



History of Female Athlete Participation in Wheelchair Rugby 1977 - 2025

By Kathy Newman

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Introduction

I have been involved as an administrator and leader in the parasport community since 1981 and have witnessed the global growth of wheelchair rugby. The evolution of the sport—including equipment, rules, training, strategy, the speed of the game, awareness, and pure excitement—has been truly tremendous.

As a mixed sport, I have observed the underrepresentation of female athletes on the court. I have so much respect for the women who were pioneers in the game and continue to admire this new wave of women who are blazing the trail to gender equity. While we are proud to call ourselves a mixed sport, we have not historically made specific, sustained efforts to recruit women. Our approach to gender equity has, at times, been inconsistent. However, the recent creation and development of "Playbooks"—designed to strategically achieve gender equity—has provided the necessary tools and focus for success.

My hope is that this resource will provide the background on World Wheelchair Rugby's (WWR's) journey to achieve gender equity and inspire the entire wheelchair rugby family to take up the challenge. We must view gender equity not as a hurdle, but as an opportunity to recruit new participants to the game and grow the game.

With the global focus now on gender equity in sport, the time has come for WWR to fully embrace this challenge. It is simply the right thing to do.



Kathy Newman
WWR Director Competitions & Development

In the Beginning

Wheelchair rugby, originally known as "Murderball," was created in 1977 by five quadriplegic athletes in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. After a last-minute cancellation by their trainer, the men decided to create a new team sport that would be fun and suitable for people with quadriplegia. They started with a volleyball, which they preferred over a heavier basketball, and some cones for goals. From that day on, the group met weekly to refine the game.

At the start, and as the sport evolved, it was welcoming to all genders. Other disabilities were also eligible to play wheelchair rugby but the primary group of participants were those with spinal cord injuries. Recruitment strategies were focused on rehabilitation facilities where individuals with spinal cord injuries were in rehab. There was very little outreach to individuals in the community with congenital disabilities. Given the demographic ratio of male to female quadriplegics was roughly 8:2, it was clear that creating female-only teams would not be likely at the time.



Randy Dueck, Jerry Terwin, Duncan Campbell, Chris Sargeant, Paul Le Jeune



Madeleine Reusch, Germany, Therese Kämpfer, Switzerland, Michaela Gori from Austria. First of three female athletes to attend 1995 World Championships,

Domestic Participation of Female Players in Wheelchair Rugby

Over the years, women have participated in wheelchair rugby at the domestic level, although their early inclusion was challenging. In the sport's initial phase, the awareness of the parasport movement was low, and rehabilitation staff often failed to encourage patients to take up sport, being unaware of its full benefits in the recovery process and opportunities to improve quality of life.

Years ago, experts also misunderstood the physical capabilities of people with quadriplegia. In the early days quadriplegics did not race for more than 60 metres on the track. This limited understanding, combined with the small number of female quadriplegics, the sport's heavy equipment, and its full-contact nature, created an unfavourable environment for encouraging women to take up wheelchair rugby.

It took almost 20 years from the sport's inception for it to achieve its first World Championships in 1995 and demonstration status at the 1996 Atlanta Paralympic Games. During this early period, female quadriplegics often chose other sports considered safer and offering more opportunities for achieving international excellence.

In the 1990s, there was a discussion about adding an extra 0.5 for each female athlete on court to the 8 points allowable on court. This idea was not evidence-based; but rather stemmed from the observation-based assumption that women were inherently less strong and fast than men and thus disadvantaged on the court. Some female athletes at the time rejected this notion as condescending, insisting they be considered on an equal level and earn their right to a spot on the national team. Times have significantly changed over the past four decades, and quadriplegics are now fully encouraged to participate in sport. Today, female participation in wheelchair rugby at the national league and championship level is approximately 10%.



