

'Playing Sports ... is Everything'

A service-disabled Iraq War veteran rekindled his passion for playing football by joining an adaptive sports football league for wheelchair-bound athletes

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Matt Daniels can catch a football after breaking off into a route, or he can fling a pass with the ease of a veteran quarterback — and he does this all from his wheelchair.

Draped in the proverbial red, white and blue of his hometown NFL team, the Buffalo Bills, Daniels was among the first players to join the national Wheelchair Football League during its inception in 2020.

For the Iraq War veteran, who served with the Army's 101st Airborne Division between 2006 and 2010, the league gave him a chance to pursue a passion he believed was out of walking distance when a service-related injury left him wheelchair-bound.

"Being able to play football again has been huge," said Daniels, a former football standout at Niagara Wheatfield High School from 2001-05. "And to be part of the first-ever Buffalo wheelchair football team, it's amazing; I'm proud to be a part of it."

A Life member of VFW Post 7487 in Lewiston, New York, about 25 miles north of Buffalo, New York, Daniels was among the first wave of wheelchair-bound football players to join the 11-team league created by the NFL, Bob Woodruff Foundation and Move United.

Today, Daniels belongs to a fraternity of more than 570 players who have joined the national Wheelchair Football League, competing in tournaments across major cities that include Phoenix, Las Vegas and Kansas City, Missouri.

"It's grown so much since I was asked to play three years ago," Daniels said. "We have a great fan base, too. To be out there with my team and hear a crowd of 400 or more people chant 'Let's go Buffalo,' it's the biggest rush I've ever had in sports ever in my life."

Daniels' Buffalo Bills wheelchair team, which plays their home games at the Buffalo

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

RiverWorks waterfront complex, also was the subject of a PBS documentary during last year's season.

The 30-minute documentary, "Concrete Gridiron," follows Daniels and his football team throughout their inaugural 2021-22 season, capturing life among disabled athletes finding a purpose in adaptive sports.

"The documentary is not about winning, as we didn't win one game," Daniels said. "Of course, that was upsetting because I'm very competitive. But I tried to look at all the positives that happened during the season, and one of them was building friendships and building a bond, which helped us walk into our second season."

'KEEPS MY MIND BUSY'

Despite the Wheelchair Football League being in its infancy, Daniels brings both a lifetime of football experience and a keen understanding for the hurdles young disabled athletes go through.

As one of the older members of the Buffalo Bills wheelchair team, a captain and veteran locker-room presence, Daniels has been playing in adaptive sports leagues since 2016.

"A friend of mine introduced me to sled hockey, and I was instantly hooked," Daniels said. "It's made the journey a lot easier for me. It made me realize I shared similar difficulties with people. And over time, I learned they didn't feel sorry for themselves. They just kept moving on just like a regular person with no difficulties, no disabilities."

Aside from sled hockey, Daniels also joined wheelchair lacrosse and then eventually wheelchair football. The three-sport veteran, a self-admitted sports junkie, added that joining all these teams has helped him cope with his own experience.

"Playing sports to me is everything," Daniels said. "Growing up playing sports and still being able to play as an adult in adaptive sports is huge for me. Sports taught me a lot about life, and it keeps my mind busy."

ADVOCATE FOR YOUNG ATHLETES

Daniels hopes that in time, he can eventually mentor younger adaptive sports athletes as a way to pay it forward for what the community has given him in turn.

"It's opened up my eyes in general, and it's nice to be a part of this community and share my story with them," Daniels said. "Hopefully, in the long haul, I can encourage the youth, especially now that there are all these sports available to them. I want to let them know to not be afraid to take that step forward to be a part of something like this."

Part of the appeal for Daniels, too, is the room for diversity in adaptive sports. Unlike sports

that categorize and split factions of athletes based on age, gender and level of skill, adaptive sports bring them all together for healthy competition.

The shared passion, according to Daniels, and competing against one another without any wedges in between is the main motivation for the athletes.

“It’s very refreshing because everything else goes out the window, and you just focus on sports,” Daniels said. “It’s not about your disability or your background, or what type of person you are. It is about your guys being there for the same purpose — to compete and have fun.”

Daniels plans on continuing to compete across several adaptive sports, serving as both a role model and advocate for younger athletes seeking to find a semblance of what he has found.

With the 2023 Buffalo Bills wheelchair football team season already rolling, Daniels hopes to continue to both inspire and provide his competitive edge as he and his teammates battle teams in upcoming tournaments.

“I’m just getting started,” Daniels said. “There’s still more I want to do.”

The Bills wheelchair football team is scheduled to compete in upcoming tournaments in Chicago (Aug. 13-14), Tampa, Florida, (Aug. 26-28) and Salt Lake City (Oct. 22-23).

This article is featured in the 2023 August issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.