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# Wheelchair rugby grows rapidly

By Rebecca Merritt  
*Oregon Daily Emerald*

With a little help from Old Yeller, Allen Seals of Eugene might make it to the 1996 Summer Olympic Games.

Seals is a member of the Oregon Trail quad rugby team which competed this weekend at the Northwest regional tournament at Lane Community College. Old Yeller is the name for his yellow, rugby wheelchair.

"This is the fastest growing wheelchair sport in the world," Seals said. "We're trying to make it an Olympic sport in 1996."

Developed in Canada in the 1970s, wheelchair rugby pits two teams of 11 quadriplegic athletes in a full-contact game that resembles football, soccer and roller derby. Players use sport-specific wheelchairs designed to turn easily on a basketball court.

Angie Seals, tournament director, said athletes are classified by disabilities. Unlike wheelchair basketball, rugby is designed specifically for people who are paralyzed in their arms and legs.

Seven teams from Oregon, California, Washington and Nevada competed in the weekend tournament. The winner, Quadzilla of San Francisco, advances to the national tournament in Boston. The Oregon Trail team, sponsored by Oregon Rehabilitation Center, placed second.

Angie Seals said this is the first time Eugene has hosted a rugby tournament. The sport is attracting a lot of attention in the local community, and Eugene will bid for a chance to host the national tournament next year.

"The disabled community here in Eugene is extremely supportive," she said.

Quad rugby athletes enjoy the competition and camaraderie offered by the sport. Many were active athletes before their injuries, she said.

"There's no other sport you can play in a chair that's a contact sport," said Darren Thomason, a quad rugby athlete from Reno.

Thomason said he works out every day to prepare for competition. The sport, he said, gives him something to look forward

to and he will be playing rugby "until my hands fall off."

Steve Pate, a rugby athlete from Sacramento, said he is addicted to the competition. Many athletes, like Pate, view the game as way of life rather than a hobby.

Allen Seals said the best part of the game is the intense degree of competition and the friendships formed off-court.

"We beat the tar out of one another in competition but we're friends once the game is over," he said.

Angie Seals said 44 teams in the United States have been organized. Seven other countries also have rugby teams.

The only obstacle keeping the game from being an Olympic sport, Allen Seals said, is there is not an able-bodied sport that compares. All other wheelchair sports in the Olympics compare with sports such as basketball and tennis.

Rugby athletes train year-round. The competition season lasts from October to April.

"This is our life," Allen Seals said. "We eat, sleep and breathe rugby."

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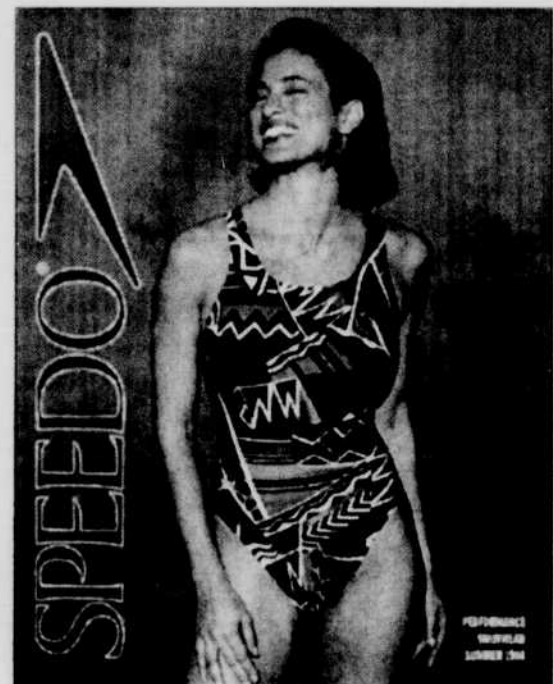
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