

In the driver's seat

When Eric Bittner graduated from high school, he was looking for something different.

He had been on the basketball team at Duchess Park and had a natural enthusiasm and ability for the game. Continuing his hoops career in the men's league, however, just didn't appeal to him.

Then, while he was at work one day, he found the answer and it came to him on wheels.

"I used to work for PG Surg-Med," he says, referring to a local company that supplies, among other things, wheelchairs for people who need them. "I kind of got involved with some of the players who played wheelchair basketball and just picked it up from there."

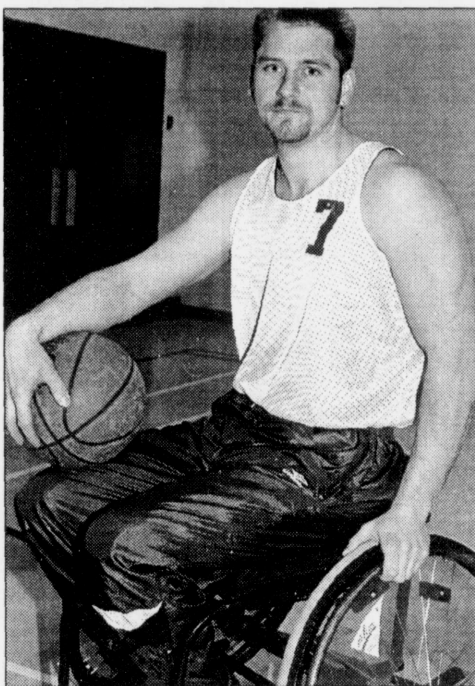
Bittner, now 26, has been playing the game for seven years and it has been good to him. He plays locally with the Prince George Titans and has also been a member of Team B.C. for the last three years.

In his three seasons with the provincial squad he has helped it win bronze, silver and gold at the national championships, the gold medal coming last year in Vancouver against Team Ontario.

While Bittner has had nothing but success in wheelchair basketball in recent years, he still remembers when the game wasn't going quite so smoothly for him.

"You don't really know what all is going to be involved when you start," he says with a grin. "It's very challenging and that's why I keep playing it every year."

Wheelchair basketball, as Bittner has discovered first hand, has obvious as well as subtle differences from 'standup basketball.' Some of the bigger differences include shooting, the power for which comes entirely from the arms instead of the lower and upper body working in conjunction. And, after wheeling the length



Prince George's Eric Bittner is one of the top wheelchair basketball players in B.C. JASON PETERS/FREE PRESS

of the floor to get to the offensive end, a player can have a case of spaghetti arms when he or she attempts a shot.

On the defensive side of the game, the simple act of checking your opponent becomes a whole new challenge.

"There's no checking like in standup ball because if your hands are off your wheels, you're not moving," Bittner says with a laugh.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for Bittner when he started was learning to make his chair go where he wanted it to. That difficulty was compounded by the fact that this was not a non-contact sport. Players continually crashed into each other while battling for position under and around the hoop.

"When you first start you kind of fight your chair," he says. "It's hard to push and manoeuvre and you tip over lots. Basically, you have to learn how the chair works."

Bittner, however, has learned and now is among the top wheelchair basketball players in the province. And, while he is perfectly able to play standup hoops, he prefers the wheel variety. It's still a challenge every time he plays it. And he has made invaluable friendships through the game.

"Some of the attraction is that you have friends who are doing it," he says. "They can't get up and play standup ball with you but you can sit down and play with them."

And that's something Bittner plans to do well into the future. He's looking forward to the numerous road trips the Titans will make this year to compete in various tournaments. Last year, the team even went to Toronto to play in an international event. Then, of course, there's his role on the provincial team.

So even though Bittner will be sitting down on the job, he'll be one busy guy.



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