

Becoming a champion



In September 2008, 25-year old Natalie Schneider of Lincoln, Neb. will represent the United States on the 2008 Paralympic Women's Wheelchair Basketball Team. In April 2008, she qualified for Team USA by competing against 20 other women from around the country and becoming one of the 12 elite who made the roster. Six of the players are members of the 2004 U.S. team, which won gold in Athens, Greece, and six like Natalie, will have their first Paralympic experience in Beijing, China.

While the mention of this honor causes Natalie to blush, she admits it's been an aspiration since she joined the Madonna Magic wheelchair basketball team just three years ago. "One of my teammates put the idea in my head during my first season, and I just made it my goal," Natalie said.

Some spectators are surprised to see Natalie stand up after a practice or game. "I think it catches many people off guard that some wheelchair athletes can actually walk on their own," she said. "I know I was surprised when I found out I qualified to play with the Magic."

The surprise was both a relief and a source of frustration, Natalie admits. "I never thought I'd be competing again. When I was 16, I thought I was finished playing for good. Now, though, with wheelchair basketball, I'm competing, playing basketball and being part of a team."

What's frustrating to Natalie is that she could be in her ninth season as a wheelchair athlete rather than just ending her third. As a result, Natalie wants to be sure all young athletes who think they can no longer compete understand that adaptive sports and recreation options exist. According to the National Wheelchair Basketball Association's rules, "a player must have an irreversible lower extremity disability, such as paralysis, amputation, radiological evidence of limb shortening, partial to full joint alkalosis or joint replacement, which consistently interferes with functional mobility."

When she was only 16 years old, Natalie had surgery to remove a malignant femur tumor, which resulted in a total knee replacement. She now has a rod cemented into her tibia and femur. Natalie qualifies because of the limited range of motion in her right knee—she can't bend it beyond 90 degrees. "The doctor told me that I wouldn't be running or jumping ever again; that I'd have to find new outlets for my competitiveness," Natalie explained. "The risk of breaking my leg is too great, and if I did, it would most likely mean amputation."

Natalie tried golfing her senior year of high school, but had to have a doctor's note so she could use a golf cart, which most competitors cannot do. "I wasn't really that good because I'm a perfectionist," Natalie admitted with a slight laugh. "I tried swimming for fitness too, but it wasn't a lot of fun for me. I missed basketball. My dad's a retired boys coach and it's the sport I played all of the time growing up," Natalie explained.

In August Natalie will leave the familiar surroundings of Nebraska and her all-male teammates from the Madonna Magic for "team processing" in Colorado Springs before heading to Beijing to pursue international victory. In her relatively short time as a wheelchair athlete, Natalie has refined and honed her athletic skills, but her real talent is one of character. Natalie is proof that obstacles can appear at any time in a person's life, but it is the "never quit" attitude that is essential in the journey to becoming a genuine champion.

Madonna's Adaptive Sports and Rec. offers workshops for youth with activity limitations

On June 11, youth up to age 18, who have physical activity limitations, are invited to participate in a fishing workshop at Holmes Lake Park from 9 a.m.-Noon. This is one of two remaining workshops presented by Madonna's Adaptive Sports and Recreation Program and sponsored by the Community Health Endowment and CVS/pharmacy. On June 14, an integrated dance workshop, taught by Bob and Stephanie Chase will be held at Madonna ProActive, 7111 Stephanie Lane, from 1-4 p.m. The workshops are free, but participants are asked to pre-register. For more information about either of these workshops, or to register, call Ian Thompson at 402-486-7766 or by e-mail ithompson@madonna.org.