Cristeen Smith from New Zealand one of the first three women to participate in the first WWR World Championship in 1995



Judith Zelman from Canada one of the first three women to participate in the first WWR World Championship in 1995

International Participation of Female Players in Wheelchair Rugby

Wheelchair rugby grew globally, and now, a World Championship and Paralympic Games are held every four years. In the early years, few females were part of these national teams. Today, female athlete representation at these high-level events is approximately 9% overall. This level has only been achieved in the last quadrennial cycle.

Table 1 below illustrates the history of female participation in Wheelchair Rugby World Championships and Paralympic Games:

World Championships

Year	Location	Number of Male athletes	Number of female athletes	Female % Ratio
1995	Nottwil, Switzerland	83	3	4%
1998	Toronto, Canada	117	0	0%
2002	Gothenburg, Sweden	125	0	0%
2006	Christchurch, NZ	122	0	0%
2010	Vancouver, Canada	122	2	2%
2014	Odense, Denmark	123	4	3%
2018	Sydney, Australia	125	6	5%
2022	Vejle, Denmark	125	13	10%

Paralympic Games

Year	Location	Number of Male athletes	Number of Female athletes	Female % Ratio
1996	Atlanta, USA - Demo Sport	47	0	0%
2000	Sydney, Australia	93	0	0%
2004	Athens, Greece	88	0	0%
2008	Beijing, China	74	3	4%
2012	London, England	89	1	1%
2016	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	95	1	1%
2020	Tokyo, Japan	92	4	4%
2024	Paris, France	88	8	9%

In 2008, the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) mandated that each team participating in the Beijing Paralympics would have one spot out of twelve available for a female athlete. Three of the eight teams took up the challenge, while the remaining brought a squad of 11 members or less to the games. This mandate was not continued after the 2008 Games, as the general feeling was that the members did not want a quota system but rather preferred women to earn their right to be on the team.

Interesting Facts about Female World and Paralympic Participation

- Judith Zelman (Canada) silver medalist, Therese Kämpfer (Switzerland), and Cristeen Smith (NZ) bronze medalist, were the first three women to compete in the World Championship in 1995.
- In the 2008 Beijing Paralympics, Erika Schmutz (Canada) was the first woman to score a Try.
- Kylie Grimes (Great Britain) was part of the team that won Gold in wheelchair rugby at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics.
- Kae Kurahashi (Japan) was the only woman on Japan's wheelchair rugby team that won Bronze at the 2020 Paralympics and a Gold Medal at the 2024 Paralympics.
- Shae Graham made her debut as the first female wheelchair rugby player to represent Australia at the 2020 Paralympics.
- The USA took its first female athlete, Sarah Adam, to the Paris Paralympics in 2024.
- Australia competed with an historic three female athletes at the 2024 Paralympics: Ella Sabljak, Shae Graham and Emilie Miller.
- Three out of eight teams at the 2024 Paralympics did not have a female on their roster, while the top three medal-winning teams all included female athletes.

Classification & Research

In 2008 at the World Wheelchair Rugby (WWR) General Assembly, the membership approved a rule change allowing an additional 0.5 points on the court for each female player. This rule change was based on extensive qualitative research with input through surveys and questionnaires from athletes and coaches to collect concerns and opinions on the changes to the rules. The rule change did not significantly increase the number of female players globally. Those that did participate were primarily low point players. The classification system, guided by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), allows for a wide range of functional abilities and ensures players can compete on a level playing field. Today, the sport's eligibility requirements have expanded to include athletes with a variety of conditions, such as neuromuscular disorders, cerebral palsy, and skeletal deformities, with no male predominance existing within these health conditions. With the increasing number of eligible athletes with other health conditions and impairment types, where the male female ratio is 1:1 the participation of female athletes should have risen and that did not happen.

