks in part to last year's hit documentary "Murderball," which followed the 2004 United States Paralympic rugby team through its loss at the World Championships to Canada and bronze medal win at the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens.

The crowd at Sullivan Arena grew from about 30 in the morning to more than 500 by Wednesday night; even more are expected at tonight's championship.

"We travel all over the country playing and we never play in front of a crowd this big," Severn said. "This is great. This is what it's all about here -- getting exposure for these sports and the veterans playing them."

The game is divided into four eight-minute quarters. Regulations specific to the veterans' games say each player must play at least eight minutes.

The players come from across the United States and include both experienced rugby players and those trying the sport for the first time. Three teams for the veterans games were selected earlier this week, with rosters finalized Tuesday.

That left precious little time for practice.

"Everybody has different strengths and weaknesses, and you do your best to play with those in mind," Severn said. "I know I'm fast, but not as fast as everybody out there. So I try to work around it during the game."

In the first game Wednesday morning, the white team defeated blue 39-29. Groulx and teammate Arron Powless, who plays for the U.S. Quad Rugby Association's Milwaukee Irons, earned the nickname "Bash Brothers" from announcer Steve Kalizewski. By halftime, white led 19-16.

Blue came out of the half with a new plan, one that used both Severn and Holland. While Holland tied up white players up defensively and used his long arms to break up passes, Severn capitalized on turnovers. He scored every minute during a segment of the third quarter, earning cheers from young fans in the stands.

In the end, it wasn't enough -- but it helped motivate the blue team to defeat their red opponents 44-31 later Wednesday night, allowing blue to advance to tonight's final. Severn scored 25 times in that game before the animated crowd.

In the final game of the night, White beat red 42-30, providing the blue team with a rematch and a chance at the gold medal tonight.

For Groulx, part of the success for the white team was efficiently managing the rule that each player must play eight minutes.

"As we play and get to know each other a little more, we've definitely gotten better," he said. "Everybody's required to play a certain amount of time and in the first game, I think, we just did that a little more effectively than the blue team and that helped us out in the end."

"I think for the championship game, we're going to try to keep a similar format ... If it works, don't fix it."

As a member of Team USA, Groulx is preparing for a trip to New Zealand in September as the Americans seek to recapture the world championship from Canada. Watching tonight's game will be Groulx's teammate, Team USA spokesman Mark Zupan, one of the stars of "Murderball."

"This will be my first vet games," Zupan said. "I'm looking forward to the competition and to see how many Iraq vets have gotten involved."

"That's something that is important -- we just want to feel that we can give the newly injured vets something since they gave so much for us."

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COMING UP

TONIGHT: Championship match of Quad rugby at 9 p.m. at Sullivan Arena.

Admission is free.

SATURDAY: Team USA spokesman and "Murderball" star Mark Zupan will attend a screening of the documentary at 4 p.m. at the UAA Student Den and speak after the movie. A silent auction will benefit Alaskans with disabilities, and the first 250 people in attendance will receive a catered buffet.

Illustration:

Photo 1: QuadRugby4\_070706.jpg

Photo 2: QuadRugby3\_070706.jpg

Photo 3: QuadRugby1\_070706.jpg

Photos by JOHN WAGNER / Anchorage Daily News

Scot Severn, left, and Thomas Durbin collide Wednesday during the first quad rugby game of the National Veterans Wheelchair Games at Sullivan Arena. Durbin's white team, triumphed in the morning game over the blue team with a final score of 39-29.

The championship game is tonight at 9 at Sullivan.

For more results of the National Veterans Wheelchair games, check out Alaska Sports Digest on Back Page.

Scot Severn, left, and Arron Powless battle for possession at the beginning of the Wednesday morning quad rugby game.

JOHN WAGNER / Anchorage Daily News

David Nau, right, braces for impact after colliding with Arron Powless, center, during the first quad rugby game of the National Veterans Wheelchair Games at Sullivan Arena. Nau was uninjured after receiving help up after the crash Powless' white team triumphed in Wednesday morning's game over the blue team with a final score of 39-

29. The championship game will be held today at 9 p.m. at Sullivan.

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