

Minnesota Hockey Report-Disabled Section
June 16, 2021

USA Disabled Hockey:

The USA Hockey meeting was virtual last week, hopefully for the last time. Here are the highlights.

- Jim Smith has stepped down as President. Election was held and a new President was elected. More to come.
- JJ O'Connor stepped down as the Disabled Section Chair. Amy LaPoe was elected in his place. She was previously the sections Special Hockey rep. She has appointed Alex De Palma to take her place on the section.
- A highlight was conversation about changing the name of the section and events and removing "disabled".

Minnesota Disabled Hockey:

Minnesota Warriors:

Curt Wilson of th St. Cloud Warriors was named USA Disabled Athlete of the year. See the nomination at the end of this report.

Minnesota Sled Hockey:

The MN Wild Sled Hockey 2020-21 season came to a conclusion at the annual Hendrickson Foundation Disabled Hockey Fest. We had two youth teams and an adult team participating...all representing MN sled hockey with a high level of compete and sportsmanship.

As for all, this season was "one of a kind", but we are very happy with the creativity and efforts put forth by our players, volunteers, and parents to actually make it a great year. This included the introduction of monthly MN Sled Weekends at Tria Rink St Paul where all sled hockey players from MN and neighboring associations were invited to come for a weekend of skill development, scrimmages, and fun!

Also attended at the end of Covid were trips to Moorhead and Brookings for sled tours. And a special shout out to the Hendrickson Foundation for, yet again, an incredible weekend of hockey for disabled athletes at the HF Foundation Disabled Hockey Fest...we are sure lucky to have them here in MN.

Looking forward - our annual Boundary Waters Sled Camp resumes Aug 8-12th in Ely. We are excited to provide this unique camp that includes sled hockey training both on ice and off ice. Also, our annual fishing tourney, Boundary Waters canoe and portage, and the annual trip to the US Hockey Hall of Fame return.

We are growing as we have increased our number of players this year, but want to keep growing...please share with anyone you may know that would want to try sled hockey.

Rochester team update:

5 players attended the Hendrickson Foundation Festival.

Minnesota Special Hockey:

Minnesota Special Hockey just officially ended the season. We had so much fun at the Hendrickson Foundation Festival in Blaine. Lots of great hockey and opportunity to socialize with events held outside. Our athletes look forward to this event every year.

We are also increasing our summer skating camps this year. Last summer we held 1 camp. This summer we are able to have 4 different opportunities to improve skating and other hockey skills.

Minnesota Special Hockey was honored to be selected as GIVE 16 winner this year. We are so thankful. Minnesota Special Hockey also awarded one of our hard-working volunteers with a scholarship to continue their education. We could not have this program without them.

We are currently planning our annual meeting and picnic for the end of July in Edina and one in Alexandria in early August. Looking back at this season, we are so proud of all our athletes and volunteers for their hard work and resilience.

Minnesota Blind Hockey

MWBH participated in the Hendrickson Foundation Festival June 4-6, 2021. During this time, one of our players skated with the National Team, a couple skated with and against other Intermediate players from across the country and our Beginners skated in a cross-ice scrimmage. We had plans to host an interactive booth at HFF but these plans were cancelled due to record high temps.

KSTP TV has expressed interest in doing a story on MWBH. Tentative plans are underway to host a practice, annual meeting and social event on June 10, joined by Ben Henry of KSTP, at TRIA and/or nearby venues.

Minnesota Disabled Hockey Committee:

With the re-introduction of the use of the word “disabled” and what that means to so many people, Minnesota Disabled Hockey will be working these next 6 months to find an alternative name. Once again we will not wait for national to lead us, but instead we will lead them.

USA Athlete of the Year: Disabled Hockey

Wilson has played an essential role in growth of Minnesota Warriors program

It’s not about the hockey for Curt Wilson.

For Wilson, a decorated military veteran, who oversaw exponential growth of the Minnesota Warriors, it’s about the brotherhood, the camaraderie and just being around the guys that keeps him going.

Wilson has been recognized with this year’s USA Hockey Disabled Athlete of the Year Award. The award annually recognizes the outstanding perseverance and dedication by a disabled hockey player through demonstrating the ability to overcome obstacles in the pursuit of excellence both on and off the ice.

“Having this type of a program allows the locker room to become family,” Wilson said. “On a personal level, if I never played hockey again, I wouldn’t miss it, but I would miss that locker room. I’m always going to continue to be involved, whether it’s on or off the ice. For me, what’s important to me is just simply continuing to reach out and to try and help as many disabled veterans as I can.”

