

University of Mississippi

eGrove

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

---

2018

## College Wheelchair Basketball Players' Construction Of Identities: A Symbolic Interactionism Approach

Alison Hovatter

*University of Mississippi*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd>



Part of the [Sports Management Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hovatter, Alison, "College Wheelchair Basketball Players' Construction Of Identities: A Symbolic Interactionism Approach" (2018). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1092.

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/1092>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

COLLEGE WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL PLAYERS' CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES:  
A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM APPROACH

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Science  
in the Department of Health, Exercise Science and Recreation Management  
The University of Mississippi

by

Alison Hovatter

May 2018

Copyright © 2017 by Alison Hovatter  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

## ABSTRACT

The National Wheelchair Basketball Association consists of 14 collegiate teams (NCAA, 2013) that are represented at both the NCAA and club sport arenas. Collegiate wheelchair basketball student-athletes have been neglected within the sport discussion due to the sports emergence status in legitimacy with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) standards (Berger, 2004, 2008; Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014; Shogan, 1999), and its perception of being a charity sport, where bodies that have disabilities do not play “natural body” sports (Berger, 2008). By using the collegiate environment to further study wheelchair basketball players, a deeper understanding of identity negotiation of student-athletes in wheelchairs will be added to the sport literature. The research used observation and semi-structured interviews to create an understanding of the identity negotiations of collegiate wheelchair basketball players. Symbolic interactionism served as the theoretical framework for helping to create a deeper understanding of collegiate wheelchair basketball players’ identity under the creation of symbols and meanings through social interactions (Blumer, 1965; Burbank & Martins, 2010; Mandler, 1962; Shott, 1979). The attempt of such research was to determine how collegiate wheelchair basketball players negotiate between different aspects of forces found within athletic and academic and environments, as well as their own disabilities. It can be concluded that collegiate wheelchair basketball players at the University of Missouri negotiate between the identity complexities of being a student-athlete in a wheelchair through the lens of struggling for legitimacy within the sport and the organizational environment.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to collegiate student-athletes who strive for success in both sports and academics. In particular, the University of Missouri wheelchair basketball team, whose work ethic and passion has left an immeasurable imprint on my life.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to personally thank Dr. Yan, Dr. Kayama, Dr. Watanabe and Dr. Lee for their unfailing guidance and support during this research process. In addition, I would also like to thank my parents for their endless love and encouragement.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
CHAPTER I	
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER II	
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
The Commercialization of Collegiate Sports	
The NCAA Scholarships and Regulations to Ensure Athletic Success	
The Student-Athlete Experience	
Understanding Disability: Major Themes and Approaches	
The History and Development of Wheelchair Basketball	
Wheelchair Basketball as a ‘Charity Sport’	
Symbolic Interactionism: Theoretical Framework	
CHAPTER III	
METHODOLOGY.....	23
Introduction	
Role of the Researchers	
Participants	
Ethical Considerations	
Setting	
Data Collection Procedures	
Analytical Procedures	
Data Verification	
CHAPTER IV	
RESULTS & DISCUSSION.....	30
Struggling with Wheelchair Basketball as a Real Sport	
Struggling with Belongingness to the NCAA	
Struggling with Managing Wheelchair Basketball	
CHAPTER V	
CONCLUSION.....	48
REFERENCES.....	55
LIST OF APPENDICES.....	61
VITA.....	66

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In 2015, a \$10 million project was proposed on the campus of the University of Alabama that would forever change the direction of adapted athletics (UA News, 2016). The proposal consisted of a 27,000-square foot facility with state of the art equipment, aiming to give athletes with disabilities the same opportunity to achieve athletic success at the highest level in collegiate sports (UA News, 2016). However, the initial creation of wheelchair basketball was filled with both turbulence and lack of interest. During the 1940's in the United States, American soldiers were returning home after relentlessly serving in the second world war (NCAA, 2013). Many of these individuals returned home with life-changing injuries (NCAA, 2013). As such, they began to look to recreation in an attempt to improve their impairment (NCAA, 2013). The birth of wheelchair basketball was therefore used for the sole purpose to meet these rehabilitation needs (NCAA, 2013).

A few years after the formation of wheelchair basketball, The National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) was formed on the campus of the University of Illinois in 1948, which, solidified a direction of eliteness in professional and collegiate athletics (National Wheelchair Basketball Association, 2017). The initial phases of competitive wheelchair basketball consisted of poor facilities and a lack of interest by populations with disabilities (NCAA, 2013). Today, however, the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) consist of 14 collegiate teams (NCAA, 2013). Due to the rising talent in collegiate wheelchair basketball, players maintain a high-level of training to further develop their skills. Similar to



varsity level athletes, athletes with disabilities must manage weight training, classes, practice times and tournaments throughout their collegiate eligibility (Berger, 2004, 2008). However, very little has been studied in regards, to the experiences of collegiate wheelchair basketball players in both the college athletic and academic environment, where a primary focus has been placed on the inquiry of the “supercrip” stereotype as a master narrative which has shaped their experience and struggles. The dominant inquiry found in the disability literature describe the heroic stories of athletes with disabilities who play through pain and refuse to set physical limits despite their impairment (Berger, 2004, 2008). As such, athletes with disabilities are often referred to as “supercrip” athletes based on institutional agendas of creating a story of courage and dedication (Berger, 2008). Furthermore, this identity associated with collegiate wheelchair basketball players has led many to not compete out of the frustration of being labeled “courageous” for participating in simple exercises, and the fear of not meeting expectations set by society (Berger, 2008). Identity can be defined as the dynamic flow and changing acknowledgement of self (Chrysochou, 2003) as individuals associate with certain social groups (see Darling, 2013). Thus, courageous wheelchair basketball players’ identities can stem from their three statuses; that are athletes, students, and individuals with disabilities. Though the literature on wheelchair basketball players has brought much awareness to the “supercrip” identity downfall in disability sports, minimal insight has been discussed on the “student-athlete” identity associated with these highly-talented athletes.

