



The NEAT Podcast, Episode Eight

[Podcast intro plays]

Adam

Welcome to the NEAT Podcast! I am Adam Kosakowski and on today's show we will speak with Adaptive Sports Program Coordinator Paul Weiland. Stay tuned as he discusses his background, gives an overview of Oak Hill Adaptive Sports and Fitness, and what's in store for their future. And now here's the host of the podcast Steve Famiglietti!

Steve

Hello everyone. I hope everybody is doing well these days and staying sane and safe. This is a very exciting podcast for us because we get to talk to Coach Paul of our Oak Hill Adaptive Sports and Fitness Center. And I can tell you from my own personal experience that you Adaptive Sports and Fitness Center is an awesome place. It's a place I visit on a fairly regular basis. And I love it. And I love everybody that works there. So hello, Paul, how are you?

Paul

I'm fantastic, Steve. And I would just like to say thank you for having me on today. I look forward to all this. And I am very excited to connect with you specifically because like you said, you do use our facility on a regular basis. And in this time of uncertainty, it's just really great to connect with people. Not only on this podcast, but just to reconnect with our members. So this is this is a really great opportunity, and I'm looking forward to it.

Steve

Cool, well, I'm glad you're here. So, I kinda I wanted to ask you, if you wouldn't mind telling our listeners about yourself and where you came from and how you got to be Adaptive Sports and Fitness Center as as who you are today.

Paul

Sure, well, I do have a little bit of a unique story you might say. First of all, I am the Adaptive Sports Program Coordinator at Oak Hill Adaptive Sports and Fitness. And what that means is it's a great title that allows me to run all our adaptive sports and head up our community programming at the center. And how I came into the space of adaptive sports is I actually was born three months premature with cerebral palsy. And I was playing high school football and thought I was going to walk on to the college football team at Southwest Minnesota State University in Marshall, Minnesota where I went to college.

And while I was waiting around for freshman football tryouts the captains of the wheelchair basketball team that was on campus there literally cornered me in a hallway and told me I was playing the wrong sport. And as they were able to get me into the gym that night, and get me to try wheelchair basketball for the first time, I literally fell in love with the competitiveness of it. And just the pure fact that I could run around and hit people on a basketball court with a wheelchair. And I got very excited and I became a four year letter winner, a five year captain, and then went on to coach at the university and I've actually done some coaching at the high school, college and, Paralympic level.

And one of those guys that cornered me in the hallway is a name a guy by the name of Ryan Martin, who went on to play professionally and start his own nonprofit here in the Connecticut area. And we started the nonprofit and we're able to get a junior program up and running in this area and do summer camps. And that's how I found out about Oak Hill. He was actually on the advisory committee that helped design the layout of our original facility. And so when the position opened here with Oak Hill, he told me about it. And with my already deepening connections to Connecticut, it just became a really unique job opportunity as an Adaptive Physical Education Teacher, who was also a Coach to be able to tie in not only with Oak Hill's mission of adaptive sports, but also to help out Oak Hill Schools as an Adaptive Physical Education Teacher and see all that connectivity and just expand on my ability to spread my love of adaptive sports. So I packed up everything moved from South Dakota, and landed here with Oak Hill.

Steve

That is a very powerful and amazing story for sure. It was something that you talked about there that I just want to go back to, because it reminded me of something that happened in me in my life. I wanted to be a Meteorologist. And there came a point in my time in college where someone said to me, you know, you really can't do this. And they weren't supportive of me. And I really had a lot of different emotions attached to that. So when you were talking about meeting those guys, and they told you that you were playing the wrong sport, I'm kind of wondering like what you thought about when they said that to you? Did that make you angry or sad? Or did you just kind of leave one sport and go to another?

Paul

Well, I'm not gonna try to sugarcoat it. My answer might not be the most politically correct answer. But to be honest, even though I had a disability, growing up with CP I was the only person in my small town with any type of physical disability that I really knew of. And so I was very dedicated to playing football. And when the guys in chairs asked me to play wheelchair basketball, I looked down on it. I'm not gonna say I didn't, in that exact moment. It wasn't until I dove in with both feet and started playing with those guys that are at a very highly competitive level. We had probably the best starting five in the college division. The only problem was, I was brand new to the sport and I was the sixth man. And so I got to learn by fire with some of the best and especially when we went into the college ranks I played literally against the best to ever do it and so that's how I luckily got that whole trial by fire.

