THE SOCIAL VALUE OF WHEELCHAIR RUGBY



GBWR

GREAT BRITAIN WHEELCHAIR RUGBY

CEO'S FOREWORD

I have lost count of the number of times someone has told me that wheelchair rugby changed their life. We hear this so frequently that it could easily be taken for granted. This report is our attempt to take that sentiment seriously—and to measure it.

The resulting figure is £1.15 million of social value generated every year by the players, coaches, and volunteers who keep our clubs thriving.

Our sport is small in terms of overall player numbers, and its addressable population correspondingly niche as it is designed for individuals with significant physical impairments. Yet, its social impact on a per-member basis is profoundly outsized.

Moreover, that financial figure only accounts for those directly participating. It leaves out the parents who learned to step back and see their children thrive, and the families who forged lasting friendships on the sidelines.

The stories captured in these pages are what stay with me: players who learned how to navigate life with a new injury from the person in the next chair; clubs started by individuals who looked for a local team, found nothing nearby, and built one themselves; and the coaches who found a new passion after retiring from their playing days.

There is still more to do. Too few people are introduced to the sport while they are in the hospital—when it can help the most—and too many still have to travel considerable distances to play. I hope this report helps us, along with everyone who funds sport and health initiatives, to close those gaps.

Thank you to everyone who dedicated their time to this research, and above all, to those who shared their stories with us.



Jason Brisbane
Chief Executive
Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby

GBWR
GREAT BRITAIN WHEELCHAIR RUGBY

Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby (GBWR) is the national governing body for wheelchair rugby, a mixed-sex sport supporting over 34 clubs across England, Scotland, and Wales. GBWR delivers the domestic competition programme across two key disciplines: Wheelchair rugby (as seen at the Paralympic Games) and wheelchair rugby fives (pioneered by Great Britain in 2017). Whilst the Paralympic discipline serves as the sport's elite international pathway, wheelchair rugby fives provides a highly accessible format open to individuals with a wide range of impairments.

In addition to managing a robust talent development pathway, the GB high-performance programme secured gold at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. In 2025, regional junior academies were launched to better support the engagement of children and young people in the sport. Furthermore, a dedicated women and girls' programme has been established, culminating in a team entry for the inaugural Wheelchair Rugby Women's World Cup at the end of 2026. To enhance player opportunities even further, GBWR has announced a home nations pathway for wheelchair rugby fives, commencing in 2027.

A Brief History

Wheelchair rugby is one of the only full-contact disability sports, and one of the few where men and women play on the same team. The sport was invented in Canada in 1977 as an intense contact sport for people with spinal injuries. It reached Britain in the early 1980s. The first World Championships followed in 1995.

Its Paralympic debut came as a demonstration sport at Atlanta 1996, with full medal status at Sydney 2000. Wheelchair rugby has been part of every Games since.

From the start it has had close links with spinal injury units, a theme this research returns to in Finding 5.

There are now more than 20 teams playing across GBWR's four leagues.

For many of the people in this report, it is the first sport they have ever played.

Purpose of this research

GBWR commissioned this study to understand and evidence the value of wheelchair rugby to the people who play it, to the people around them, and to society as a whole.

We also set out to understand the sport's relationship with rehabilitation and health services, what other sports could learn from these relationships, and what would help wheelchair rugby reach more people.

How we did this

We surveyed 214 people across every role in the sport. The findings of the survey were then supplemented by more detailed interviews, enabling us to build a rich understanding of the views and experiences of participants, volunteers, supporters and organisers.

Following a mixed methods approach enabled us to build a robust understanding of the drivers behind the headlines, and to truly do justice to the incredible human stories of each and every respondent.

In total, 32 people contributed across 25 semi-structured interviews. We estimated the social value of wheelchair rugby using the Sport England Base Model, using responses to our community survey, which gave us a much larger base of wheelchair rugby respondents than the Active Lives Survey. Wellbeing value was calculated through the Treasury's WELLBY approach and health through NHS and societal costs. The findings are scaled to GBWR's membership in 2026: 521 full, 197 associate and 45 junior members, and 244 monthly volunteers.