Meanwhile, turning attention to the collegiate sport literature, the studies have delineated an interconnected chain where a preoccupation with commercialization has led to an excessive competitive athletic environment for college athletes. In 1929, the Carnegie Foundation labeled commercialization as the root of all major issues associated within intercollegiate athletics and

the downfall of educational achievement of student-athletes (Benford, 2007). Despite the NCAA categorizing college sport under the label of “amateurism”, industrial aspects such as media coverage, apparel contracts and expensive, modernized stadiums figure prominently in college sport (Benford, 2007). For instance, the SEC Network was reported to have a net worth of over \$500 million dollars in 2015, and most recently, Nike generating close to \$16 million after signing apparel contracts with top the four top collegiate football programs in 2016 (Staurwosky et al., 2015). From there, an expansion in media coverage and a growing sense of revenue contracts has led to a win-at-all-cost mentality and a heightened sense of athletic competitiveness (Staurwosky et al., 2015; Benford, 2007). As reflected from athletes’ experiences, the time designated for academics would often be filled with practices, travel, workouts and media commitments due to the pressure to compete (Adler & Adler, 1985). As such, these overcommitted athletic-focused schedules of student-athletes have increasingly deprived college athletes from acquiring meaningful educational experiences on college campuses (Benford, 2007; Watt & Moore, 2001).

Considering this, the focus of the current research seeks to understand the possible identity struggles of collegiate wheelchair basketball players in the context of academics and intercollegiate athletics as well as their disability. Collegiate wheelchair basketball players are a non-revenue generating sport who are not regulated by NCAA rules, and thus, are often a population ignored in the discussion of identity struggles within collegiate athletics (Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014; NCAA, 2013). Furthermore, wheelchair basketball players must not be neglected in the collegiate sport literature due to being a student-athlete that has similar identity complexities as varsity level collegiate athletes (Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014). This study seeks to fill the literature gap by understanding these identity complexities and

negotiations through the lens of symbolic interactionism. That is, the interactions to which collegiate wheelchair basketball players participate in socially can create symbols and meanings that have direct correlation with their behavior and identity (Burbank & Martins, 2010). The philosophy of symbolic interactionism is rooted in the belief that culture and institutions highly influence a person's behavior (Blumer, 1965; Mandler, 1962; Shott, 1979). Furthermore, the meanings and assigned symbols within interactions of these systems becomes the heartbeat to the behavior of the individual (Askan et al., 2009). In other words, the findings have important implications in not only understanding the identity formulations of the collegiate wheelchair basketball players, but also how they negotiate between these different identity complexities.

In concluding, the current study attempts to make multiple folds of contributions to the sport and disability literature. By considering a disability collegiate sport instead of a varsity level sport, the expansion of identity negotiations is much more vast and complex due to the negotiation of three identity complexities. Thus, adding a deeper amount of knowledge to disability sport discussions. Finally, as higher education institutions seek to bring collegiate wheelchair basketball to their campuses, the findings from this study could help to justify their decision based on how similar these individuals are in comparison to varsity level student-athletes.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### The Commercialization of Collegiate Sports

College sports entered the collegiate environment in the United States in the late 1800's (Watt & Moore, 2001). Collegiate athletics has grown tremendously since its inauguration in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The commercialization of collegiate athletics has led to many industrial aspects such as media coverage, licensing of logos and apparel sales (Benford, 2007). Through this growth in commercialization, many industries and cities have sought to gain profits in collegiate athletics.

Nike, for instance, has been the most prevalent company to generate revenue through collegiate athletics (Staurowsky et al., 2015). During the 2014 College Football Playoffs, Nike and the four semi-final teams signed a uniform agreement that would eventually generate an estimated \$16 million to the apparel company (Staurowsky et al, 2015; Kish, 2014). Such expansive scale of commercialization has a lot to do with the revenue chase of major sport television networks, such as the SEC Network, Big Ten Network and ESPNU (Staurowsky et al., 2015). The SEC Network was reported to be worth \$547.3 million in 2015 according to "Fox Sports analysis", Clay Travis (Staurowsky et al., 2015).

Due to the inability for revenues to be paid to the student-athletes under the current NCAA amateur bylaws, these funds have been commonly dispersed into an arms race with regards to athletic facilities and coaching salaries (Benford, 2007). For example, when the University of Nebraska decides to build a new stadium or skybox, other schools such as

Oklahoma and Texas will search for opportunities to build better facilities too (Benford, 2007). The arms race between universities is a direct reflection of the need to recruit the top players in the country to compete at the highest level in collegiate athletics. The problem is also manifested from collegiate men's football and basketball coaching salaries, which are comparable to professional coaching salaries in the NBA and NFL (Staurowsky, 2011). Indeed, the gap between the salaries of college football coaches and professors at institutions continues to increase (Southall & Staurowsky, 2013). The salaries of FBS football coaches have grown by 120% within the last ten years (Staurowsky, 2011).