But yeah, when that first introduction happened and when they cornered me in that hallway, I had no expectation or nor thought process that I would ever do this past, you know, the one night of, you know, obliging them or just saying "Yeah, okay, I'll try it once," just to make these guys feel good. There was no intent in that. And I had my heart set on being a football player and that's where my mindset was, but it was the competitiveness and the drive that I saw on a wheelchair basketball court that made me fall in love.

Steve

You know, and I'm just wondering if you remember about how old you were when that happened?

Paul

Oh, I was a freshman in college. So I was 18 on the nose. Yeah. And I often think about one of the biggest things in my current position with Oak Hill is just to expand on the awareness of adaptive sports. You know, I grew up in a town with less than 2,000 people. And when I went to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, which was about a half hour away to do all my doctoring. There was actually a junior wheelchair basketball program in existence throughout my entire childhood. Which, incidentally, later in life, I would go on to coach to two national championship games. And nobody within the continuum of care that I had with my doctors, my physical therapist, nobody told me about this opportunity. And I often wonder, what would have happened had I heard about or learned about wheelchair athletics, or adaptive sports prior, because I later found out that had I known earlier, I could have been playing High School wheelchair basketball with guys that were eventually be my college teammates. But I never was exposed to it until I came to college and I was 18. So that was never an option for me. So in my current position, what I really try to focus on is just doing things like this to open up the awareness of adaptive sports.

Steve

And it's so important to do that because even in where we are in Connecticut, I mean we have a lot of towns and cities here, but you never know what the awareness is, you know until you're out there like pounding the pavement, making people aware.

Paul

I couldn't agree any more. You know, for a very small state, Connecticut does a great job of providing adaptive sports, not only through Oak Hill Adaptive Sports, but there's other agencies out there with the Ryan Martin Foundation and Gaylord Hospital and Hospital for Special Care just to name a few that are putting together great programming there is both men's and women's wheelchair basketball. There's a youth program in the state. We have sled hockey, we have tennis programs, we have Achilles does a great job with their road races and things of that nature. And those are just things just quick off the top my head. There's a lot more out there and there's so much happening in the small state that we don't do enough as a whole to get the verbiage out there. And that's why podcasts like these and things like these are so important.

Steve

Absolutely. You know, I know for myself growing up as a kid, like I wasn't someone that was really ever interested in sports. And so I never paid attention to it. And I never paid attention to the importance of it in all of the different aspects of what you can have as a person if you are a part of a team, or you're a part of a place like Adaptive Sports and Fitness. And so as an adult now, I just have the utmost respect for our Adaptive Sports and Fitness Center, but any, anywhere where they're doing physical fitness activities and sports activities, and there is a way and there is an inclusion for people, no matter what their ability is. Like that is just huge to me.

Paul

It is and you, you actually brought it to a different place where I wanted to make sure we went to. Is it's not just sports, it's physical fitness, it's improving on oneself and being part of a community at large. You know, and that's what Oak Hill Adaptive Sports and Fitness really strives to do. As a program there are three pillars we try to uphold, the sports which I've talked about, the fitness, which we'll get into here in a little bit, and Steve, you take a part of. But then also the whole sense of community, being that place that we're not just a fitness center where you come in and get your workout in, take a shower and leave. But really that place where you build a sense of community and togetherness, through all our support groups, and even through this time of uncertainty and online stuff. We're doing trainer talks, we're doing all different types of things, to really build that sense of community and with all the work that we do with the Fitness Center, our Exercise Physiologist and Personal Trainers do a great job of building programs that are specific to the individual and really eliminate barriers. And that's what we're all about, is eliminating barriers so that everybody can be part of the community and, you know, witness what it takes to build their self-esteem and their strength in their physical abilities.

Steve

So I have a little bit of a funny story to tell you is I ran into somebody that was working out at adaptive sports one day, and I just happen to know that this person was going there and I said to the person, "Hey, how are your workouts going?" And the person said, You know, I was doing, I don't remember what exercise they were doing, and they said, "I was kind of thinking that I was just going to stop," you know, "I was going to just like shorten my workout." And the person said, "And then I saw Coach Paul and he was like, 'Alright everyone, let's go, let's do it.'" And the person goes, "You know, I'm not someone with a disability and I looked at that situation and I said, you know, I'm not stopping, because I don't have a disability. And yet here I am thinking that I'm just going to goof off on my workout and like quit early because I don't feel like it. But when I see somebody like Coach Paul, doing everything that he does with all of the different challenges that he has, it just made me want to push that much harder." So I wanted to share that with you.