NB. The social value figure is based on players and volunteers only, so the ripple effects on friends, families, carers and the wider community must be considered in addition.

Who we heard from

115 adult players · 54 coaches · 40 volunteers 34 officials · 25 parents, carers and supporters 5 players under 16.

Interviewees included players at every level from first session to Paralympic gold, parents, carers, volunteers, officials, coaches, club founders and an NHS peer support worker.

214
Survey Respondents

25
Interviews

WHEELCHAIR RUGBY IN NUMBERS

PARTICIPATION

First Sport

16%

Had done no activity at all before

Main Activity

65%

say it is their main or only sport

Active Now

95%

players do 150 minutes or more a week

WELLBEING AND CONNECTION

Belonging

93%

report a stronger sense of belonging

Connection

94%

report better social connections

Isolation

71%

report less loneliness

SOCIAL VALUE

Total

£1.15M

around £1,500 for every member, every year

Monthly Volunteers

244

creating £196k of wellbeing value a year

Health

240

GP visits avoided each year

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

> **"I WOULD PUT [WHEELCHAIR RUGBY] ON A PAR WITH PASSING MY DRIVING TEST AND MEETING MY WIFE."**
>
> Tony Williams, Northampton Saints

"All of a sudden, I'm speaking in front of people, speaking in front of brands, flying across the world to go and help this sport... The biggest thing for me is confidence and knowing... my disability has not stopped me living, it just gave me new opportunities instead."

Sarah Burrows, Penrith Pumas

"We used to have this saying at the club: we're not creating players, we're creating better people."

Steve Palmer, London Wheelchair Rugby Club

"We all have different conditions and experiences, but we respect one another because of that."

Paul 'Midge' Hartley, Saracens

"I felt like starting life again as a baby and learning how to do literally everything again."

Gavin Walker, former GB captain

"We both knew what the sport had given us. We wanted to give that same support to other people."

Ian Hosking, Stoke Mandeville Maulers

"For me, mental health wise, it's been amazing. It's got me out of the house after five years of being in the house."

Sarah Dillingham, Saracens

"To be honest, I think the parents on the social side get as much. It's like a therapy session for us."

Gary Messer, parent, Newcastle Wheelchair Rugby Club

"Wheelchair rugby has completely changed my life. I've gone from being at home socially isolated, not being a very confident person, not going out much, not doing much, to now having a full-time job, travelling for work, travelling to play wheelchair rugby on my own."

Kascie Higgins, Northampton Saints

"The best thing that happened to him was getting in that chair, because he learned how much he could take... It's made me more tolerant of not putting him in a box, keeping him tucked away and safe."

Nikki Kingett, parent, Crawley Jets

FINDING 1

CREATING ACTIVE LIVES FOR THOSE FACING THE GREATEST BARRIERS

Two years ago, Tony did no physical activity at all. Eighteen months later, he was representing his country.

Wheelchair rugby does what activity campaigns find hardest: it gets inactive disabled people moving, and keeps them moving. Without it, most of this activity would not simply happen somewhere else.

Before wheelchair rugby, 31% of players met the national activity guideline. Now 95% do.

Disabled people are far more likely to be inactive than non-disabled people (39.3% against 19.7%). For many, the problem is not motivation but finding a sport where their impairment is part of the game, not a barrier to it.

Some of the people in this study had never played a sport. Others had tried several and found nothing that fitted their impairment. For both, wheelchair rugby was the first sport that worked.

After taking up the sport, the share of players in our survey meeting the 150-minute weekly activity guideline rose from 31% to 95%, and the share who were inactive fell from 28% to 1%. Almost everyone who was doing little or nothing before is now active.

Once they start, they stay: for 65%, it is now their main or only form of physical activity.

Weekly activity
Before & now





Base: 87 adult players who answered both activity questions; 89 for main or only activity. Percentages include not applicable and unsure.

STARTING AT FIVE



Newcastle Wheelchair Rugby Club

Mick Armstrong set up the club with a friend who had broken his back and found there was no wheelchair rugby club in Newcastle. They started with a couple of chairs on loan. Will was its first junior, so small that no chair fitted him.