The focus of athletic success by the institution may also vary depending on the division. When analyzing graduation rates, Division II and III student-athletes are graduating at an astounding higher rate than Division I student-athletes (Watt & Moore, 2001). It is possible to conclude from this analysis that Division I student-athletes have more demand placed on athletic performance due to media coverage and external pressures regarding win-loss records (Watt & Moore, 2001). Division II and III institutions may also emphasize the importance of both academic and athletic success more than Division I institutions (Watt & Moore, 2001).

#### Student-Athletes' Experiences on College Campus: Dimensions and Struggles

Precisely because Division I college sports are operated in such a commercialized environment, it has led to an organizational culture that places a heavy focus on the athletic success of individual athletes to provide competitive entertainment product in the marketplace (Staurowsky, 2011). To be sure, student-athletes are reported to have experienced overcommitted schedules devoted to improving athletic skills (Harmon, 2010). Though the NCAA has mandated that practice time may only consist of 20 hours per week, the practice time for student-athletes often exceeds the mandated time due to a fast-paced schedule. A student-athlete's schedule is

characterized as ‘demanding’ and ‘inflexible’ (Watt & Moore, 2001) based on large amounts of academic, social and athletic commitments. For instance, majority of student-athletes’ schedules will consist of classes in the morning, practice sessions or other athletic commitments in the afternoon and study hall requirements in the evening (Martens & Lee, 1998; Watt & Moore, 2001). The largest obstacle that student-athletes will encounter is the inability to attend classes due to traveling for athletic competitions (Anderson, 2010; Simon et. al., 1999; Watt & Moore, 2001). On the other hand, non-athletes’ schedules do not have similar routines, giving them the opportunity to manage their own academic and social schedules (Lanning, 1982; Watt & Moore, 2001). As such, a major focus of discussion in sport literature has attempted to highlight the conflict between academic and athletic experiences for college athletes (Harmon, 2010). Adler & Adler (1985), for instance, has brought rich awareness to student-athlete struggles by highlighting the “pragmatic detachment” of the academic experience caused by the over-concentrated focus on athletic performance. The chasm between athletic and academic domains, as according to Harmon (2010), is both turbulent and divisive.

The turbulent relationship between the academic and athletic experiences with student-athletes is displayed most in their transition into intercollegiate athletics and their daily routines (Adler & Adler, 1985; Harmon, 2010). Prior to entering the arena of intercollegiate athletics, most student-athletes will have optimistic attitudes and high goals with regards to academic achievement (Adler & Adler, 1985). However, upon entering the highly commercialized and competitive world of intercollegiate athletics, the sport to which the student-athlete participates in shifts from a recreational activity to an occupation, and the once high academic goals turn into manageable aspirations (Adler & Adler, 1985). Despite reinforcements from family members and coaching staff on the importance of obtaining a degree and receiving knowledge from a

higher academic institution, the athletic sphere of a student-athlete takes center stage in the individual's life (Adler & Adler, 1985). The domination of the sport in a student-athlete's life is caused by a greater sense of commercialization and professionalization in intercollegiate athletics. Due to these economic and professional forces, the media presence and pressure to win is heightened (Adler & Adler, 1985). Therefore, time that would normally be spent studying for an exam or writing a term paper is filled with practices, training sessions, travel and media commitments (Adler & Adler, 1985).

Furthermore, the focus on athletic success hinders a student-athlete's academic experience (Adler & Adler, 1985). The pragmatic detachment from the higher learning experience has led to stereotyping and a stigmatization in the academic environment (Lawrence, Harrison, Stone, 2009; Simons et al., 2007; Watt & Moore, 2001). Instead of taking classes that interest the student-athlete, most are placed within manageable classes in order to have more time to grow their athletic ability (Adler & Adler, 1985; Harmon, 2010; Watt & Moore, 2001). This form of practice is a commonality within college athletics and thus student-athletes will be placed within similar classes and majors (Martens & Lee, 1998; Watt & Moore, 2001). A sense of isolation begins when a student-athlete only has academic courses with other student-athletes (Watt & Moore, 2001). Due to the student-athlete being placed within 'manageable' classes and majors, boredom begins to take root causing a forfeit of the student role (Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, and Terenzini, 1995; Pacarella, Truckenmiller, Nora, Terenzini, Edison, and Hagedorn, 1999; Watt & Moore, 2001).

As a consequence of forfeiting the student role, negative perceptions and stereotypes are given to student-athletes by faculty and non-student-athletes (Watt & Moore, 2001; Harmon, 2010). In general, the cultural identity of a student-athlete can be defined as a person who

displays entertainment and generates financial profit for his or her university (Watt & Moore, 2001). The stereotypes and terms such as ‘lazy’ and ‘dumb jocks’ have all been associated with student-athletes (Harmon, 2010). Lawrence, Harrison and Stone (2009) has brought much discussion to the confirmation of behavioral stereotypes given to student-athletes. By studying the different stereotypes given to male college athletes, they were able to confirm that student-athletes were perceived to have low academic motivation and unmerited privileges (Lawrence et al., 2009; Simon et al, 2007). The use of these rationalized beliefs given to the student-athlete population has caused a heightened stigmatization in higher education learning (Lawrence et al., 2009; Simon et al., 2007). These negative perceptions and stereotypes cause a student-athlete to feel unwelcomed and overwhelmed at the university that he or she represents in the collegiate athletic arena (Kihl, Richardson, & Campisi, 2008). For instance, research has led to the belief that in certain extremely competitive form of sport, such as football and men’s basketball, the athletes are less motivated in the classroom due to the perception of being less respected by professors, peers and other academic support (Anderson, 2010).

