



November 16, 2008

Rochester Wheels open their home basketball season with two games

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Staff writer

With the clock winding down Saturday and his team enjoying a comfortable double-digit lead, coach Steve Barbato wasn't letting up.

He shouted for his players to spread the floor on offense, to get back on defense. Others on the bench urged their teammates to run the clock.

Barbato knows the game of wheelchair basketball. He played on this team — the Rochester Wheels — for 30 years.

That's right, 30 years as a player; the past five as coach.

"The equipment is the big change," he said, recalling the chairs weighed 80 pounds in his day, but are a lightweight 20 pounds today. "And the athletes are better They are starting to play earlier. The development is much better."

Barbato was part of the team when it started, in 1972. To have maintained a team that long is quite an accomplishment, officials say. The team plays in the Keystone Conference, which has lost two teams in the past two years and has just four left today. One of those teams is in Pittsburgh, however, and is rated among the Top 5 in the nation.

Youth leagues allow children to start playing as young as 8 years old, with a basket lowered to 6 feet instead of the regulation 10 feet. Traditionally, people haven't started until their teens or 20s.

That was the case for Xavier Major, 37, introduced to the game in 1992. Major had lived in Rochester as a child, moved to Alabama but returned after suffering a paralyzing gunshot wound to his back. He was rehabilitating at Strong Hospital when a couple of Wheels players visited, and they went to the hospital gymnasium to shoot around.

Major had tried out for basketball in high school, but found his talents more suited for football. Still, he enjoyed pickup basketball games in the park, he said, and was watching the NBA Finals in his hospital room.

"I knew I would like it right away," he said. "Most people are surprised how aggressive it is, how competitive it is. There's a lot of banging, guys falling out of their chairs."

The biggest adjustment, he said, was building the strength to shoot from a seated position, and learning to control the ball and the chair at the same time.

On Saturday, Major and his teammates cruised to an easy 36-17 victory in the first home game of the

season, played in a double-header against the Bay City Thunder of Erie, Pa., at 12 Corners Middle School in Brighton. The Wheels lost the second game, 34-28.

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Additional Facts

To help

Securing gymnasium space for games and covering travel costs for the team are a constant challenge. To donate, offer gym space, fundraise or sponsor an exhibition game, contact Rochester Rehabilitation Center, SportsNet manager Nancy Steinkamp at (585) 271-1894 ext. 674.
