

Being a wheelchair user should not deter you from becoming a sports coach

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We took our video camera to Leeds Beckett University to film American football coach and ConnectedCoaches member Will Babbington, who wants to see more wheelchair users get involved in coaching.

- **Lack of confidence is a huge barrier preventing wheelchair users from getting involved in sport or physical activity.**
- **There are some simple solutions to the practical problems wheelchair users face.**
- **Being in a wheelchair is irrelevant to a person's ability to coach.**
- **If you are a wheelchair user and have ever thought about becoming a coach, then you have already, unwittingly, cleared the first big barrier.**
- **Just thinking about getting out and doing something means you have the mindset needed, says Will Babbington.**

The headline is not intended to be in any way flippant.

It is an easy trap to fall into though: preaching to readers what is easy and what is difficult for wheelchair users, what they should or shouldn't do, when the statements you are proposing are not rooted in personal experience, rather guesswork or a few hours' online research.

Of course, no disrespect is intended, but it must be galling nonetheless for those with disabilities to read articles peppered with lifestyle advice and glib comments.

The only time I have spent in a wheelchair is two weeks in Greece after crashing through a plate glass window when I was 12 and slicing through a tendon in my leg. It wasn't a pleasant experience. And I will never forget, on my return home, that feeling of morose despondency as I watched on crutches from the sidelines as my school football team contested the cup semi-final without me. How I craved to be on that pitch.

But does that in any way qualify me to write the headline at the top of the page? Of course it doesn't. My eye-opener into how the [1.2 million UK wheelchair users](#) live their lives was merely a fleeting glimpse into the hardships they go through every day with persistence and courage.

If wheelchair users are to be persuaded to take their first steps into coaching, a credible voice is required to pass judgement.

Which is why I went to see wheelchair user and American football coach [Will Babbington](#) one sun-

drenched May morning during a training session with his Leeds Academy of American Football under-17 squad at Leeds Beckett University.

I wanted to ask him how much of a deterrent being in a wheelchair was to launching a coaching career, and what barriers he faced when making the leap.

Chapter two

Will's words carry the necessary gravitas to hopefully inspire other wheelchair users to follow his path into coaching.

He has featured on ConnectedCoaches before, in the article [An iron Will: How a disabled American football coach is bucking the trend](#).

It was time to dust off the video equipment and get ready for part two of the story: Where there's a Will, there's a way, and provide some visual evidence to show that coaching from a wheelchair is viable, while expanding on some of the issues discussed in that first interview.

If you are a wheelchair user reading this, congratulations – you are partway to becoming a coach, according to Will, having already cleared the first barrier without even realising it.

‘If you are thinking about it, then you’ve got the mindset that you want to get out and want to do something, and at that point, you’ve got nothing to lose. You’ve taken the hardest step just to get to that phase.’

Getting to that juncture may take time. Every disabled person will have their own personal mountain to climb. In Will's case, an autoimmune condition weakened his muscles, to the extent that he began using a wheelchair eight years ago.

‘When I first went into a wheelchair, I basically didn't want to leave the house. I was scared to. What happens if I get stuck somewhere and can't move myself? Who's going to help me if I haven't got my wife or car there? But then, as you get used to the chair or your disability, you start realising you can do more and more things on your own, and you don't feel as isolated any more.’

This lack of confidence is a huge barrier that a lot of wheelchair users find difficult to negotiate.

With no confidence comes isolation, and isolation can lead to lack of confidence, says Will. It is a ‘massive factor’ preventing people going into coaching, and a vicious circle that may also serve to perpetuate people's inertia.

‘I think that confidence comes with acceptance as well,’ adds Will. ‘Alternatively, if people are always staring at you and whispering about you behind your back, then your confidence will just go, and you will think, “Why do I bother when I have to put up with all this?”’

While the stigma surrounding people with disabilities is changing ‘ever so slightly’, discrimination still remains.

‘I've never had an issue here at Leeds Academy of American Football. Parents, players and coaches have all been very respectful.

I think generally what you find is that, if people are respectful of race and sexuality, then disability is nothing to them. But where those stigmas maybe still stick a little, then wheelchair users and disabled people will run into the same issues.

‘Players and parents can be very uncomfortable, for want of a better word, of someone in a wheelchair or of someone with a disability who is coaching their child. They may not feel the session is safe or that the

coach knows what they are doing.’

Will Babbington

Fact-finding mission

If confidence remains the biggest obstacle, it isn't the only one.

Some problems are more self-evident, and are the same regardless of a person's disability: how to get to training sessions or matches, transport links, accessibility of venues.

‘If you are coaching an indoor sport especially, a lot of gyms and sports halls are downstairs or are not particularly wheelchair accessible,’ says Will. ‘If you are outside, chances are you will probably be much better off.’

Some simple solutions exist to the practical problems of coaching in a wheelchair, with meticulous planning one of the secrets to success.

‘It's not as simple as just turning up and taking a session,’ he says. ‘You've got to know what you're going to do. Every few minutes, you should have broken it down in your mind or have it in your written plan, what it is you want to do next.’

‘You want to spend a bit of extra time sometimes explaining what it is you want your players to do. I can't demonstrate anything. Now, there are some schools of thought who will say “Good, a coach should never have to demonstrate. You should be able to verbalise what it is that you want.”’

‘But I know some people like to see what it is they are going to be doing so I always like to have a demonstration. For that, I will need one of our experienced players or another coach. Again, that means getting here a little earlier [so I can run through it with them].’

Coaching: It's just fantastic

A recon and some research is advisable, then, before approaching a club, but don't let the obvious obstacles put the kibosh on your plans.

Will is adamant that you won't regret giving it a go, and emphasises the fact that being in a wheelchair is

irrelevant to a person's ability to coach.

'You never know what may happen, how brilliant you'll find it. If you find something you're passionate about, it shouldn't matter that you're in a wheelchair.'

'Go and get in touch with someone, and they will meet you with open arms, they really will.'

'Sports teams are crying out for coaches of all kinds. Just because you are in a wheelchair doesn't mean to say you can't coach the sport. If you're thinking about it, please go and do it.'

'Coaching is the most rewarding thing I have ever done. The passion the kids have for the sport rubs off on us as much as I think our passion rubs off on them – that impact that we've had on them, the fact we have made them what they are, we've moulded them. It's almost instant feedback, and it's just fantastic. There's nothing like it.'

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Next steps

UK Coaching (formerly sports coach UK), in conjunction with WheelPower, has produced a [Coaching Manual Wheelchair Users Guide](#), which offers generic advice to coaches.

Whatever your background, you can coach. Find out more about taking the first steps on your coaching path by [visiting the UK Coaching website](#).

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