If a student-athlete is socially disconnected from a university’s academic community, he or she will be less motivated to achieve academic success resulting in a disconnection to the ‘student’ identity (Anderson, 2010). It can be concluded from this research that revenue-generating collegiate sports are more aligned with the vision of professional sports instead of the academic mission of a university (Anderson, 2010; Watt & Moore, 2001).

To summarize, collegiate sports, provide a university a diversified student body of different socioeconomic statuses through athletic scholarship opportunities (Anderson, 2010). From a psychological perspective, positive and negative consequences related to collegiate athletics may develop with the primary focus being only on the athletic identity role (Anderson,



2010). The positive benefits to individuals who participate in collegiate athletics ranges from a healthy well-being, higher amounts of self-esteem, discipline and leadership qualities (Chu, 1989; Harris, 1993; Simmons, Rheenen, and Covington, 1999; Watt & Moore, 2001). Furthermore, these benefits are a direct result of collegiate athletes participating in an active, competitive team environment. Unfortunately, negative consequences will also develop during the duration an individual participates in collegiate athletics. As mentioned previously, an aggressive, ‘win at all cost’ attitude may often be displayed by the student-athlete due to the persuasion of coaches and athletic administrations to have athletic success (Watt & Moore, 2001). As a result of this aggressive attitude, some student-athletes participate in the use of steroids and other enhancing drugs to increase the probability of winning in his or her respected sport (Hebel, 1999; Presley, Meilman, Cashin, and Leichter, 1997; Watt & Moore, 2001). Collegiate wheelchair basketball players may be subjugated to the similar identity struggles due to competing in a highly competitive collegiate environment that requires major devotion to perfecting skills through practices and training sessions, similar to able-bodied student-athletes (Harmon, 2010; NCAA, 2013; Watt & Moore, 2001).

#### Understanding Disability: Major Themes and Approaches

The U.S. Bureau of the Census reported in 2010 that 18.7 percent of the population within the United States had some form of disability (Darling, 2013). With not all of these disabilities being the same, some may be more visible and others not so apparent (Darling, 2013). The disability rate reported by the Census Bureau in 2010-will likely increase as the majority of the U.S. population grows older (Darling, 2013).

The creation of the Disability Rights Movement in the 1970’s and 1980’s, allowed for more individuals to become empowered through their disability (Darling, 2013). Much of the

research found within the disability literature relates to emancipatory research (Brittain, 2004). This specific type of research is highly concerned with the “exploitation and oppression” (Jary & Jary, 1999, p.192) of individuals who suffer from physical or mental disabilities. It has been determined that individuals who acquired a mental and/or physical impairment during the early stages of life were more likely to have a positive view of the disability (Darling & Heckert, 2010). Therefore, individuals that acquired a disability in the later stages of life were more likely to view his or her impairment negatively (Darling & Heckert, 2010).

To fully conceptualize disability, both the medical and social models have provided prevalent lenses. The medical model views the disability through the understandings that the individual with the impairment is associated with a sickness and an undesirable state (Darling, 2013; Parsons, 1951). Under this specific type of model, medical professions give detailed definitions of what characteristics are associated with disabilities (Brittain, 2004). These definitions conform to the norms set by society and result in the disability population to be disconnected to other individuals who meet these standards (Brittain, 2004). The medical model of disability has highly influenced government powers into creating policies that often devalue and disempower individuals with disabilities (Brittain, 2004). Furthermore, individuals with physical or mental impairments are persuaded into accepting the identity given to them (Brittain, 2004). Whereas, the social model centers towards the belief that individuals can overcome their disability (Darling, 2013). Furthermore, the social model of disability believes that environmental barriers to the disability population are apparent but can easily be removed by the influence of institutional driven policies and the change of attitudes embedded within society (Brittain, 2004; Morris, 1991). This social construction model has transformed society’s perceptions of individuals with disabilities (Brittain, 2004). As a result of the social model,

individuals with disabilities may be more likely to participate in able-bodied activities such as sports, due to being more aware of these opportunities. (Darling, 2013). For instance, with the guidance of the social disability model, the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) has developed a strong team classification system consisting of a Class I, II and III hierarchy that creates opportunity, fairness and organization. The Class I player is an individual with a serious disability, and a Class III player has minor disabilities (Berger, 2008). Each collegiate wheelchair basketball player is given a point of one to three based on his or her classification (Berger, 2008). Based on the classification system, all collegiate wheelchair basketball teams are granted the opportunity to play five players with a total of 12 points (Berger, 2008). The classification system found within wheelchair basketball is an attempt to create both legitimacy and fairness in a highly competitive athletic environment (Berger, 2008).

