# Rugby for the Physically Challenged

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'India vs US' shouts the referee as he blows a whistle to start a rugby game. Excited players get set to play and the opposing team members try to 'kill' whoever has the ball. Boisterously, they bump into each other as the ball goes to and fro. As one team scores a goal, elated shouts rent the air. Just another rugby tournament? Not at all. This is a scene from the Delhi-based Indian Spinal Injuries Centre (ISIC) where a group of six wheelchair-bound men, mostly in their 20s, play a game of wheelchair rugby for quadriplegics (those with limited arm and hand movement and paralysed from the chest downwards), called quad rugby.



Rugby has been brought to ISIC by an American C-5/C-6 quadraplegic named Jonathan Sigworth. Two years ago, when he was 19, a bicycle accident in Mussoorie rendered Jonathan paralysed and he had to come to the Centre for treatment. A sophomore in Film and Middle Eastern Studies from the Connecticut-based Wesleyan University, after his accident and initial treatment, he went back to the US. Returning to Delhi and ISIC, during his winter break, he hit upon the idea of introducing wheelchair rugby.

Can the physically challenged withstand the rough and tumble of rugby? Sigworth's response is a resounding affirmative. "Quad rugby is very accessible to quadriplegics," he says, going on to add, "The sport is also very aggressive so it is very empowering and motivating for patients, who otherwise have very few outlets."

Back in Connecticut, Sigworth plays in a wheelchair rugby team, where he is the youngest player. Instead of wallowing in misery and self-pity after his fateful accident, he has aggressively picked up the pieces of his life and emerged as a role model for others similarly afflicted. In his words, " From the very beginning I saw my accident as an opportunity to do my bit with the physically challenged community. Only a disabled person can encourage those similarly affected. When one compares the US with India and other Asian countries, it is clear that in the latter there is far less governmental or infrastructural support for the disabled. In the US with such a disability you become a model citizen who can inspire others through motivational talks. My message is that instead of succumbing to depression, people should see it as a blessing and an opportunity to encourage others."