In 2023 research was conducted to compare muscle strength differences between male and female athletes. This research concluded:

- There is a significant difference in muscle strength (40–50%) between female and male athletes in unaffected and partially affected muscles (e.g., high-point players' arm muscles; low-point players' elbow flexors).
- However, there is no difference in fully affected muscles (e.g., elbow extensors in low-point players).
- Therefore, the absolute difference in muscle strength between male and female players is much larger in high and midpoint athletes, than low point athletes.
- Despite these findings, all classes of female athletes are currently allowed only the original 0.5 extra points on court.

These findings impact both offensive and defensive activities—specifically, making and taking hits and holding and getting out of a pick. This research resulted in another rule change implemented in 2025 to add an additional 0.5 advantage to the current 0.5, equaling 1.0 extra points on the court for female players in the 2.0 classification and higher. This rule change is currently being analyzed, including a global consultation process. Membership has also been invited to provide feedback on the rule change. This feedback will inform the next steps in the adoption of this rule change.

Further research is planned, dependent upon accessing funding. This research will:

- Assess any differences in trunk muscle strength between female and male athletes.
- Assess differences in performance between female and male athletes, both in standardized activities and in measurements with inertial movement sensors in match-play.



Erika Schmutz, Canadian athlete and leader promoting gender equity

Efforts to Increase Female Participation Globally



Sarah Adam first female athlete to join the national USA team squad in 2024

National Level

National Member Sport Organizations (NMSO) have played key roles in advancing female participation in wheelchair rugby. We have seen a rise in gender equity policies and the need to look at different avenues to recruit athletes. This has inspired many NMSO's to expand their traditional recruitment strategies to include women.

The USA has hosted training camps, for women only, in Utah and at Houston University. Athletes attending were primarily from the USA however athletes from other countries have attended. Despite years investing developing female wheelchair athletes it wasn't until 2024 that a woman was selected to the national team attending the Paris Paralympics.

In 2013, Germany hosted the first Women's Cup to inspire more female participation. It was a festival-style event that included 11 women. The first day was a training camp, and the second day was a competition.

The Paris Women's Cup is hosted by Paris based organization CAP SAAA, an organization supporting diversity and empowerment through sport. For CAP SAAA encouraging women's participation in wheelchair rugby is not just a goal – it is a deep conviction. Following in the footsteps of Germany they were inspired to host the first Paris Women's Cup in 2015 and have hosted every two years with the exception of the COVID year. The first two tournaments were festival in nature with teams being made up from the athletes attending.

In 2024 there were 5 teams from 5 countries attending including: Great Britain, France, USA, Brazil and Spain plus 3 at large teams for a total of 8 teams. While they were not actually selected as National teams all of the athletes were from their home country. In this table they have been referred to as national teams. This growth can be attributed to the increased interest in playing on women only teams, awareness, domestic investment in gender equity and expansion of athletes eligible to play the game.

Beyond the numbers, the Women's Cup has helped to build momentum and create a sense of collective energy and inspiration around women's wheelchair rugby. It has contributed to growing awareness that women are truly present in the sport - not as background figures, but as competitors in their own right.



France team participates in international tournaments



Paris Women's Cup hosted every 2 years is committed to growing the women's game

Table 2 details the history of participation in the Paris Women's Cup tournament

Year	Location	# of Women attending	# of countries represented	# of National Teams	# of teams
2015	Paris, France	12	6	None	4
2017	Paris, France	30	15	None	5
2023	Paris, France	42	10	2	5
2024	Paris, France	60	18	5	8

In 2020 Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby (GBWR) conducted a survey to find out more about women's experience of wheelchair rugby. GBWR wanted to implement insight-based interventions including: female-friendly Try-it sessions and competitive games and televise matches as part of the Quad Nations Tournament to raise awareness that women do play wheelchair rugby. They made a commitment to ensure that diversity is represented in the promotion of wheelchair rugby. They wanted to make sure playing wheelchair rugby was meeting the needs of women and encourage them to choose to play wheelchair rugby.