The term “disability” can encompass physical, intellectual or emotional impairments. For the purpose of the following thesis, a deeper analysis will be reviewed regarding physical disabilities that collegiate wheelchair basketball players have. One of the leading causes for a person to be bound to the use of wheelchair is due to the loss of function in muscular tissues in the body (Stubblefield, 2016). This specific type of impairment is referred to as paralysis. An individual is diagnosed with paraplegia paralysis when the loss of feeling in both legs is present (Stubblefield, 2016). If an individual only experiences a loss of function in one leg, the diagnosis will result in monoplegia paralysis (Stubblefield, 2016). Paralysis can be caused by an injury to the spinal cord, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, brain injuries and other defects occurring at birth (Stubblefield, 2016). A neural tube defect can also lead to an individual being placed within a wheelchair for the use of mobility (Mayo Clinic, 2018). During the development of an embryo, neural tubes begin to cultivate within the brain, spinal cord and other tissues surrounding them

(Mayo Clinic, 2018). Spina bifida is caused when an embryo does not develop these neural tubes, resulting in certain blemishes to take root in the spinal cord (Mayo Clinic, 2018). It is believed that spina bifida can be caused by genetics or other environmental factors such as the inadequacy of folic acid (Mayo Clinic, 2018). The complication resulting in an individual being diagnosed with this disorder is paralysis, as well as intellectual impairments such as a decrease in comprehension skills and the inability to pay attention for extensive periods of time (Mayo Clinic, 2018). Another cause of physical disabilities began in 2001 when soldiers were first deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan (Montgomery, 2017). As of 2001, 1,650 American men and women in uniform have lost a limb serving for their country (Montgomery, 2017). Bomb attacks along roadside patrolling, closer combat missions and new innovative devices by enemy countries are all causes to these disastrous injuries (Montgomery, 2017). For the American soldier who lost his or her leg in combat, the wheelchair may be the next alternative for better mobility and recreational activity. It is also important to note that an amputation can be caused by a car accident and illness, as well as military accident.

### The History and Development of Wheelchair Basketball

Wheelchairs basketball began in the 1940's under the shadows of the second world war (NCAA, 2013). Men, with disabilities, who had fought in the war began returning to the United States in hopes of improving their impairment (NCAA, 2013). The sport of wheelchair basketball was initially created for rehabilitation purposes and a new form of recreational activity for veterans with disabilities (NCAA, 2013). This recreational activity soon became so much more, and thus, turning into an outlet for individuals with disabilities to meet competitive desires.

The National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) was founded on the campus of the University of Illinois in 1948 (National Wheelchair Basketball Association, 2017). During the first 40 years of the National Wheelchair Basketball Association, most of the courts games were held in facilities that did not meet NCAA standards (NCAA, 2013). These arenas often lacked proper court size dimensions and time equipment such as score boards (NCAA, 2013). The association now consist of 200 teams, including ten men's collegiate teams and four women's collegiate teams (NCAA, 2013). In terms of the set-up of the wheelchair basketball programs, these programs are made up of NCAA athletics and club sport. With the help of the Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, new legal provisions were formed to allow for these athletes to compete for programs with the hopes of having financial assistance (NCAA, 2013).

The development of collegiate wheelchair basketball first began with the struggle of finding players who wanted to participate (Berger, 2008). Eventually, more people wanted to play, teams began to travel to tournaments and official publications were released about the sport (Berger, 2008). Due to the rising notability of collegiate wheelchair basketball, players have begun to have a rigorous training schedule that consist of weight lifting, game plans, and participation in elite tournaments, as well as seeking good academic performances in the classroom in (Berger, 2004, 2008). Uncommon under NCAA regulations, collegiate wheelchair basketball players are granted the opportunity to compete for five seasons for their respected institution and must also follow a strict classification system (Berger, 2008; NCAA, 2013). The 'emerging sport' phase allows for the NCAA to monitor the progress of the sport in comparison to development and finacial stability (Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014). Furthermore, these

athletes with disabilities have a strong passion to demonstrate that they are just as competitive and athletic as their varsity level peers .

In addition to the National Wheelchair Basketball Association many players also serve on their respective Paralympian teams, illustrating the elite level of training and competition. Furthermore, the trend of building adapted sport facilities, such as the recent construction project at the University of Alabama which had a \$10-million-dollar budget (UA News, 2016), further enables wheelchair basketball to be identified as a sporting spectacle. Though when analyzing the statistics reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it is difficult to fully understand that a large portion of individuals with disabilities seek to participate in physical activity. According to these reports, only 23 percent of the population with disabilities participate in physical activity three or more times a week for a minimum of thirty minutes (NCAA, 2013). As a result, 37.6 percent of Americans with disabilities are obese and suffering from major health concerns (NCAA, 2013).

#### Wheelchair Basketball as a ‘Charity’ Sport

Despite of its development across the country, wheelchair basketball is often associated with the perception of a ‘charity’ sport due to economic, institutional, and cultural reasons. To begin with, wheelchair basketball is not a revenue-driven sport, where funding to support operations and athlete scholarships is heavily based on private donations, grants, and entrepreneurial activities such as organizing training camps (Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014). On one hand, because collegiate wheelchair basketball is not directly overseen by the NCAA , coaches and players have more freedom in managing scholarship, recruiting, coaching, etc. Collegiate wheelchair basketball falls short of the collegiate sport norm because it does not generate large amounts of revenue through apparel and TV contracts.