Paul

Well, that's a great sentiment and great message to put out there as a whole motivation comes in all different forms and all different ways. And if we as you know, fitness professionals can help motivate people and if someone looks at my story and is motivated by it, that's great. But as a whole, we're just out there to allow people to see the strength within themselves and push through that. What I took away from that story is that someone dug a little bit deeper than they thought they could. And they push themselves whether it was because of something I said, or something someone else did. That's the whole idea behind building that sense of community. Because at the end of the day, that individual found the intrinsic motivation to push us a little bit harder. And that's one of the large concepts that we really tried to drive home at Oak Hill Adaptive Sports and Fitness.

Steve

It's such an awesome place. So I'm wondering if you could tell our listeners about Adaptive Sports like who the people are and the different offerings that you guys have there?

Paul

Yeah, so give to give a wide overview, I guess, is we are a fully inclusive sports fitness and community center with all the attributes that you think that would come with. If you look at our weight room, it would have all the same weight equipment and selectorized equipment and cardio equipment you

would see in any standard gym, the largest difference being that the majority and all of our equipment is built so that the equipment adapts to the user instead of the user having to adapt it. So for example, with all the weight equipment, the seats can rotate, move so that it creates for easy transfer. People who are full time chair users can access all the equipment without having to or access all the equipment without having to transfer out of their chairs. And with every membership you get a personalized exercise program written for you by one of our fitness specialists, and they all have extreme knowledge and backgrounds in working with a wide variety of needs and abilities. They take the time to learn your strengths, weaknesses and goals and medical history and write the program specific to you to reach those goals. And to talk a little bit about our staff, everybody, like I said, has strong backgrounds in adaptive personal training and things of that nature. We have exercise physiologist and the strength conditioning coaches and personal trainers that all have that strong background. So we really work with each individual to build a program that's specific to them. And then from a sports standpoint, we have everything from women's wheelchair basketball to a wheelchair lacrosse program that's coed to...I'm working on starting our baseball program. And what we do from a programmatic standpoint is we're still young enough that we're looking for ideas on how to build. When I tell people is if you've got three people that want to start an activity we'll look on building a program for you. So it's kind of a wide answer, but I think we provide a little bit of everything for everybody. And we make it accessible for all.

Steve

That's amazing to me and honestly heartwarming. I was actually on riding the paratransit bus one day with one of another one of your members. And she was telling me about how before she found adaptive sports, she had made some phone calls to some various gyms in her area. And she said it was a really awful experience because when she called them and explained her situation, she said that she got laughed at and actually hung up on. And I just thought that was outrageous in this day and age and beyond reproach. It was so nice to hear her say that she found you guys in, you know, found a place where she could go and she could be taken seriously, and you could accommodate her needs. And I just think that's so awesome.

Paul

I mean, it kind of just hits the nail on the head of everything we're about. And one thing that I just wanted to shed light on is you keep calling it Adaptive Sports and you're cutting down the name and I love it because it shows how connected you are to it. And it shows how part of it you are, you're one of our strongest members. And I think that that goes back to speaking to just what the individual you rode the bus with was talking about. It was it was a place where you can feel connected. It's a place where it becomes a part of not only a routine, but it becomes a part of your identity. And I am a member I am someone who is valued and I think that's something we strive to do every day.

Steve

Yeah, it's a really amazing place. I know I keep saying that, but it's because it's true. What are some of your...This might be a hard question to ask in the current state of where we are with the Coronavirus. But what are your...What are some of your plans for the future? You know, coming up, like, what are some of your dreams and goals for adaptive sports or perhaps what the Director Kelly has in her mind?

Paul

Yeah, the biggest things actually, we just got off a team call just a little while ago and the biggest things are always just trying to get that awareness out there and spreading our message just as far as we can

reach. So to that end, one of the biggest barriers that we've seen is the whole idea of transportation. One of the biggest problems is when we go and do outreach, hey, this is everything we want. My son, daughter, brother, sister, mother, this is perfect for them. But where are you located? Oh, that's too far away. So one of the biggest things that we're working on right now is expanding our telehealth option and expanding our reach via the internet. We currently have YouTube channels, both one that does Oak Hill Adaptive Sports and Fitness, specific to physical fitness and personal training and those types of things. And then I have my own YouTube channel called Coach Paul's Adaptive Gym Class, in which I have all my adaptive PE classes for youth and individuals with special needs. And so we're also working on a grant right now to implement a new platform where we can do more in home Personal Training, and that's where our next step is going to be is to be able to do Distance Learning personal training and add that to our membership base, both in the short term throughout this whole Coronavirus time period, but then also adding that as a piece to our membership so that if transportation or anything else becomes an issue where, hey, I may not be able to make my personal training session. Well, now we can maintain and maybe we can do the same thing over. And so that's where we're really focusing our efforts right now to both help in the short term in the long term moving forward.

