

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 6
Issue 3 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 8

December 2002

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Recommended Citation

Warren, Sarah (2002) "VVAF and Sports for Life: Promoting Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Rights," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 6 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol6/iss3/8>

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VVAF and Sports for Life: Promoting Rehabilitation, Reintegration and Rights

VVAF volleyball players compete at the Sydney Paralympics. c/o Andy Eams



The Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation's (VVAF) Sports for Life program gives people with disabilities a chance to come together around sports, providing important opportunities for social reintegration.

by Sarah C. Warren, VVAF

Rehabilitation Redefined

VVAF began implementing programs for people with war-related disabilities in 1992 in Cambodia.¹ In 1991, on their first trip back to southeast Asia since the Vietnam War, VVAF's founders had been overwhelmed by the images of countless amputees wandering and beg-

ging in the streets of Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital. The appalling living conditions and lack of medical treatment witnessed by the returning veterans on this trip inspired them to set up the Kien Khleang Rehabilitation Center, which stands on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. Today, VVAF runs a total of four rehabilitation centers throughout Cambodia, as well as the highly successful *Joom Noon* silk weaving cooperative run by people

with disabilities. VVAF also works in seven other war-affected countries around the world, running comprehensive rehabilitation, education and advocacy programs.

As VVAF's programs have grown, so too has our understanding of how best to help landmine survivors and other people with disabilities return to an active life. VVAF has recognized what is becoming standard thinking among many rehabilitation organizations working in post-war countries: it is not enough simply to provide a person with an artificial limb or a wheelchair. Addressing the broader emotional, social and economic

needs of survivors is a critical aspect of the rehabilitation process and should in no way be misconstrued as a luxury. Indeed, without an opportunity to leave their homes and participate in community life—and without enough self-confidence to get them out of the house—some people feel they have no reason to wear a prosthesis or make use of a wheelchair. Follow-up care and outreach services are essential to ensure that devices are appropriately constructed and fitted and are being used properly. Beyond this, though, we must also support survivors in becoming reintegrated into all aspects of community life, including education, employment, recreation, and social and political activities.

Barriers exist in every society that make such integration challenging, all of them bolstered by one of the largest barriers of all: people's attitudes towards disability. Problematic are both the self-image of people with disabilities and the perceptions of society as a whole. In the countries in which VVAF works, people with disabilities are typically regarded with pity, scorn, mistrust or complete indifference. In fact, in many places, people with disabilities are practically invisible. Making progress on issues such as accessibility, education and employment requires a shift in attitude toward disability, as well as the adoption and enforcement of appropriate policies. Inclusive and respectful practices must be developed at the family, community and societal levels.

Ultimately, for real and lasting change to occur, people with disabilities must themselves demand reform. They must make themselves visible and insist that their voices be heard. To be effective and far-reaching, this movement for change should be advanced by a unified group of people with all types of disabilities. Thus, landmine survivors should come together with people with other types and causes of disability to share their experiences and forge alliances. VVAF's new Sports for Life initiative is designed to help people do just that, to build a bridge between physical rehabilitation and social reintegration by providing people with the opportunity to come together around sports and recreational ac-

tivities and begin advocating for themselves.

Sport as an Entry Point

The basic concept underlying Sports for Life is that that sport can be used as a powerful vehicle for change. On the individual level, sports and recreation play an important part in promoting physical health and mobility, as well as emotional well-being and self-confidence. At the same time, sports and recreation activities provide people with disabilities an opportunity—sometimes their first opportunity—to come together to share ideas and experiences. What begins as a conversation about sport typically evolves into a conversation about accessibility, employment or education. Also, because of its wide appeal, sport provides an inviting and positive way to increase the visibility of people with disabilities in their communities, drawing attention to their strengths and abilities. Also, sports and recreation activities can be integrated so that able-bodied people play with people with disabilities in a fun, cooperative setting. Thus, sports can be regarded as an entry point to working on a variety of other issues that are significant to people with disabilities.

Reversal of Fortune

In Cambodia, people have traditionally looked upon disability as a sign of bad karma, meaning that people with disabilities evidently brought misfortune upon themselves through some wrongdoing in a previous life. The disabled volleyball players supported by VVAF's Sports for Life program no longer buy into that conception of disability. The Cambodian National Volleyball Team for the Disabled currently ranks fourth in the world in standing volleyball. Standing volleyball is a sport played by people with a fairly high level of mobility, such as people with a single arm or leg amputation and people with limited paralysis, such as some polio survivors.

VVAF has supported the national team since 1999, when it was training for the 2000 Paralympic Games in Sydney, Australia. Cambodia won only one of its five matches in Australia, but returned to the practice court at VVAF's Kien Khleang Rehabilitation Center determined to train harder than ever and increase its level of play. With support from its sponsor, Cathay Pacific, and singer-songwriter Nanci Griffith, VVAF sent the team to the World Cup Games in Slovakia in 2001. There, the team played

A volleyball player signs autographs for Australian schoolgirls. c/o Andy Eams



Victim & Survivor Assistance

an outstanding tournament, narrowly losing its battle for the bronze medal.

The efforts of the volleyballers are having a great impact on Cambodian society, as well as the lives of individual players. Cambodians take pride in the achievements of their team, while young people with disabilities are finding new role models to emulate. What is more, the players are demonstrating an unprecedented level of self-confidence. The team's coordinator, Chris Minko, noted that "some of the players have been seen strutting through the streets of Phnom Penh wearing shorts and showing off their prostheses," a scene that would have been unimaginable in Cambodia just two short years ago.