Meanwhile, precisely because of the institutional arrangement of wheelchair basketball, the basketball athletes commonly struggle with the lack of legitimacy of being considered as college athletes (Berger, 2008; Shogan, 1999). Indeed, from the perspective of institutional culture, their struggle also reflects a widely prevalent belief that individuals with disabilities do not play ‘natural body’ sports (Berger, 2008). Precisely because wheelchair basketball was to be used as a therapeutic outlet (NCAA, 2013), it is now often narrowly understood as an escape from the ‘disability ghetto’, termed as oppressive life experiences for the disability populations (Page et al., 2013). The ‘disability ghetto’ and other institutionalized barriers has led to the belief that collegiate wheelchair basketball is a charity sport.

Furthermore, the conception of wheelchair basketball as ‘charity sport’ is deeply rooted in our cultural belief of ‘disability’ as influenced by a Charles Darwin’s premise of “survival of the fittest” (Brittain, 2004). Under this logic of understanding, those who do not meet the norms of society are classified as inadequate and unworthy to be granted equal opportunity (Britain, 2004; Devine, 1997). As such, athletes with disabilities are often treated as charitable opportunities that are pitied instead of celebrated (Berger, 2008). It has been believed that sports were never held for individuals who have disability impairments (Berger, 2008). This common belief contributes to the perception that collegiate wheelchair basketball is a charity sport. Furthermore, able-bodied organizations, such as the National Basketball Association, are more likely to donate money to wheelchair basketball teams for the sole intent of receiving a tax write-off due to their ‘charitable giving’ (Page et al., 2001).

The prospect of college wheelchair basketball as a ‘charity’ sport maybe changed due to that the NWBA recently joined in the Central Intercollegiate Conference, allowing for the association to be governed by rules and regulations in alignment with the NCAA (Larkin,

Cottingham & Pate, 2014). Along with that collegiate wheelchair basketball is currently classified as an ‘emerging sport’ that seeks to be housed in at least 40 institutions to officially receive championship status with the NCAA (Hosick, 2011; Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014). Third, the NWBA has developed a strong team classification system consisting of a Class I, II and III hierarchy that creates opportunity, fairness and organization. In so doing, it is possible that a new sense of awareness and authentication would embody the sport (Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014). Sportization can result in larger endorsement opportunities and financial givings (Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014). Meanwhile, institutionalized recognition may help players to have an increased measure of self-worth and legitimacy as college athletes (Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014).

#### Symbolic Interactionism as a Theoretical Framework to Study College Wheel-Chair Basketball Players

Symbolic interactionism was chosen as the theoretical framework in order to determine the identity construction and negotiation of collegiate wheelchair basketball players through the use of symbols displayed through social interactions. By using symbolic interactionism, more awareness of the identity negotiations of these student-athletes is added to the academic inquiry. With the assistance of the media, perhaps the most profound discussions on wheelchair basketball players identity centers on their struggles with the ‘supercrip’ identity (Berger, 2008). That is, instead of simply playing for fun or other recreational purposes, college wheelchair basketball players are often associated with the image of ‘supercrip’, referred to as the individuals whose stories of courage, dedication, and hard work prove that one can defy the odds and accomplish the impossible (Smart, 2001). The identification with ‘supercrip’, however, may mean that the athletes are encouraged to use sport as an activity that has “historically been



oriented to the able-bodied” (Berger, 2008, p. 39) to normalize their bodies as tough, competitive, and relentless. It may generate an overt reliance on the ‘self-made man’ ideology, leading to extraordinary efforts to maintain a competitive image. The competitive image leads to athletes with disabilities becoming frustrated when they are given titles such as ‘courageous’ for completing simple exercises (Berger, 2008). The ‘supercrip’ term has led many individuals with disabilities to not compete in sports due to not meeting society’s expectations (Berger, 2008). Furthermore, the term also paradoxically invokes the derided perception that people with disabilities are different and insufficient, which shapes the perception towards wheelchair basketball players. As such, the term ‘wheelchair basketball player’ is socially constructed through the assistance of media as an oxymoron with the words being related to both strong and vulnerable (Berger, 2008; Gerschick & Miller, 1995; Smith & Sparkes, 2004).

As such, this thesis seeks to examine the identities of college wheelchair basketball players by focusing on the struggles and conflicts of experienced by student-athletes in the college sport environment, which are further complicated by disability and the characteristics of wheelchair basketball perceived as a charity sport, as it is typified by the stereotype of ‘supercrip’. From there, in order to understand how college wheelchair basketball players struggle to negotiate different aspects of identities, the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism is employed in this study. Specifically, the term ‘symbolic interactionism’ was first used in a 1937 short textbook published by Herbert Blumer discussing the current status of social psychology (Plummer, 2000). During the 1960’s, the theory became more influential in reshaping different research methodologies in such fields as education and medicine. Specifically, symbolic interaction theory can be characterized as seeking to understand identities through a communication system driven by meanings and symbols formed through interaction

with others in society (Askan et al., 2009; Burbank & Martins, 2010; Manis & Meltzer, 1972). It takes the belief that social interaction is much more than meanings and symbols, but rather a thorough process that helps to create the identity of an individual (Askan et al., 2009).

