Sled hockey is an exhilarating sport, to watch as well as to play. For those athletes that do take up the sport, the idea of hopping on the ice, pushing around awhile, and not having any other cares at that moment is a big draw. And most would say the fact that it is a full contact sport draws them in as well.

The sport has grown in popularity in recent years, partially due to the reasons above, but also for a couple other reasons. First, it is being offered in more locations across the country. More than 30 Disabled Sports USA chapters offer sled hockey as one of their adaptive sport activities and other sled hockey programs also exist. The popularity of the sport at the Paralympic level is another reason it is growing among individuals with physical disabilities. After all, Team USA has now won three straight gold medals during the Winter Games.

**GIVE IT A TRY**

You don’t have to be a fan of ice hockey or even be knowledgeable about the sport in order to give it a try. “I knew nothing about hockey beforehand,” said Rachel Grusse who plays with the Gaylord Wolfpack (a Connecticut chapter of Disabled Sports USA) as well as with the U.S. Women’s Development Sled Hockey Team.

“My friend Kelly (Lavore), who was on the team, recommended sled hockey to me. I tried it and loved it,” she said. Seven years later, she is still enjoying the sport.

Retired Army Sergeant Chris Leverkuhn, who is a below-the-knee amputee as a result of an injury suffered in Iraq, agrees. While rehabbing in San Antonio, he tried sled hockey during a trip he took to Sun Valley. “I didn’t want to do it at first, but I tried it and loved it,” he said. Prior to that, “I knew who Wayne Gretsky was and that was the extent of my hockey knowledge.”

Leverkuhn met Operation Comfort, a chapter of Disabled Sports USA in San Antonio, and began playing with the Rampage sled hockey team in 2007, the first year of the team. “It has made a big impact on me. As a former military member, who had a jarring incident happen, this has been an outlet for my frustration and anger or emotions.” Sled hockey is definitely good for stress relief.

Kevin McKee, a two-time gold medalist with Team USA’s sled hockey team was also drawn into the physical nature of the sport. “It is a very physical sport, the most physical one I know of,” he said. “I just want to get on the ice and hit someone.” He describes the contact sport as “little mini car crashes.” But McKee also appreciates how freeing it can be. “I love being able to glide around the ice ... I feel like a normal hockey player.”

Grusse, Leverkuhn, and McKee are also attracted to the fast-paced nature of the sport. “It is both a mental and physical sport, which I really like,” Grusse said. The sport involves physicality as well as strategy. “You have to be able to think quickly,” McKee said.

Another element the three players enjoy about sled hockey is the team aspect. It is a tight-knit community and there is a lot of camaraderie. I have made some good friends through this sport,” Grusse said. Playing for Operation Comfort, which is primarily a team comprised of active-duty service members and veterans, Leverkuhn also enjoys the “military style mentality when it comes to team.”

**EQUIPMENT/RESOURCES NEEDED**

Your first time out on the ice, you will mainly just need to wear something you are comfortable sweating in, according to Leverkuhn. You will undergo a full fitting to get the right gear and equipment that works best for your body. Sleds, and the buckets you sit in, can be customized to the individual. “Sometimes it is a rough start and there needs to be sled adjustments,” Leverkuhn said. A good sled is real snug and sleds can be accommodated to individual bodies.
You will also be outfitted with a chest protector, elbow pads, hockey boots and/or shin guards if applicable, and a helmet with face protection. You will also receive two hockey sticks, each having a blade on one end (which is used to make contact with the puck) and spikes on the bottom that helps maneuver players around the ice. The good news is that all sled hockey programs typically provide the equipment required to participate in the sport.

**FUNDAMENTALS OF THE GAME**

Derek Daniels, the manager of adaptive sports at Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, a chapter of Disabled Sports USA in Chicago and McKee’s club team, suggests the first thing you have to develop is your sled skills. “You have to get familiar with the equipment and how to maneuver your sled on the ice,” he said. “We teach players how to push and how to turn and steer.” You will also most likely start out with wider blades to match your ability and comfort level. Wider blades, which go up to six inches, will help with balance and stability but limit speed and maneuverability. Getting to a blade that is 1.5 to 2 inches is good. Of course, you use the sticks to propel yourself around the ice.

After mastering the sled, you can then concentrate on puck handling, including hand passing and shooting. “Don’t get frustrated, although it is easy to do so,” Grusse said. “No one is amazing overnight. It took me a year to get used to the sled and a little longer to learn the sticks.” After that, you can focus on the actual game concepts and developing your hockey IQ by doing research and expanding your knowledge of the game. Two basic things you should know: games consist of three periods, each fifteen minutes long and teams consist of a set of offensive players (forwards), defense, and goalies.

Sled hockey is a sport that can accommodate a variety of disabilities and is for individuals who can’t be in upright skates, according to Leverkuhn. Players are often affected by amputations, paralysis, multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injury, cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury or other lower extremity disabilities. “If you have legs, legs get in the way in this sport,” Leverkuhn said. “It is the one time you can say you are fortunate to be a double amputee.”

Daniels, from Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, also points out that a number of adaptations are available for various impairments. Straps for legs may be needed or higher backs on the sled for those with a spinal cord injury, for example. Individuals with CP or TBI may not be able to use sticks. Push bars are available so a stand-up skater can assist with movement.

Even though it is a contact sport, Daniels also assures that it is pretty safe. “There is a lot of padding that helps to protect players.”

**FIND A PROGRAM**

Sled hockey is a sport where you are right in the action and right in the play, even more so than stand-up hockey as the ice and puck are only a foot or two away. It is also a sport for players of various backgrounds. Grusse, one of two females on her Gaylord team, said that the male players might take it easy on you at first. “But once you show you are not afraid to hit them, that changes.” And at Shirley Ryan, the age range of players goes from 19 years old to 68, including four guys in their late 60s.

If you are interested in the sport, Grusse suggests watching sled hockey or para ice hockey online to get a feel for it. Then, give it a try for at least one or two years. To find a Disabled Sports USA chapter that offers sled hockey, visit https://www.disabledsportsusa.org/chapters/location-map/. For other locations or resources, visit https://www.usahockey.com/disabledhockey.