



BY
WILLIAM POWELL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
BRIAN SIRIMATUROS

CRASH COURSE

ERIC NEWBY KICKS ASS
IN THE HARD-HITTING SPORT
OF WHEELCHAIR RUGBY.

A

COUPLE OF STRONG PUSHES SEND ERIC NEWBY ROLLING DOWN THE SIDELINE. HE COASTS FOR A FEW YARDS, RECLINING TO CRACK HIS BACK. NEWBY'S ST. LOUIS RUGBY RAMS, THE HOSTS OF THIS WEEKEND'S CRAZY 8S TOURNAMENT, ARE ABOUT TO TAKE ON THE MINNESOTA STEELHEADS, AND PLAYERS FROM BOTH TEAMS ARE TAKING PREGAME LAPS. SOME PLAYERS TALK AND JOKE, BUT NEWBY'S GOATEED FACE IS BLANK. MAYBE HE'S HYPERFOCUSED, IN THE ZONE. OR MAYBE HE'S BORED, IMPATIENT FOR TIPOFF.



Then a grin appears. His palms flash across the tops of his wheels, and he makes a sharp turn. He sprints across the floor, straight for Steelheads star Chuck Aoki, who sees Newby coming just in time to brace himself. The chairs slam together in what sounds like a car accident, and both pop up off the floor.

To an outsider, this pregame assault might signal sabotage, like Tonya Harding on wheels. But Newby and Aoki are laughing. Though they're opponents today, they play together on the USA wheelchair rugby team. This brain-jiggling blow is just Newby's way of saying, "Nice to see you."

The hits keep coming. Every play includes a vicious collision... or two...or four. With your eyes closed, the game sounds like the demolition derby at a county fair. The ear-splitting crashes drown out even the cacophony of cowbells and noisemakers rattled by the home crowd. A player passes the ball just before he's taken out by a charging defender, like a quarterback being leveled as he throws. Teammates clear the way for a ball carrier by setting high-speed blind-side screens.

To withstand this punishment, rugby chairs are fitted with angled wheels, which give them a wider, more stable base. Those wheels are covered with protective plates, and the chairs are built up with metal guards, all scarred with more craters and dents than the surface of the moon. The players are secured with heavy-duty snowboard binding straps across their waists and feet. Still, one impact sends Aoki sprawling onto his back, more angry than injured. Play stops so a pit crew can race out onto the floor to pick him up.

What little most people know about the sport comes from the excellent documentary *Murderball*, which set these wrecks to heavy metal—a brutal ballet. But even though Newby em-

braces the game's violence, he loves it for the strategy. "It looks like bumper cars, but you play it like chess," he explains.

Quad rugby is played four-against-four on a standard basketball court, with cones at each end marking goals. The object is to carry a modified volleyball across the goal line, good for one point. To be eligible to play, a person must have impairment in three or four limbs. Each player is given a rating based on his disability, ranging from a 0.5 for those with the most severe impairments to a 3.5 for those with the most function. Aoki is a 3.5, Newby a 2. At any one time, a team may have only eight points on the floor. The game is called rugby, but it has more in common with basketball: Dribbling is required. There are pick and rolls on offense and full-court presses on defense. The action favors the offense, with just about every possession ending in a point, meaning that a single timely defensive

stop can decide the outcome.

A first-time observer wouldn't guess that the players are quadriplegic. Partly that's because of the misconception that the term means total paralysis below the neck. And partly it's a testament to these players' years of practice. His hands don't work well enough to shake, but Newby can throw a 30-foot pass right into the lap of a moving teammate. Even a person with no knowledge of the rules can instantly recognize the talents of players like Aoki and Newby. Exceptional athletes simply possess an ineffable universal quality, a sort of poetry in motion that transcends context. Usain Bolt running, Tom Brady passing, Vladimir Tarasenko finding the back of the net—these things would stir the soul of even a recently landed Martian.

Aoki is like a Kobe Bryant, fast and deceptively strong, scoring at will. On play after play, the Steelheads simply inbound the ball to him, then watch as he spins and knifes through the defense. He leaves the Rams choking on his exhaust as he slams the ball down in the goal. "He's one of the most dominant players in the world," Newby says. "The second you think you have him, he just pushes you out of the way, calls you a bad word, and leaves you behind." Newby's talent is more understated. He's a LeBron James, scoring when he needs to but also throwing beautiful passes or setting crucial picks. At times, he appears

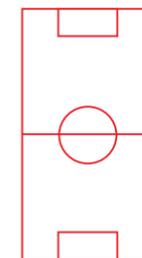


Players with less function use defensive chairs (above) with bumpers for hooking opponents.

Players with more function use offensive chairs (below) with built-up wings.

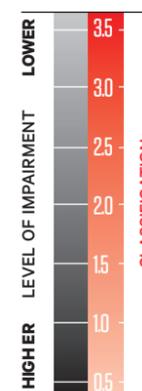


Eric Newby (right) and the Rugby Rams face off against Chuck Aoki (left) and the Steelheads.



The game is played on a basketball court, with an 8-meter-wide goal added at either end. Like in basketball, there is a key area where players are not allowed to camp out. There is a 40-second shot clock, and teams have 12 seconds to advance past half court.

4v4



Four players from each team are allowed on the court at a time. Each player is assigned a classification, ranging from 0.5 to 3.5, depending on his impairment. Each team can have no more than 8 points on the court at a time.

to be playing in slow motion, calmly directing the action, waiting for an opening, then seizing it. Defensively, he's among the best in the world at forcing turnovers, using his long arms to swipe at the ball.

Today, though each excels, Aoki gets the best of the matchup, and Minnesota wins, 56-48. Both teams are in the top five of the national rankings, and the Rams will have the rest of the season to plot their revenge. In the stands, the mother of a player from Milwaukee explains the sport to me. "They have a better life now than if they hadn't been in chairs," she says. "If they had the choice, they'd stay in the chair. Isn't that crazy?"

Newby remembers everything. The night of his graduation from Nashville Community High School, in rural southern Illinois, he was at a park for a party hosted by a fellow member of the class of 2006. The weather was warm, and Newby wore sandals, khaki shorts, and an orange T-shirt from a three-on-three basketball tournament. He had a reputation as a badass, a 6-foot-5, 230-pound powerhouse who could bench press 300.

Just before midnight, he and a few friends decided to drive to his buddy Drew's house to jump in the pool. It was only a couple of miles away—Newby could look across a field from the park and see the lights at Drew's house, though the winding road wasn't such a straight shot.

Newby had outs. More than one sober friend had offered him a ride home. But instead, he jumped into his friend Kevin's* truck. They were both drunk. The Chevy pickup had a restrictor feature that cut the engine at 99 mph. As they burned down the road toward Drew's, the truck kept hitting that cap. Kevin kept the pedal to the floor. "Dime" by Mike Jones blared on the radio, and both boys stuck their heads out the window, letting the warm wind wash over their faces, two graduates on top of the world.

It was about then that Newby noticed tall grass coming over the hood. "Dude, you're going off the road!" he yelled. When Kevin tried to correct course, the back end cut loose, and they shot across the road and off in the other direction. There was only a

Continued on p. 140