The foundation of symbolic interactionism is built on an empirical world and described as a 'down-to-earth approach' (Plummer, 2000) used to study different groups and individual conduct. The philosophy of symbolic interactionism is rooted in the thinking that the culture and other institutional systems that an individual finds himself or herself in can only influence behavior to a certain extent (Blumer, 1965; Mandler, 1962; Shott, 1979). Ultimately, the social interactions that occur with other people within society will shape behavior; creating an identity (Burbank & Martins, 2010, p. 28). To be sure, in the identity construction process, the individual can be extremely active in the development of his or her identity (Burbank & Martins, 2010). The meanings that are formed out of social interactions become the heart of human behavior (Askan et al., 2009) and help to give life to facts (Askan et al., 2009). From these meanings, symbols are created to demonstrate shared beliefs of large groups within society (Burbank & Martins, 2010). Symbols are exchanged between individuals in social interaction settings using language (Askan et al., 2009). The last component of this extensive process is thinking. Thinking or self-reflection refers to the individual's interpretation of the symbols and importance of the social interaction (Askan et al., 2009). Through the interconnection of these components, an individual is able to develop the environment in which they exist (Askan et al., 2009; Fernback, 2007). Therefore, symbolic communication is a mechanism used to formulate different realities and communities within society (Fernback, 2007).

Several different themes are consistent with this shifting and emergent interaction theory, and thus can be used to understand the different identity negotiations of collegiate wheelchair

basketball players (Plummer, 2000). First, symbolic interactionism is ever changing and involves the process of interaction (Burbank & Martins, 2010; Plummer, 2000). Each of these collegiate wheelchair basketball players are not bounded to one identity, therefore a constant negotiation of identities is always occurring (Robinson, 2007). Due to several interactions occurring within the span of a day, the collegiate wheelchair basketball player will have to develop different selves to fulfill several performances (Goffman, 1959; Robinson, 2007). Through performance, the collegiate wheelchair basketball player will constantly negotiate between different expectations that are consistent with the audience and situation of the social interaction (Goffman, 1959; Robinson, 2007). For instance, if more value and pressure is placed on the athletic performance, similar to able-bodied athletes, the collegiate wheelchair basketball player will neglect academic commitments in an attempt to meet the demands of the sport (Adler & Adler, 1985; Harmon, 2010; Goffman, 1959; Robinson, 2007; Watt & Moore, 2001). Therefore, the identity negotiation of collegiate wheelchair basketball players is highly interconnected with institutional and social forces. Furthermore, the accounts associated with this theory, explain the constant flux and undeniable change of collegiate wheelchair basketball players' identities (Plummer, 2000).

Secondly, the world in which individuals live is both objective and symbolic. To be sure, a symbolic world produces history, culture as well as a network of communication (Plummer, 2000). The concept of the 'looking-glass self' found within the theory of symbolic interactionism can provide a helpful lens (Robinson, 2007). Under the 'looking-glass self' concept, collegiate wheelchair basketball players will define their identity by the 'generalized others'' judgement (Cooley, 1902; Robinson, 2007). The formulation of each of these individuals' identities is created out of the perception they believe society sees on them (Robinson, 2007). For example, under the perception of a 'supercrip' athlete, the college wheelchair basketball player will take

on the ‘self’ or ‘identity’ of being heroic or courageous (Berger, 2008). The fruit of interaction allows for a continual process of the collegiate wheelchair basketball player evaluating who they are in the eyes of other people they encounter (Robinson, 2007). Lastly, symbolic interactionism is closely interconnected with methodology. At the heart of symbolic interactionism, there involves several methods such as ethnography. This sense of interconnection between theory and methodology is formulated out of the belief that society must be studied differently than physical worlds due the researcher needing to have full understanding of those who are studied (Plummer, 2000).

With the understandings of the above, this study takes the belief that social interactionism can be well-utilized in understanding the construction of identities of wheelchair basketball players. Collegiate wheelchair basketball players form their respected roles by the social interactions for which they are a part of (Plummer, 2000). The social interactions for which they are a part of can involve coaches, trainers, teammates, professors, family members, friends and classmates, as well as organizational forces such as the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA).

With regards to this study, the collegiate wheelchair basketball players will also have social interactions with the researchers creating possibly another identity complexity. Each of these social interactions will be given a certain amount of value for which meanings and symbols will derive from (Berg, 2000; Askan et al., 2009; Plummer, 2000;). The symbols and meanings from ‘oriental others’ such as teammates, coaches or parents have tremendous influence on the collegiate wheelchair basketball players identity due to the individual being most fully devoted to these people (Burbank & Martins, 2010; Kuhn, 1972). Furthermore, symbols and meanings are expressed differently depending on how emotionally and psychologically connected the

collegiate wheelchair basketball player is to the other individual within the interaction (Burbank & Martins, 2010; Kuhn, 1972). Due to this variation in meanings and symbols between different social interactions, the collegiate wheelchair basketball player will take on different identity roles (Burbank & Martins, 2010; Plummer, 2000). As a result of these different roles being taken on by the collegiate wheelchair basketball player, a level of negotiation between these identities must take place. Therefore, symbolic interactionism illuminates the identity negotiations of collegiate wheelchair basketball players based on the societal and institutional forces interconnected with these student-athletes (Plummer, 2000).

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter aims to provide an extensive view of the methodological approach presented in this thesis research. Most research surrounding sport is still written in the context of a positivist paradigm, where it is believed that researchers can accurately depict thoughts of other individuals through written text (De Garis, 1999). Previous research has instilled a simplistic model that disregards ‘play’ in the context of social environments (De Garis, 1999). However, this study sought to use an ethnography approach to allow for sensuous material to be collected through an active recording process.

