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Paralympic primer packs Douglas College

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If the crowds at Douglas College on Wednesday were any indication, Olympic fever is likely going to carry over to the upcoming Paralympic Games as well.

The school's main gym was packed for several hours during an open house hosted by the Therapeutic Recreation program that provided people the opportunity to try out a number of Paralympic sports from both the Summer and Winter Games.

Not all sports from the upcoming games were included (it would be awfully hard to simulate alpine skiing or biathlon in a school gymnasium, after all) but it afforded a chance for the able-bodied and the not-so-able-bodied alike to mix it up in such sports as sledge hockey and wheelchair rugby (more commonly known as the less politically correct "murderball"), curling, basketball, and volleyball.

This being Canada, the most popular one to give the old college try was sledge hockey.

"Tickets for the gold medal game sold out in a day, which is awesome," said B.C. Wheelchair Sports program coordinator Kevin Bowie.

The variation of sledge on display had roughly as much in common with the real event as ball hockey does with ice hockey. Competitors were strapped into tippy gurneys with wheels rather than balanced on a single blade and had to propel themselves with sticks tipped with rubber rather than ice picks. But it's there's little doubt that it's a hard-charging sport that often leaves players, along with some stereotypes, flattened.

One of the common misconceptions about some of these sports is they are the exclusive domain of people with disabilities. Bowie, for example, only got into the sport after a friend suffered a spinal cord injury and he wanted them to continue enjoying sports together. While he has the use of perfectly good legs, he nonetheless chooses to spend a good percentage of his time in a wheelchair careening around various playing surfaces.

"It's a heck of a lot of fun and a great workout," he said.

One of the pro athletes on hand was Garrett Hickling of the Canadian national wheelchair rugby team. Hickling, 39, was MVP of the sport's first three world championships and was also one of the stars of the hit 2005 documentary Murderball. The Vancouverite been playing the game since 1993 and says he "can't stop, won't stop."

"There's a good murderball scene here in the area.

We're got about 12 to 16 guys, including four guys from the national team, who come out and play regularly.

The risk of further injury to players remains high. One strategy in wheelchair rugby, for example, is to knock over your opponent's chair and land him on the floor; that's not a foul, although the referees generally help put the players back on their wheels.

"We're tough and it's not like any of us broke our necks at the library. I've broken a few fingers, I've torn my tricep off and I've had to have a neck operation," said Hickling.

Anyone who has seen the documentary is sure to remember it vividly, and the intense rivalry it portrayed between Canada and the U.S. is also still going strong.

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