Steve

I'm interested to know, I don't think the listeners know this, but you guys recently had a big move from the Bristol location to the Hartford location. And I'm curious as to how you're feeling about that move in terms of...Do you think that that is going to help people in getting to you because you're in Hartford?

Paul

Yeah, for those of you that might know us, we were formally in Chapter 126 Sports and Fitness of Bristol. Now we are Oak Hill Adaptive Sports and Fitness of 33 Coventry street in Hartford. And I think it is going to be a great thing for not only our current members, but we're going to be able to expand our membership base just based off of things like what we're doing right now, by being on Oak Hills main campus, essentially, and being able to work more connectively. With NEAT and other programs. Look at what we're doing right now. We have more of a connected base and I'm on this podcast and we're doing things. I think our location helps too because being in the Hartford area, it opens us up to a larger funding sources and different grant opportunities that weren't open to us in the Bristol area. I just think that we'll be able to open up new collaborations with different universities and hospitals and different things that weren't available to us in the Bristol area that does not go to say anything about how much we miss the people in the Bristol location. Because there unfortunately, were some people that were very Bristol centric, that may not be able or have not yet been able to make the transition with us to Hartford. But I think in the long term, it's going to be so beneficial, not only to us, but our members and allow us to grow in ways that we haven't even yet to begin to see. So it comes with a little bit of sadness, and that we did have to close a location but in that same breath, we're excited about how the expansion can happen and see where it takes us.

Steve

Yeah, that's, I guess you could say it was sort of bittersweet.

Paul

Yeah. Those were the words I was trying to find. Thank you, sir.

Steve

Well, I'm glad I found them for you. Um, what else would you like to tell the listeners that we haven't talked about yet?

Paul

Well...I thought we, you know, covered a wide variety of topic areas, I think one of the biggest things that I can offer to listeners is to try us out. The best way I can say it is we have an extremely high retention rate, our retention rate is in the 80 to 95% range, and the average fitness center is more in that 10 to 15 to 20 range. So the whole idea is that if you give us a try, you're gonna fall in love. So if you have any reservations, don't, because we can literally adapt it for anybody. So even in this time, check out our videos on Facebook and YouTube and give us a try and if you have any questions we're very open and willing to ask for it and help you out.

Steve

So these days during this Coronavirus pandemic what's the best way for people to find you, get hold of you? You know, contact you kind of thing?

Paul

Right now, Facebook and Instagram. Oak Hill Adaptive Sports and Fitness on Facebook has all our links and then on Instagram we are OakHillAdaptiveSportsFitness. So it's our name minus the "and".

Adam

And what kind of things can people find on the social medias lately?

Paul

Not only can you find our workout videos and my adaptive PE classes, but We are also putting up trainer top questions and everything is as accessible as possible. We are working now on adding captioning to all our videos and making them accessible to everybody. So, videos, questionnaires, and just we're asking for your feedback as well so we can provide you what you're looking for.

Steve

Well, I think it's so cool that you have the word adaptive in your title because you've been adapting since the day you open, you know, you had to move to a new location. You weren't at your new location very long. And then we had this sudden, unprecedented pandemic, and you're continuing to adapt through that. And I just think that hats off to you. You guys are just so awesome.

Paul

Catchphrase that we use all the time is "Adapt and overcome." That's literally what we do every day. Whether it's adapting to a physical challenge to a need of a client to remember, but it's adapt and overcome at all times. And that's what we do. So I would just like to say thank you guys for having me on and this has been a great conversation and a great way to get our message out.

Steve

Well, you're very welcome and we are so happy to have you on the podcast.

Adam

[Podcast outro music plays]

For more information or to subscribe to our newsletter, please visit us at AssistiveTechnology.OakHillCT.org, or hit us up on Twitter @TheNEATPodcast. Today's podcast was hosted by Steve Famiglietti and produced by Kris Thompson and Adam Kosakowski. Our theme music was composed by Andrew Pergiovanni. Tune in next month for another episode and thanks for listening!