The Minnesota Warriors program is designed to provide a recreational, therapeutic experience and education for wounded, injured or otherwise disabled veterans of the U.S. military, in conjunction with USA Hockey’s disabled hockey program.

The program educates, trains, motivates and encourages individuals who have physical disabilities incurred during service to the United States. The program also uses the game of hockey to develop self-confidence, adjust to new lifestyles, focus on rehabilitation, self-reliance, concentration and help participants back into mainstream lifestyles.

“When I found out, I was shocked, honored, humbled ... there were all sorts of emotions,” Wilson said. “My first thought was why me? When I can sit here and name 12 guys off the top of my head, who I think deserve it. I kind of feel like I’m still processing all of this, but it’s truly an honor for me.”

In 2018, Wilson started a Minnesota Warriors team in St. Cloud, Minnesota, after the program already carried a presence in the Twin Cities and Duluth. In three years since its founding, the St. Cloud program has 62 rostered players, equating to roughly one player for every 1,000 residents of St. Cloud. In comparison, if New York City started a team, the same participation rate would yield just shy of 10,000 players.

“It’s humbling just knowing everything that I’ve done for the warrior program and the community, and people have noticed, I guess,” Wilson said. “I’m a very private person, so having this public attention is different for me and it’s a little awkward, but I’m also finding out that I need to be able to just embrace it.”

Wilson, who comes from a third-generation military family, joined the Navy when he was 26 years old. He was deployed to Guam during the 9/11 attacks and later sent to Iraq in March of 2003 for Operation Iraqi Freedom. Once he returned, Wilson’s battalion was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation.

“My tour in Iraq was part of the initial march to Baghdad,” Wilson said. “That was 33 straight days of sustained combat operations, which was a pretty big deal.”

Wilson learned of the Minnesota Warriors program in 2017 when he attended one of his daughter’s games and noticed a flyer.

“The very next day I called, and I submitted all of my documents, and a short time later, I started skating with the Twin Cities team,” Wilson said. “From there, I was able to realize what the program was doing, No. 1, for disabled veterans, but also what it was providing for me. I ended up diving even deeper into the Warriors program by becoming a board member and also the media relations director.”

Acceptance Remarks

The program sought to branch out to St. Cloud, which is the same distance from Wilson’s home to Twin Cities. So Wilson volunteered to start the St. Cloud team, which has allowed him to come out of his shell through his involvement.

“I’m a very private person, and I don’t like a lot of things to be public knowledge, but when I’m comfortable, I will talk with buddies about experiences and things like that,” Wilson said. “Just being around these like-minded veterans, it’s a good place for you to feel safe and not judged. This has become more of an outreach to continue to help our disabled veterans and get them what they’re looking for and what they need.”

The team takes part in not only practices and games, but also off-ice activities like golf outings, pond hockey, charity fun runs, pre-skate meals, a yearly all-day barbeque at Wilson’s house and more.

“My teammates have done just a tremendous amount of healing for me,” Wilson said. “They have provided me a place where I can kind of regain a purpose again. Now, my

therapy comes from knowing that there's 60 disabled veterans on our team, who come to the rink looking for something and they're able to leave with a smile on their face."

But it's not just the players. Wilson deliberately creates games and events where leaders include not only players, but also spouses and children, as they incorporate extended families to the team. Family is of the utmost importance for Wilson. His wife, Norma, and their seven kids have always been the foundation of Wilson's support system so it's important to him that all players' families have the opportunity to be involved.

Sometimes, after high-profile games, Wilson has led initiatives for potlucks, catered meals, or pizza delivered to the rink intended for both teams, referees, family and friends to feast and fellowship. After the team's first game, this resulted in recruiting new players.

"None of us can do any of this solely by ourselves," Wilson said. "We all do truly need the support from our families in order to do this. It's just providing a place for all of us to feel like we belong."

With burgeoning participation numbers, Wilson has regularly removed himself from the lineup to open a spot for another player. While he loves playing, Wilson sees more joy through enabling and encouraging others.

Players have offered support for one another through life-changing circumstances like divorces, deaths, and job loss, in addition to marriages, births, promotions and other significant life events.

"I was fortunate enough to surround myself with people who helped make this successful, and that's a huge factor in this," Wilson said. "We created a culture within the program of accountability and being accepted no matter what your circumstances are. We all have our darkness, but we all need to take responsibility, as well, so the culture we created inside of the program does that."

Respectfully submitted,
Antonia Gillen
USA Hockey Director-Disabled Section
Minnesota District