

MAVERICKS EXTRA

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Wheelchair team evolves into winner

By Evan Grant

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The Dallas Mavericks are World Champions.

No, really, they are.

The only difference between these Mavericks and the ones with losing streaks of 10 and 15 games this season, is the successful ones play their basketball in wheelchairs.

The wheelchair Mavericks, who have an affiliation with the NBA team, won the national championship last April after six unsuccessful trips to the Final Four. In November, they won the World Championship in Madrid, Spain.

"When I first got involved with the Mavericks, it was very different," said coach Ron Williams, who played for the team 12 years and has coached it the past four. "It used to be a hometown type of team, but the game and the way players compete has changed so much. Our game is so different now. When you play at that level of competition, it's very exciting."

When it comes to wheelchair



basketball, the Mavericks play at the highest level. Only three players on the nine-man roster live in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The rest come from places such as Mexico City, Gainesville, Fla., Detroit and Australia.

It's quite a change from the team's start. The team was started as the Dallas Raiders in 1972 by two Vietnam War veterans and was made up entirely of local players.

They played mostly in local and regional tournaments. A decade later, when the NBA's Mavericks were born, the two began an affiliation that is still in place today. They became the first wheelchair team in the country to carry such an affiliation. The team name was changed to the Mavericks. The NBA team supplied uniforms and some financial support. Now, 17 other teams have such affiliations.

However, the ties between the two teams have, at times, ebbed. The NBA Mavericks intend to strengthen those ties in the near future. They plan to purchase new uniforms for the team and commit some financial support. Also, the NBA team hopes to involve the wheelchair players in some of their community service projects, such as clinics and school appearances.

The NBA has become closer and closer with the National Wheelchair Basketball Association. For the first time, the NBA will sponsor an All-Star game featuring wheelchair players during NBA All-Star weekend. Two Mavericks, Troy Sachs and Darryl Waller, will play for the East. Williams will coach the team.

"If they are going to be identified with us, we want to make sure the support is there for them," said Mavericks president Terdema Ussery, who hadn't seen the wheelchair team play until last month.

The NBA team also might want to borrow from the wheelchair Mavericks' success.

For the past five years, the wheelchair Mavericks have climbed to the top echelon of the sport. They have been to the Final Four four times in the past five years. The NWBA holds a tournament similar to the NCAA's format in its top division, which includes 25 teams. In 1996, the Mavericks lost the final to a team from Arkansas.

Above, Dallas Mavericks president and CEO Terdema Ussery congratulates Abu Yilla (left) and coach Ron Williams (right) for the Dallas Wheel-



The Dallas Morning News: Andy Scott

Last April, they beat the Golden State Road Warriors, one of only three NBA-affiliated teams in the top Division, in the championship.

"It was a relief for us," said Stephen Welch, who lives in Arlington and has played on the team five years. "We didn't want to become known as the Buffalo Bills of wheelchair basketball. It was the culmination of a lot of hard work and effort."

And a lot of talent.

According to Welch, now a player-coach, the Mavericks probably are the best team ever assembled.

They are quicker and taller than most

of their opponents. Wheelchair basketball is still basketball, and height is still a factor. The Mavericks feature 6-7 Waller and 6-5 Jason Van Beek. Reggie Colton, a double-amputee who led the team with 27 points in the 85-61 win over Golden State, also plays tall.

And to all of this, the Mavericks added Sachs, the team's version of Chris Antsey: a young, talented Australian.

Sachs, 22, was attending the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater when the Mavericks recruited him. He also plays for the Australian National team. At the 1996 Paralympic Games in Atlanta, he scored 42 points in the final

chair Mavericks' world title last season. Below, Reggie Colton, passing to Yilla, displays his skills during halftime of an NBA Mavericks game.

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DALLAS WHEELCHAIR MAVERICKS

Name	Pos.	Age	Hometown
Reggie Colton	F	32	Gainesville, Fla.
Eddie Bland	G-F	36	Roanoke
Doug Jones	G	38	Gainesville, Fla.
Raul Ortega	G	25	Mexico City
Troy Sachs	G-F	22	Sydney, Australia
Jason Van Beek	F-C	26	Arlington
Darryl Waller	C	39	Detroit
Stephen Welch	G	26	Arlington
Abu Yilla	G	41	Grand Prairie

HIGHLIGHTS

■ **1997:** Team spends season ranked No. 1 in the National Wheelchair Basketball Rankings (NWBA). Beats team from Nashville in national semifinals and beats Golden State 85-61 to win first National Championship. In November, team wins World Club Championship in Barcelona, Spain.

■ **1996:** Mavericks spend entire season ranked No. 1 in NWBA, but are upset by Fresno, Calif., in the national semifinals.

■ **1995:** Mavericks reach the Final Four for the fifth time, but lose to Fresno in semifinals.

■ **1990:** Mavericks reach the NWBA Final Four for the first time in Chicago, but lose to Casa Colina, a team from Los Angeles, in the semifinals.

■ **1982:** The Raiders change their name to Mavericks as part of a publicity agreement with the new Dallas Mavericks of the NBA. The NBA Mavericks provide uniforms as part of their sponsorship.

■ **1972:** The Dallas Raiders Wheelchair Basketball team is born out of an idea by two Vietnam veterans.

The Dallas Morning News

to lead Australia to the gold medal.

The team's biggest problem is that it has become so internationally flavored, it rarely gets to practice together. Instead, Williams and Welch will diagram a few new plays and show the team before a regular-season tournament. That's where they will practice.

"When we get together, that's when we try to blend a little bit," Williams said. "Our tournaments become our practices."

For the Mavericks, practice has made perfect.