The survey results prompted GBWR to create and implement a strategy to increase female participation. In particular they introduced:

- Try it sessions for women only
- A chair loan system
- Education for clubs and workforce
- Increased competitions
- More socialising
- Share insights on barriers
- Listen to the female voices
- Communications strategy on variety of platforms featuring an "I can play" campaign
- Research project in 2023 referenced above was in part funded by Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby
- Signed on as a funder to support the work of the WWR Women's Task Team
- Entered a team, representing GB, in the 2023 and 2024 Paris Women's Cup
- Hosted the French national team for a training camp and friendly competitions series prior to the World Rugby 2025 Women's World Cup Rugby Tournament.



Friendly matches between Great Britain and France hosted during the 2025 Women's World Cup Rugby Cup



Kylie Grimes, from Great Britain, wins gold medal at 2020 Paralympics

Wheelchair Rugby Canada (WRC) identified focusing on recruiting women and girls in to the sport as a strategy to increase participation as part of their strategic plan. Canada took a leadership role in hosting the symposium in 2024 to create the "Playbooks" used by WWR. WRC also created a Canadian focused set of Playbooks. Since hosting the symposium WRC has:

- Entered a women's team in one of their domestic competitions
- Hosted Training Camps for women only
- Introduced a Women in Leadership Grant Program
- Offered Club grants that focus on women's only programs
- Recruited and trained coaching staff for a national team
- Implemented a robust communications strategy featuring women in the game.
- Hosted a webinar addressing female issues as an athlete
- In part financially supporting sending the first ever national women's only team to the 2025 Rugbymania Tournament in Prague, Czech Republic

Wheelchair Rugby Australia (WRA) has strategically invested in developing female athletes for their national team and development team. This has been through a range of initiatives including seeking funding from sponsors to support the development of women in the sport, implementing coaching and wellbeing techniques to better support female athletes, and ensuring the promotion and awareness of women in the sport across all communication channels and in media opportunities. WRA has also funded Australian athletes to attend the Women's Cup to continue the global momentum of growing the sport for women, and has encouraged attending athletes to share their learnings and insights domestically on their return.



Natasha Smids at a womens training camp, Vancouver 2025



Shea Graham, from Australia, national team member and Chair of the WWR Athlete Council

In 2025, Australia also formally began work through the development of a Women and Girls program to better understand how to support and encourage women in wheelchair rugby, with a wide scope to include athletes, officials and volunteers. To date, the program has brought together participants for an in-depth information workshop and a friendly women's only training session with more sessions to come in 2026 as part of a co-design process. This program will form part of a wider research piece to WRA's ongoing strategies for recruiting and retaining women in the sport from the grassroots to the elite.

Japan Wheelchair Rugby is exploring ways they can support increasing female participation. They have hosted a women's Try it Day and have also established a women's only club for players, coaches, and staff to train, connect and grow together under the leadership of female athletes Kae Kurahashi and Tamami Tsukimura.



Kae Kurahashi, two time Paralympic medal winner.



Northern Lights Canadian team in Prague 2025

Brazil is investing in the women's game significantly. The Brazilian women's team, the Divas, attended the 2024 Paris Women's cup. They have hosted training camps and hosted their first national championships in October 2025 which included 3 teams.

Denmark Paralympic Committee and CAP SAAA financially contributed to the work WWR has been doing to grow the game globally.

International Level

In 2022, a paper was submitted to the WWR Board of Directors to begin a discussion around female participation in wheelchair rugby. The purpose of the paper was to challenge WWR to consider what they were doing to encourage female participation, ensure the female voice was being heard, and maximize the benefits of being a mixed-gender sport.

This paper was prompted by the global movement for gender equity in sport. During the 2022 Winter Olympics and Paralympics, sport organizations proudly acknowledged gender equity in the participating sports. When WWR submitted their application to be included in the 2028 Paralympic Games, they were asked what they were doing to move toward gender equity. While WWR could not say they were doing much at the time, they were beginning to think strategically about what they could be doing. The WWR Board of Directors officially confirmed their support to create and implement a plan to move towards gender equity.