Will could barely push the chair, so for two years the club ran a separate non-contact half hour just for him until he was old enough to play. Seeing the club "bend over backwards" for his son turned Gary into what Mick calls "basically our number one junior wheelchair rugby recruiter". Today more than ten juniors train on their own for the first hour of each session, one of the largest junior sections in the country, says founder Mick Armstrong.

Will's Story

What Will's parents remember most about his first session is his face when he saw other people in wheelchairs. They had never been anywhere like it, and they had trouble getting him home. He was five, in lockdown, and, in his words, "just in my house". He has captained his regional team to a national title and this year was named WellChild's most inspirational 7 to 11 year old, meeting Prince Harry at the awards.

A FIRST ROUTE INTO SPORT



Blue Light route

Police UK Disability Sport began in 2023 because one serving police officer saw that colleagues with a disability had nowhere to play. It is now becoming the Blue Light Sports Foundation, a registered charity open to staff of the police, fire, ambulance and armed forces, frontline NHS staff, and their disabled family members. It fields its own wheelchair rugby team, drawing players from across the country. Its wheelchair rugby team hosts tournaments with an open session the day before, so anyone can come and try the sport for the first time.

Tony's Story

Tony is 56, has cerebral palsy, and until two years ago did no physical activity at all. He saw an advert on the police intranet and went along, mainly out of curiosity; within five minutes the coach had him in a chair. Within eighteen months he had gone, in his words, from "a non-sporting person" to representing his country at the Police UK Home Nations tournament, wearing the same squad number his father wore as a volleyball international. When he heard, he says, he burst into tears.

FINDING 2

WHEELCHAIR RUGBY BUILDS COMMUNITIES AND LIFTS PEOPLE OUT OF ISOLATION

For some of the people in this study, wheelchair rugby ended years of isolation. One participant had barely left the house in five years. Another had lost the identity his working life was built on. What changed things, they say, was having somewhere to be every week and people to be there with.

These clubs are more than teams. They are places where disabled people, families and volunteers find each other, and stay.

Belonging and social connection were the most-reported benefits of the 11 we asked about in the survey.

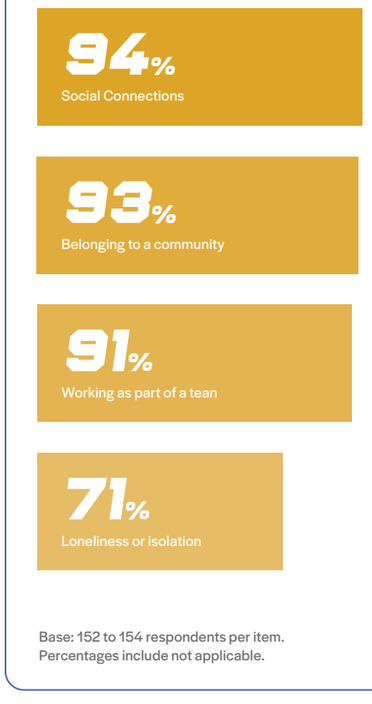
At Crawley Jets, teammates are learning sign language to communicate with Xav, who is deaf, on court.

The community wheelchair rugby builds is unusually mixed: young and old, disabled and non-disabled, different impairments, backgrounds and nationalities, on one court.

The community reaches beyond the players. Parents who wait on the sidelines become friends and keep in touch between sessions. Even opponents help: players describe rival teams coaching each other mid-tournament.

94% say wheelchair rugby has given them better social connections, and 93% a stronger sense of belonging: the most-reported benefits of the 11 we asked about.

% reporting a positive effect



Base: 152 to 154 respondents per item.
Percentages include not applicable.

A CLUB WHERE DISABILITY IS THE NORM



London Wheelchair Rugby Club

A registered charity, the club trains at the Aspire National Training Centre in Stanmore, next to a spinal injuries unit, so new patients can wheel past, see a session and join in. Its players range from current Great Britain squad members to people who play for the social side, all coached the same way. The club pays for players' food, accommodation and most of their travel to competitions, and a hardship fund helps those who cannot afford to get to training, so no one has to choose, as Steve puts it, between "playing rugby or heating the house".

