

# Clearing the hoops for wheelchair sports

*Increasing participation in physical activity through community sport and active recreation*

This project is part of a VicHealth funding program known as PICSAR, which aims to increase participation levels in community sport and active recreation amongst people with disabilities and those from low socio-economic, Indigenous and new arrival communities.

## The organisation

Wheelchair Sports Victoria (WSV) aims to provide and promote positive health outcomes for people with a disability through participation in sport and recreation. It is the leading provider of sport and recreation opportunities for people with a disability in Victoria. WSV has over 1400 members, with disabilities such as spinal cord injury (paraplegia and quadriplegia), lower and upper limb amputees, spina bifida, cerebral palsy and other physical conditions affecting mobility. WSV also raises awareness of disability in the wider community by working with over 120 primary and secondary schools, tertiary institutions and organisations annually.

## The project

WSV's *Active and Able* program works with committed partners across Victoria to attract and engage participants in regular activities so that they remain physically active and have a sense of belonging within the local sporting community. WSV is focusing on the development of regional programs, while also further developing the number of opportunities for people living in the metropolitan areas.



Wheelchair Basketball Coach, Neville Thorn, addressing members of Shepparton wheelchair basketball team at a regional tournament. *Image courtesy of Wheelchair Sports Victoria.*

## Coaching program reconnects players across country Victoria

### The story

It is well known that people with a disability can face many obstacles in wanting to participate in a chosen sport or recreational activity. For people living in remote or regional areas, these challenges can be even greater, with opportunities to engage in recreation scarce or non-existent. WSV is determined to change this. Its *Able and Active* program aims to address the barriers that deter people from participating in sport and recreation by developing locally based activities that are sustainable in the long term.

Wheelchair basketball is the most popular disability sport in Australia with approximately 150 players registered with WSV. In recognition of this, over the last 10 years, WSV has coordinated a number of regional wheelchair basketball tournaments throughout Victoria.

WSV realised that the wheelchair tournaments, although popular, did little to increase lasting participation levels and that what was needed was a structured program with a strong emphasis on coaching development. The organisation decided to trial a program in Shepparton, an area which needed a boost.

More information about Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) is available on the VicHealth website at: [www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/picsar](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/picsar)

"Shepparton hosted a club called the Goulburn Valley Wheelies over the years, but interest had started to wane. There were a number of active and interested wheelchair basketballers in the area, including an inspirational 70-year-old man. But most of the activities were ad hoc and not structured to hold their interest on a regular basis," says Joe Rotella, WSV's Manager, Sport and Recreation.

WSV decided to build on four critical aspects to implement an effective sports development program. These were: access to a sports facility; access to sports equipment; access to a qualified coach; and affordability (that is, the need to keep participation costs relatively low).

Finding a suitable, accessible facility was relatively easy, but accessible sports equipment and a coach were major challenges. To overcome these obstacles, WSV conducted an equipment audit and contacted both Basketball Victoria (BV) and the Shepparton Basketball Association (SBA) to secure a coach. SBA recommended a local, Neville Thorn, who had had no experience with wheelchair basketball but was an enthusiastic coach for his son's local team and very keen to learn.

Neville played an integral role in recruiting and sustaining involvement in the program. Through his commitment, wheelchair basketball in Shepparton has gone from an occasional ad hoc affair to a weekly structured session with approximately 10 players.

"Neville is a 'gun'. He is passionate about coaching this wheelchair team. Players now come to training with a purpose. Before Neville's involvement, the players had nothing to aim for. Now there is an incredible team spirit and a great sense of belonging and fun," Joe Rotella says.

During implementation, WSV ensured that all the equipment in Shepparton was suitable and has eight wheelchairs currently available for anyone who wants to join in. "Now we can confidently say if someone in Shepparton wants to play wheelchair basketball, we can accommodate them easily and provide a fun, welcoming environment," adds Joe Rotella.

Wheelchair basketball is also popular in Albury/Wodonga and there are plans underway for teams from both regions to meet regularly in competitions. WSV will also continue with statewide tournaments that are run six times a year in different regional centres, with Shepparton proudly participating with renewed zest.

In order to increase participation, WSV is also proactively recruiting many more participants to its programs. A new initiative includes visiting rehabilitation centres and clinics to promote its programs to people who may not be aware these opportunities exist.

"After illness or an accident, many people, may spend a long time in rehabilitation and then go home to face their new reality. We work with occupational therapists and other health workers to let people know that there are many recreational and sporting activities available. We emphasise the positive aspects of participating in a sport or recreational activity – the sense of belonging and the improved outlook you can get from knowing there are many things you can do, and not being limited by what you can't," Joe Rotella says.

## PICSAR

Sport and active recreation organisations are well placed to assist VicHealth in addressing the health inequalities that result in poorer health outcomes for many groups in the community.

They have a tradition of providing opportunities for individuals and groups to:

- participate in physical activity,
- connect with other members of the community,
- feel part of their local community, and
- develop knowledge and skills that can be used in a range of contexts.

The Participation in Community Sport and Active Recreation (PICSAR) Program comprises three funding programs:

- State and Regional Grants
- Active Participation Grants
- Active Club Grants

The first two programs are long-term investments that work with State Sporting Associations, Regional Sports Assemblies, statewide peak agencies and regional organisations to increase participation in physical activity in specific target populations.

A learning snapshot from the independent evaluation being conducted by Monash University/ ARTD Consultants shows that:

1. partnerships are perceived as beneficial to program delivery
2. it is important that staff (paid or voluntary) have the required skills to implement activities
3. sports at all levels should consider adapting policies and activities to provide greater flexibility to promote inclusion.