To achieve this, WWR has undertaken the following work:

- Formed a Women's Task Group with a mandate to provide guidance in developing a strategic approach to increase female participation in WWR and supported the work they undertook
- Financially supporting the research conducted focused on male/female differences in muscle strength in elbow flexion and extension, shoulder flexion and shoulder extension, and Push & Sprint performance.



Mélanie Labelle at Symposium in Vancouver 2024

To date, the WWR Women’s Task Group has:

- Accessed funding to implement a comprehensive consultation process and develop “Playbooks” to support increased participation.
- Implemented a “Women’s Wednesday” social media campaign promoting female participation.
- Invited guest speakers with expertise in gender equity and other related topics to attend Task Group meetings.
- Collected data in order to measure the progress of the work.
- Established an Ambassador Program to help ‘spread the word’.
- Become a signatory on the International Women’s Group for Sport to indicate a commitment to gender equity.
- The “Playbooks” were launched on March 8th, 2025, International Women’s Day.
- Presentations were made to the membership on member calls two times, the 2024 WWR General Assembly and the 2024 Paris Women’s Cup.

The consultation process to create the “Playbooks” included:

- 298 Survey Respondents from 29 countries, including athletes, staff, organizers, Classifiers, Officials, Coaches, Family and Friends.
- 27 Focus group participants—athletes, officials, coaches, classifiers, and volunteers from across nine member countries.
- 10 Interviews with global wheelchair rugby leaders, out-of-sport leaders, and gender equity experts.
- 34 delegates (including athletes, coaches, staff, community leaders, and specialists in gender equity) attended a Symposium in Canada with international participation.
- 25 WWR General Assembly Members provided feedback on the approach and implementation.
- 50+ Women’s Cup Participants—athletes, leaders, and support roles from around the globe—participated in or attended the 2024 Paris Women’s Cup.

This robust consultation process resulted in the creation of 3 Playbook resources, which can be found on the WWR website here - <https://worldwheelchair.rugby/women-resources/>.

The Playbooks are practical resources to assist national and club level organizations. Strategies in the Playbooks to address increasing female participation in wheelchair rugby globally include:

- Promotion: Creating awareness and interest for wheelchair rugby as a sport for women.
- Leadership & Support: Helping women in leadership and support roles across the sport.
- Community: Creating programs at the local club level to engage women in the sport.
- Environment & Experience: Creating the environment to deliver experiences that meet the needs of women.
- Events & Competitions: Creating the conditions for a more fair, accessible development pathway for women to compete in high-performance wheelchair rugby competition.

In each of these areas, goals have been identified along with action plans to achieve them. Examples of what events and programs could look like are provided in the Playbooks.

Ultimately, it was agreed that the desired outcome is to globally increase female participation and competitive opportunities to position WWR to apply for a women’s division in the Paralympics.

For the Brisbane 2032 sport program, WWR has been asked how they are advancing the goal of the Paralympic Games Sport Program, which is described in the IPC Handbook as: "to ensure the highest level of clean, fair, safe and well officiated competition, featuring the world's best athletes with varying types/ranges of impairment and equal opportunities for male and female athletes from all regions of the world." Given the recent work WWR has done we will be able to respond with confidence and begin the conversation to work towards a women's division in the Paralympic Games.