Steve's Story

Steve was injured in 1996. One weekend a nurse on his rehabilitation, who refereed wheelchair rugby, took him to a tournament in Belgium. "Wheelchair rugby has made my life so much richer," he says. He went on to play for Great Britain, and now chairs and coaches the London club, where Muslim and Jewish players, black and white, play side by side, and his rule is simple: look after "the person first, the player second". As he puts it: "Don't care where you're from, who you are or what you are, you're just a London player."

A CLUB THAT MAKES ROOM FOR EVERYONE



Crawley Jets

Xav first tried wheelchair rugby at an after-school club at Valence School, which had secured a grant for five rugby chairs. He has cerebral palsy, is deaf and has communication needs. He wears a device that sends the coaches' voices straight into his hearing aids, and the club makes sure everyone is included, Nikki says, "to whatever level they are".

Nikki and Xav's Story

For a deaf young man with cerebral palsy, being part of a team starts with being understood. At Crawley Jets, the coaches sat down with Xav's family to plan how to talk to him, and his teammates are learning sign language so they can talk to him on court. Xav, usually quiet with people he does not know, now wheels in and goes round saying hello to everyone. "It feels like it's a community thing," says his mum, Nikki. "They've built like a little community together."

FINDING 3

FITTER, STRONGER, MORE CONFIDENT: THE POWER OF WHEELCHAIR RUGBY

Wheelchair rugby changes how people feel as well as what they can do. Getting fitter and stronger builds confidence, and confidence opens up the rest of life.

"The stronger I got, the faster I got. The faster I got, the more confident I got. The more confident I got, the more I went out and did." Ian Hosking

- **88% feel better about themselves**
- **86% cope better with challenges**
- **82% stay more active**
- **49% play partly for their mental health**

Several described the low point before they started. One, medically discharged after 27 years in the RAF, said he had been "existing, not living".

Wellbeing value, per year

Adult participation	£703,946
Volunteering	£196,127
Children and young people	£95,013
Health outcomes	£156,798
Total	**£1,151,883**

How we calculated this: the Sport England Base Model turns the wellbeing gain people report from taking part into a money value, using the Treasury's WELLBY measure, then scales it to GBWR's players and volunteers. Health values come from NHS and societal costs avoided.

Those personal changes add up to public value

The value of participation is £703,946 a year for adults and £95,013 for children and young people. It is modelled to avoid around 10 cases of clinical depression a year, along with 240 GP visits and 250 psychotherapy sessions. Depression alone makes up 56% of the health value.

This is wellbeing the Treasury can count: close to £1m a year, before a single ripple effect on families is included.

% reporting a positive effect



MENTAL WELLBEING



Saracens Wheelchair Rugby Club

Saracens draws players and volunteers from across north London and Hertfordshire, including veterans and serving personnel who arrive through Invictus and Blue Light programmes. Several of its volunteers came to the club through a family member and stayed.

Sarah's Story

After the pandemic, Sarah stopped leaving the house; even her shopping was delivered. She first helped Saracens from home, by email and phone. When she finally went to the club's awards evening, the welcome made her realise she could go out. Now her friends tease her: they used to not see her because she would not come out, and now they do not see her because she is away with wheelchair rugby. She still lives with anxiety, but the sport, she says, has "lessened my anxiety".

"It's given me my life back." Sarah Dillingham, Saracens

PHYSICAL WELLBEING AND IDENTITY



The Invictus pathway

For people whose identity was built around service or around sport, wheelchair rugby offers both back at once. Invictus and Blue Light programmes bring veterans and emergency service personnel into the sport, and several go on to play and coach at club level for years afterwards.

Midge's Story

Midge served 27 years in the RAF and captained every rugby team he played for, until a progressive condition ended his career and he was medically discharged. He stopped going out and, by his own account, was existing rather than living. Through the sport he lost six stone and went on to captain Invictus Games Team UK to a silver medal.

"When I go and play wheelchair rugby, I never need to justify to anybody why I'm playing wheelchair rugby." Paul 'Midge' Hartley, Saracens

FINDING 4

LEARNING TO LIVE INDEPENDENTLY, FROM THE PERSON IN THE NEXT CHAIR

After her surgeries, Sarah Burrows was at home all the time with her mum, who became her main carer. Four years into wheelchair rugby, she drives everywhere on her own, and her mum can enjoy "being my mum again rather than my main carer".