In June and July of 2002, VVAF coordinated the first ever national league

competition for people with disabilities. Three teams from Phnom Penh and five from outlying provinces traveled to the Kien Khleang Center to participate. The first year of the league proved to be a resounding success. Particularly exciting was the zeal with which former national team players set out to recruit and train new team members. Local businesses, government leaders and media organizations also threw their support behind the effort, reflecting a significant change in attitude toward athletes with disabilities and people with disabilities in general. At the end of the league competition, a selection competition was held and a new national team was identified to play in the upcoming Far East Asian (FESPIC) games in October 2002 in Busan, Korea. This newest team is determined to add a

gold medal to the long list of remarkable achievements Cambodia's volleyballers have already established.

In the coming year, VVAF plans to expand its Sports for Life activities in Cambodia. The national league will be expanded from eight teams to 12, and a new federation will be established to oversee future development of disabled volleyball in the country. The national team will hold a competition against one of its regional neighbors. Also, VVAF will implement a training program for its rehabilitation staff in order to increase the use of sports and recreational activities within VVAF's rehabilitation centers. Finally, VVAF will conduct a detailed assessment to determine how best to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in sports and recreational activities at the community level.

After the Emergency

VVAF began its Kosovo program after the conclusion of the war in 1999, implementing mine/UXO education for 90,000 at-risk youths and providing socio-economic and psychosocial support to 400 people with war-related disabilities and their families. These projects responded to the immediate needs of post-war Kosovo, particularly the need to address both the threat and consequences created by landmine/UXO contamination. By the end of 2001, though, the mine/UXO threat had been contained and the urgent needs of the survivors met. In general, Kosovo was ready to move beyond the emergency phase and embrace the transition to development. While many organizations withdrew from Kosovo at this stage, VVAF chose to stay and help the Kosovars through this very delicate transition period. Although the crisis may be over, there remains much work to be done to build a stable democracy and, in particular, to ensure that survivors and all people with disabilities integrate into a democratic Kosovo. Through a comprehensive new Sports for Life program, VVAF is taking on the challenge of helping Kosovo build a strong and inclusive civil society.

VVAF has actually been implementing sports activities as part of its Kosovo

program since its inception, incorporating mine awareness training into soccer clinics and helping youths organize sports events through which they spread mine awareness to their peers. VVAF also implemented sports activities in isolated minority villages, reaching out to some of the most disadvantaged youth in the province. In 2001, VVAF employed program development specialist and wheelchair athlete Andrew Houghton to initiate VVAF's disability sports and recreation activities in Kosovo. Houghton discovered a great deal of interest in sports throughout the province, but found that most groups did not have the equipment, training or information that they needed to develop meaningful programs. For example, 80 athletes expressed a desire to compete in wheelchair basketball, but only 20 sports chairs could be found in all of Kosovo. Furthermore, rules for the game did not exist in local languages. So VVAF translated rules and began providing sports equipment to local groups and schools.

VVAF also learned that many people, disabled and non-disabled alike, had never been exposed to disability sports activities and therefore lacked an understanding of what was possible. Houghton observed that "many people didn't even want to try, but after one went out and started to play, the others followed. It's typical—people never know what it will be like until they get out there and participate." With this in mind, Houghton organized three wheelchair tennis clinics, facilitated recreational activities for youth and brought together disability organizations, the Department of Sport, the Kosovo Olympic Commit-

tee and the tennis and basketball federations to organize a major disability sports and recreation exhibition. After this event, the sponsors signed a joint proclamation declaring their commitment to developing disability sports and recreation programming in Kosovo.

In May 2002, VVAF kicked off its new Sports for Life initiative in Kosovo, building on the work done by Houghton. Through this new initiative, VVAF is organizing sports and recreation activities that bring people with disabilities together with able-bodied participants and that unify people from a variety of ethnic communities torn apart by conflict. VVAF conducts sports clinics and tournaments to introduce participants to new activities and develop their skills and confidence. At the same time, VVAF is helping local disability organizations form Disability Sports Advisory Committees by providing training and equipment. These groups will be responsible for implementing activities in their respective regions throughout Kosovo. In the long run, VVAF hopes that these groups will use their new organizational skills and networks to tackle other important issues beyond sports and recreation.

The second major component of this new Sports for Life project is disability awareness training. VVAF's six teams of educators will spend half of their time educating youth at the secondary school level about the concerns and rights of people with disabilities. Guest speakers will be brought in to tell their own stories of life as a person with a disability in Kosovo. The purpose of reaching out to Kosovo's young people with these mes-

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sages is to begin building a society that is more accepting and attuned to the rights of people with disabilities. By beginning with the youth, we are making an investment in Kosovo's future leaders, parents, doctors and caretakers.

A Global Mission

VVAF's goal is to incorporate Sports for Life into each of its overseas programs as a key component of its work with people with disabilities. In the coming months, VVAF will establish a Sports for Life program in Angola, which will focus on creating sports and recreation opportunities for children. Planning is also under way for Sports for Life activities in Vietnam and Ethiopia. Throughout the course of this initiative, VVAF will collect and analyze the experiences of each project so that the lessons of the past can inform the development of future rehabilitation and advocacy programs by VVAF and other organizations. ■

Endnote

1. VVAF uses the name Veterans International in Cambodia and Angola.

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■ Two girls with disabilities fish at a competition on a lake in Kosovo. c/o Sarah Warren