Recent Milestones (2025)

- International Working Group (IWG) on Women and Sport, Brighton plus Helsinki Declaration
- Launched the "Playbooks" on March 8, 2025 International Women's Day
- Unprecedented social media highlighting female participation
- Increased images of women participating in wheelchair rugby globally
- "Try it" Days held around the world
- Training Camps held for women's teams
- USA formed a Women's task team to address gender equity
- Female wheelchair rugby players in Spain formed a team called the "Felina's". Through a merchandising program and self-funding, the team attended the 2024 Women's Paris Cup. The Felina's recently received an award recognizing the work they are doing to promote gender equity.
- Great Britain and France female wheelchair rugby teams gathered prior to the Women's Rugby Cup in Sunderland, England for a training camp and friendly competition
- Conversations held with key people in the IPC to express our desire for a women's division in the Paralympics
- 2025: A female team enters the Seattle Slam, USA club tournament.
- Brazil hosts national women's championships in fall of 2025
- November 2025: Canada sends its first all-female team to participate in Rugbymania, an international mixed team tournament in Prague, Czech Republic
- First WWR Women's World Championship planned for 2026
- Defi Sportif, Canadian based organization in Montreal, Quebec plans to host a women's international wheelchair rugby tournament
- First WWR Women's World Ranking system to be created in 2026
- Number of female players in the WWR classification data base has increased by nearly 100% in the past year and currently stands at 91.



An at Large Women's team participates in the Seattle Slam club tournament



WWR President, Richard Allcroft OBE signs the Brighton plus Helsinki Declaration. Left to right, Lisa O'Keefe MBE, IWG Secretary General IWG; Faye West, GBR Athlete; Sophia Azzi, WWR Female Task Group

Moving Forward

The decision to create a women's only competition pathway directly addresses several key goals:

- **Boosting Participation:** It creates a dedicated space to recruit more women and girls into the game and address the imbalance of female participation.
- **Meeting Demand:** It responds to the rising interest and desire from women to play the sport.
- **Effective Strategy:** It moves away from the historically ineffective results of allocating extra points for women playing in mixed-gender teams and avoiding a quota system, opting for a more impactful structural change.
- **Paralympic Alignment:** Crucially, it aims to meet the IPC requirement for equal male and female participation to secure the inclusion of a women's division in the Paralympic Games, which will be supported by a women's only World Championship.

Key Takeaways and Next Steps

This move represents a major evolution for the sport, aligning WWR with global trends towards gender equity in sports.

- **Goal:** Establish a WWR Women's Division in the Paralympic Games, based on meeting the IPC criteria and approval
- **Mechanism:** Creation of a dedicated WWR Women's Competition Pathway and World Championship.

I. Meeting Paralympic Qualification Criteria

- **Establish the World Ranking List:** Work towards meeting the minimum requirement of 8 teams on the World Ranking list.
- **Host International Events:** Host a minimum of two (2) Women's World Championships.
- **Expand Global Participation:** Ensure a minimum of 18 member nations establish a national league or championships specifically for women.



Team wins Gold at the Brazil National Championships for Women



Action shots at inaugural 2025 Brazil National Women's Championship



Action shots at inaugural 2025 Brazil National Women's Championship



Maia Marshall-Amai, from New Zealand named MVP at the 2024 Women's Paris Cup

II. Competition and Development

- **Create the Competition Pathway:** Design and implement a structured competition pathway specifically for women.
- **Continue Data Collection:** Systematically collect data to track growth, performance, and trends.

III. Promotion, Education, and Communication

- **Promote Women in Rugby:** Feature and actively promote women's involvement in wheelchair rugby through the use of Ambassadors, social media campaigns, and other promotional platforms.
- **Disseminate Resources:** Continue to promote and utilize the 'Playbooks'
- **Webinar Series Development:** Design and launch a comprehensive webinar series focused on providing solutions, strategies, and practical ideas for recruiting, retaining, and supporting female participation in wheelchair rugby at all levels.
- **Communicate with Membership:** Ensure consistent and transparent communication with membership regarding strategic plans and necessary actions to achieve these goals.

Since WWR committed to gender equity in 2022, we have made great strides. While there is much more work ahead, the momentum is building. We must collectively work together, sharing best practices, success stories, and challenges to continue this progress.

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For more information, visit: worldwheelchair.rugby