Players learn how to live with a disability from each other. As they become more independent, the pressure eases on someone else: a parent, a partner, a carer.

91% report a positive effect from learning practical skills from people with similar experiences: transfers, driving, air travel, parenting, setting up a chair.

A club founder put it another way: therapists teach the medical way of doing things, and other players teach the real-life way. Clinical care ends at discharge; clubs pick up where it stops.

> **"I was able to learn everything from... parenting, to travel, to living independently."**
>
> **Gavin Walker, former GB captain**

It reaches the people around them

When a player becomes more independent, family life changes too. Parents describe learning to step back, often after watching other players manage on their own. Partners and carers find their role shifting from looking after someone to supporting them.

64% of survey respondents say their involvement has had a positive effect on the people around them.

None of this is counted in the £1.15m. Every parent who can step back, and every partner who no longer has to be a carer, is value on top.

% reporting a positive effect

91% Learning practical skills from others

64% Independence in daily life

64% Impact on those around me

Base: 153 respondents per item.
Percentages include not applicable.

INDEPENDENCE, AND WHAT IT GIVES A CARER



Penrith Pumas

Penrith Pumas play wheelchair rugby fives, the format most open to people with a wide range of impairments and the one most club members play. In rural Cumbria, the Pumas recruit through local health professionals and volunteers: Sarah's own physio was the team's physio.

Sarah's Story

Sarah was a dancer until her health took her off the stage. When her physio suggested wheelchair rugby, she told her mum: "I don't think I need a disability sport. I think they're being a bit dramatic." Her mum took her anyway. Four years on, the woman who would not fly across the country on her own has flown to the Hague to volunteer, speaks for the sport in public, sits on GBWR's community commission, and drives herself to tournaments. Her mum, who had become her main carer, can now enjoy being her mum again.

> **"I didn't have the confidence to go out on my own. And then I found the sport and now I go everywhere, drive everywhere on my own, been to different countries."**
>
> **Sarah Burrows, Penrith Pumas**

2 CAREERS OUT OF 1 FAMILY



The Higgins family and Northampton Saints

Jamie came to wheelchair rugby as the parent of a son who could not take part in school PE and had struggled in disability football. Most clubs then ran daytime sessions, until Northampton Saints advertised taster sessions in 2017. Jamie took his coaching qualification in exchange for a hundred voluntary hours. He now delivers GB Wheelchair Rugby's junior programme and works as a club development officer.

Kascie's Story

Kascie spent his teens at home, socially isolated and, in his words, "not being a very confident person". At his first session he was 16, the youngest by a decade, very shy, with his dad alongside him. Today he travels the UK for a full-time job in sport, and to play wheelchair rugby on his own. One taster session changed two lives: "It gave me a sport to play, my dad a job, and then me a job as well."

FINDING 5

WHEELCHAIR RUGBY HAS A PROVEN PLACE IN REHABILITATION, WITH ROOM TO REACH MANY MORE

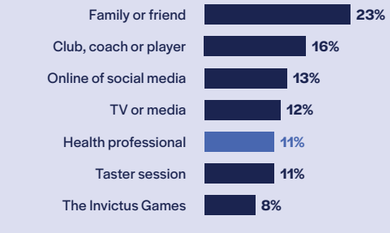
Tristan was injured while in a rugby development programme. Within two weeks at Stoke Mandeville, he was playing wheelchair rugby at the stadium.

Wheelchair rugby already works as rehabilitation. The opportunity is to make it a routine part of rehabilitation and social prescribing, rather than something people find by chance.

Wheelchair rugby was invented in Canada in 1977 by tetraplegic athletes who wanted a game where players with limited arm and hand function could take a full part. It reached Britain in the early 1980s through an exhibition game at Stoke Mandeville, home of the National Spinal Injuries Centre, and its links with spinal rehabilitation remain strong today. It became a full Paralympic event at Sydney 2000.

On the ward, patients only weeks into a new injury see what life can look like years later: a long-time player transferring into a rugby chair and driving himself home. After discharge, the club is where people learn the practical side of living with an impairment.

