ISIC insiders obviously also have a similar perspective. One such individual is Major HPS Ahluwalia, chairperson of the Centre, who became paralysed neck down after a bullet injury suffered in the course of the 1965 India-Pakistan war. Just before embarking on a game of game of table tennis, he spoke to this correspondent: "Rugby is a wonderful opportunity for our patients because it combines adventure, sport and a sense of competition. Among the welcome spin-offs of this sport is the strengthening of muscles and mobility."

Another votary of rugby is Chitra Kataria, head of ISIC's rehabilitation department: "Rugby enables the patients to improve the strength of their upper limbs, build their stamina and develop good balance," she asserts. Chitra has had the opportunity to visit the renowned Savar-based Centre for the Rehabilitation for the Paralysed (CRP) in the course of two conferences organised by the Asian Spinal Cord Injury Network. She is greatly impressed by CRP and its motivated founder Valerie Taylor. In her view, CRP excels in producing effective low cost devices such as stretchers and parallel bars. Another noteworthy feature of the organisation, she says, is its wheelchairs adapted for women to do their domestic chores.

For paraplegic Sunil Phougat 24-year-old the game is a welcome diversion after a recent road accident confined him to a wheelchair. Everyday he comes to the Centre by auto rickshaw and as he says, the cheerful environs never cease to uplift him. " I used to be a wrestler earlier so welcome the opportunity to play another sport," he says.

Sigworth, the prime mover in bringing this sport to ISIC, has received unstinting support from his parents, Vicky and Fred Sigworth. His mother has, in fact, had to cope with major tragedies in the family Fred, thankfully now all right, suffered from testicular cancer and a kidney tumour, while her other son, Nathan had a major accident in the US but is fortunately back on his feet. Vicky is grateful for the support the US government extends to the disabled as she says the government footed the bill for Jonathan's helper last year and also bears the cost for the modification of cars and homes. "In India people go back to a second floor apartment and never get out because it is very difficult for them to negotiate the stairs," she says.

Fred, in turn, has been actively involved in his son's Delhi sojourn. "This has proved to be quite an adventure for which Jon has been preparing for months. We spent Christmas day in our living room cannibalising parts to assemble 10 wheelchair frames; the next day these were transported to Delhi, along with 16 wheels as 'luggage'thanks to the Air India Staff." Private organisations too pitched in, he says. The expenses were covered by a grant from the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation and contributions from friends. Likewise donated wheelchairs came from several quad rugby teams as well as the Connecticut-based Gaylord Hospital.

Once in Delhi, a team member Tom Scully worked round the clock along with Shanu, the Centre's wheelchair mechanic, to make the rugby chairs functional as well as convert a few conventional wheelchairs into rugby chairs by welding on metal guards. To play rugby, the players were given armour and gloves.

On the eve of his departure, Jonathan expressed the hope that the sport of rugby for the physically challenged would gather momentum in India and elsewhere in the region. Certainly, organisations such as CRP in Bangladesh would do well to take a cue from ISIC. ■



Therapist-referee Yotha Singh tosses the ball to start India's first Quad Rugby game.



A taste of the action: Jon rams Jyoti (a para and the star player of her team) as she tries to pass to Shakut.

Quad rugby is a sport for both men and women. It is played on a hardwood court. The rules include elements of wheelchair basketball, ice hockey and handball. Wheelchair rugby featured in the Oscar-nominated 2005 documentary called Murderball. In fact, wheelchair rugby's original name was murderball and it is referred to as quad rugby.