



WORLD

WCHA refs volunteer at Paralympic games

Johnathan Morrison and Brad Roethlisberger called games for sled hockey in Vancouver, B.C.

PUBLISHED: 03/25/2010
WILL MITCHELL (SPECIAL TO THE DAILY)

After the Olympic Games had come to a close, two WCHA referees headed to Vancouver to officiate games for the Paralympics.

Johnathan Morrison and Brad Roethlisberger called games for sled hockey, a sport that has raised new awareness this past week with the conclusion of the Tenth Paralympic Winter Games in Vancouver, B.C.

Sled hockey was one of the largest attractions for spectators at the Winter Paralympics.

“The hits are harder, action is nonstop, players shoot the puck 80 miles an hour with one hand — people have no idea that these guys are hockey players. There is nothing safe about playing this sport,” Morrison said.

Making its debut at the 1994 Paralympic Winter Game, sled hockey — named for the aluminum or steel device the players sit on — is similar to regular ice hockey fans are used to seeing.

Competing under modified International Ice Hockey Federation rules, players grip two double-ended sticks, one in each hand. One end of the stick has a sharp pick that the players use to propel the sledge, the other has a curved blade used to pass and shoot the puck.

The pair of officials regularly call men’s Gophers and Badgers hockey games, but volunteered in Vancouver to help grow the sport of sled hockey.

Morrison got into sled hockey after taking a hard shot from a puck that shattered his cheek during a preseason game in the American Hockey League several years ago. The injury kept him off the ice for six weeks.

While Morrison was healing, a well-timed phone call from Scott Brinkman, chief of the International Paralympic Committee, convinced him to get involved.

“Mind you, at this point, I had heard about sled hockey, [but] I had never seen anyone on a sled,

never seen a game, live or in even a picture, never, nothing,” he said.

In February 2006, Morrison headed out to Colorado Springs, Colo., to referee a three-team, long-weekend tournament between Canada, Germany and the United States.

Then, in March, the fledgling sled hockey official was off to his first Paralympic Games in Torino, where he officiated the gold medal game, was the gold medal game he officiated.

While Morrison wrapped up his second Paralympics in Vancouver with a bronze medal game between Norway and Canada, 12-year WCHA veteran linesman Brad Roethlisberger, of Green Bay, Wisc., enjoyed his first experience at the Paralympics in Vancouver.

Roethlisberger was impressed with the organization and the friendliness of the people outside of the village with his first time in Vancouver and as a Paralympic linesman.

“I myself have this rock star mentality, the bright lights in my eyes, you’re walking around, access to everything. Wow, this is cool,” Brad said.

The “next level” of spectatorship — the numbers and intensity of the crowd, also impressed Roethlisberger.

The bronze medal game he and Morrison worked had more than 5,000 ticketed spectators.

J.J. O’Connor, general manager of the U.S. Paralympic sled hockey team, could see Roethlisberger loves the game of hockey no matter what form it’s played in.

“He loves to ref, he loves to coach all types of players out there, in a wheelchair, or missing a limb, he’s such a good ambassador for the sport,” he said.

It was at a 2006 stop at a Wisconsin Amateur Hockey Association conference in front of the entire board of directors that O’Connor gave a speech to promote sled hockey and emphasize the benefits to an able-bodied hockey community within its borders.

Adoption of a sled hockey program, O’Connor said, would benefit both able and disabled athletes as part of a life-changing experience.

“When I saw that nobody stepped up, I said, “This is something that I’m passionate about in terms of giving back,” Roethlisberger said.

Little by little the program began to grow, and four years later, the program he built attracts youth players from all over the state, a testament to his dedication and passion to the game to take that task on and travel in uncharted territories.

For Roethlisberger, the sled program in Wisconsin fit into part of the bigger picture of an official’s role to give back.

“For me, it’s trying to take back the opportunities that have been provided to me — whether it’s working in the WCHA, or the having the experience of going to the Paralympics, and bringing it back to the local level,” he said.