How players first heard about the sport

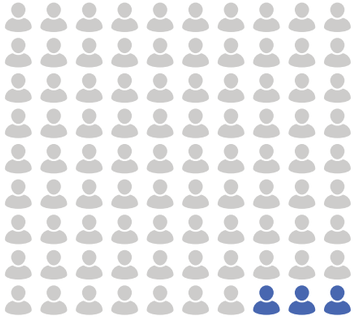


Where the link is made, it matters

When we asked players how they first heard about the sport, 10 said a health professional. But only 3 in 90 were ever formally referred by a health or support service, and all three called that referral extremely important. 69% say wheelchair rugby helps them manage their health or condition.

Players born with a condition such as cerebral palsy describe finding at the club advice nobody had offered before. Where links work, they come from the sport built into an institution or one person inside it, and at this year's Inter Spinal Unit Games several units began engaging with local clubs.

The link between hospital and club works. Right now it rests on a handful of committed people. It could be built into every spinal unit.



Only **3** in **90** players were ever formally referred to the sport by a health service. All three called it extremely important.

SPORT ON THE REHAB TIMETABLE



Stoke Mandeville

The spinal injuries unit, the national stadium and a wheelchair rugby club sit alongside one another. Inpatients try the sport in sessions on the unit and can watch the club train. There is no written agreement: the link rests on the unit's sport therapist and the club chair, and when the therapist post was vacant, the sessions stopped for a few months.

Tristan's Story

Tristan was 14, and in the Northampton Saints development programme, when he was injured. At Stoke Mandeville, sport was on the rehab timetable, and within two weeks he was playing wheelchair rugby at the stadium. The sport gave the whole family a community: his dad, Stephen, is now the team mechanic. Three years on, Tristan gives advice to younger players, and was chosen to co-captain the Saints at this year's nationals.

"It's really important to include it in rehabilitation because you meet other people that are playing sports... And sometimes when you just have an injury, you don't really see further down the road that actually that's possible." Delphine, Tristan's mum

A FORMER PATIENT ON THE WARD



North East Bulls

The Bulls were founded 25 years ago by men who met each other on a spinal unit, and their first two volunteers were the unit's own occupational therapist and physiotherapist. Once or twice a year the club brings rugby chairs into the therapy gym so patients, and staff, can try it. There is no written agreement of any kind.

Shaun's Story

Shaun met his teammates on a spinal unit 25 years ago, and the unit's own physio and occupational therapist helped them start the Bulls. For the last 15 years he has worked on that unit as a peer support worker, so he gets to know every patient, and anyone interested in rugby gets an invitation.

"You get taught the very basics in a spinal unit, because you're only there for like a finite time... But your real living and your real life rehabilitation starts when you go home." Shaun Lacey, North East Bulls

3 WAYS TO HELP WHEELCHAIR RUGBY REACH EVERYONE WHO COULD BENEFIT

01

Make sport part of rehabilitation and social prescribing

The health benefits of wheelchair rugby reach beyond rehabilitation after injury, and several people in this study have lived with a condition since birth. Patient education sessions offer an opportunity to introduce sport more routinely during rehabilitation. Where a governing body development officer worked directly with spinal units, players followed. Only 3 of 90 players were ever referred by a health service, and social prescribing offers a route to many more.

For: NHS England, the Department of Health and Social Care, social prescribing services, spinal and neuro-rehabilitation units, Sport England.

02

Open up venues, and invest in facilities and equipment

Clubs can only grow where venues will host them, and some still refuse wheelchair sport over marks on sports hall floors. 41% of respondents travel more than an hour to take part, including 17% who travel more than two hours. Cost is the barrier survey respondents name most often (47%): a rugby chair costs around £6,000, and one club pays around £6,000 a year for a single court. Where a club opens within reach, participation follows.

For: Sport England, DCMS, local authorities, leisure operators, the education sector.

03

Invest in the volunteer workforce

244 volunteers generate around £196,000 of social value a year in their own wellbeing alone, before counting what they make possible for others. Clubs describe running on five people.

For: Sport England, DCMS.

The Social Value of Wheelchair Rugby
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A full technical report will be published separately.
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