

## **Wheelchair basketball for the win**

Inclusive sport gets good participation and enjoys success in Kathmandu, Nepal, with the first edition of the country's first wheelchair basketball league. Read on for a detailed narrative by co-founder of ENGAGE, Inclusive Change Through Volunteering, Simone Galimberti.

Last Saturday the Turkish Airlines ENGAGE Empowering League ended in a high note with an incredible final game who decided the winner of the male title. The National Army Team had to fight very hard against a very strong adversary, the Jawalakhel Wheelchair Sport Club, J.W.S.C.

Created just two years ago and a unique example of intergenerational inclusiveness as the team's captain is fifty years old and the youngest players are only seventeen years old, J.W.S.C. now poses an incredible threat to the dominance of the Army Team who has never lost a game in its entire history.

The final game played on Saturday ended with 33 points for the Army and 28 for J.W.S.C.

Only in the last minutes the Army managed to prevail after J.W.S.C had came back and took advantage for few minutes before the Army "killed" the game with an incredible basket o of Raju Katuwal, the league highest scorer and the co-winner of the male MVP ( he shared the MVP title with Prem K.C., a young but extremely talented player from J.W.S.C.).

The winner of the female title was Wheelchair Basketball Association, W.S.A with an irresistible Jyoti Aryal who won both the top scorer title and also the MVP trophy.

Played over seven weeks, with games held on every Saturday with six male and three female teams competing, the Turkish Airlines ENGAGE Empowering League has been a success. We were able to bring together different partners, starting from the Ministry of Youths and Sport, Turkish Airlines and the Embassy of Switzerland together with Navyo Nepal Asia Travel, Century Bank, Civil Bank, Hero, D-Style Group.

If the opening held on 28<sup>th</sup> of May was a bit disappointing in terms of audience, the final game instead had more than 300 spectators, including school children, scouts, family members and other persons passionate about sports. Interesting and critically to the success of the league, also the media took notice of the event and started covering it.

Yet there is still so much to be done to create awareness about wheelchair basketball and inclusive sports in general and while we got a couple of feature stories and one TV show covering the league and the players, the press coverage of the final game was still a bit disappointing.

We need to think about new ways to create an audience, to ensure that inclusive sports can be fully appreciated and mainstreamed into the society.

It must be seen through the lens of sports rather than as social issue. Surely we need to work more with schools, creating a new sense of awareness about disability and social inclusion.

This is one of the reasons why as part of the outreach component of the league, we are currently holding presentations in different schools here in Kathmandu, talking about the power of inclusive sports and where the league's players address the students, talking about how sport playing changed their lives for better.

The league would not have been possible without the involvement of forty plus ENGAGE Volunteers who took care of all the logistics, including, transportation, food distribution, support to the teams, cleaning, and registration. They were amazing working since early morning for seven weeks despite we are in the full examination season here in Nepal.

We also had an incredible team of Commissioners in the persons of Micheal Rosenkrantz, our Senior Advisor, Raj Kumar Maharjan, the best wheelchair basketball coach in Nepal and a long date friend of ENGAGE, both supported by our colleagues Govinda Gurung, Head of Technical Training at ENGAGE, Utkrist Thapa and Bikram Rajkarnikar, our senior most volunteers who were the first to come up with the idea of having a semi professional league.

A big thanks to Turkish Airlines and Embassy of Switzerland for the incredible support and enthusiasm offered throughout the league.

Some thoughts for the future, now.

We will keep working hard to strengthen the volunteering coaching program at the foundations of the league with almost all the teams being supported by young local undergraduate students who are selected and trained to become ENGAGE Sport Coach, a part time, 11 months volunteering program run by ENGAGE.

We look forward to create a training accreditation program based on international standards so that all the trainings received by our Coaches can be internationally recognized. It will be a long journey before achieving such a milestone but surely we are now laying the foundations to raise the quality of the game.

Investing in young, motivated coaches is the best way to make wheelchair basketball and the entire inclusive sport movement, big.

Our learning is that without committed coaches, hardly the teams are motivated to train regularly. If we look at the achievements of J.W.S.C., the winning receipt is having a team training at least three or four time in a week with the support of energetic and capable coaches.

Moreover we want to work hard to include more women players as now days there are only three teams actively and regularly playing.

Indeed, if we really want to make wheelchair basketball truly inclusive, we must engage more girls, so that we can have more teams playing in the 2017 edition of the league.

Last but not the least, we will try the impossible: expand our franchise program beyond the Kathmandu Valley, going in other districts where there is a high potential to create regular training programs. The overall goal will be to have in place a league that fully represents the entire nation instead of being just focused on the Capital and surrounding areas.

With determination and more support from corporate partners and development sector, I have no doubt that in few years from now, this will become reality and not just a dream.

Simone Galimberti

ENGAGE, Co-Founder

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