The following study used an ethnographic methodological approach to understand the complex identity roles regarding collegiate wheelchair basketball players at the University of Missouri. To fully understand these complex identity roles, conversations served as the guide through this thesis research. The participants, researchers and methods all converged under the performative approach to develop a profound conclusion. Furthermore, this study does not seek to find hidden truths but to help coproduce the knowledge associated with identity roles in collegiate wheelchair basketball.

#### Role of the Researchers

Prior to researching the thesis topic, I had no previous experience and knowledge regarding collegiate wheelchair basketball. Due to this lack of awareness, I viewed collegiate wheelchair basketball players as more of an inspiration figure and less of an athlete. However,

upon completion of the research of collegiate wheelchair basketball, I view these individuals with disabilities as legitimate student-athletes who take pride in both their academic and athletic achievements. Based upon my previous readings regarding the sport, I entered all interviews with a firm level of respect for these student-athletes.

I have collected data through observing participants and conducting fieldwork. For this study, I aimed to observe players and staff who were members of the University of Missouri collegiate wheelchair basketball team during games, workouts and practices. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with both staff and players. Due to me being a former able-bodied collegiate athlete of a non-revenue generating sport, I could personally relate to their experiences and views on how they view academics and athletics. It was my goal, however to not create any bias within my findings based upon this conclusion, but instead use this factor as a way to build trust with each of the participants. Where I once saw individuals with limitations and in a wheelchair, I now see competitive athletes who display a high level of discipline, work ethic and passion for the university and program they represent.

### Participants

The primary informants for this study were the players of the University of Missouri wheelchair basketball team. All of the primary informants were male and between the ages of 17 and 22. For the purpose of this study, it was important that information was collected regarding all aspects of a collegiate wheelchair basketball team. Furthermore, both the assistant and head coach of the University of Missouri Wheelchair Basketball team were interviewed and observed too. The team consisted of three freshmen, two sophomores, three seniors and two coaches. All student-athletes and coaches on the team were interviewed except one of the players due to another commitment.

Prior to the start of the research, approval was granted from the head coach of the University of Missouri wheelchair basketball team, Ron Lykins. He began his journey in collegiate wheelchair basketball out of a commitment to complete volunteer hours while attending college at the University of Kentucky. Afterwards, he began to take on an administrative role with the University of Kentucky wheelchair basketball program. In 1986, after completing his master's degree, Ron Lykins became the head coach of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (Berger, 2008). According to Coach Lykins, during the late 1980's to early 1990's, there were only four universities who had collegiate wheelchair basketball teams on their campuses. However, this did not stop Lykins from bringing an athletic model to the collegiate wheelchair basketball program at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (Berger, 2008). He has brought the same athletic model to the University of Missouri, where he is known to recruit highly skilled players who are eager to learn and reach the top in the Intercollegiate Division of the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (Berger, 2008). A new sense of eliteness and competition has begun under Lykins, where only experienced players are recruited to join the program (Berger, 2008). Therefore, he has recruited specific athletes who are active participants in the wheelchair basketball environment (Berger, 2008). Lykins's tactical recruiting strategy is similar to how "standing" basketball coaches recruit their elite players. By modeling his coaching style and approach after coaches such as Bobby Knight, Lykins has brought higher expectations to collegiate wheelchair basketball, where he has encouraged his players to view themselves as legitimate athletes (Berger, 2008). By obtaining permission from Coach Lykins, I was able to obtain a deeper understanding of the identity construction of collegiate wheelchair basketball players through observation and interviews.



## Ethical Considerations

Throughout the course of the research, it was the primary researchers aim to respect all participant's rights and values. It is important to note that ethnography is one of the most invasive research methods due to the researcher's constant observation and exposure to possible sensitive data (Spradley, 1980; Creswell, 2014). In order to respect all participant's rights, the Institutional Review Board at the University of Mississippi approved the research. Furthermore, certain safeguards were put in place prior to the start of observations and interviews. First, all participants were informed if they were recorded during observation or interviews. Second, transcriptions of all interviews and observations were made available to all participants. Lastly, participants' wishes were considered prior to the reporting of results regarding the study.

## Setting

The study was conducted on the campus at the University of Missouri. The University of Missouri is a public institution and has a student population of 32,341 (Cappex, 2018). As of recent, the University of Missouri has been classified as being in "financial crisis mode" (Keller & Stice, 2016). The financial instability on campus is directly correlated to lower funding and high school graduate enrollment (Canon & Williams, 2017). With the Missouri General Assembly cutting direct funding to the university by around 6.6% and a 16% drop in freshman beginning their college endeavor at the University of Missouri, the institution has had to close seven dorms and eliminate over 400 jobs in an attempt to not lose more revenue (Canon & Williams, 2017). Unfortunately, the university lost over \$16 million in revenue, resulting in former chancellor R. Bowen Loftin having to defend his managerial and leadership agenda in front of legislators in a public forum (Canon & Williams, 2017). As such, the financial crisis of the University of Missouri has left an uneasiness in both the academic and athletic environment

on campus. Furthermore, all of the research for this study was conducted in the Student Recreation Facility located on campus. Specifically, most of the participant observation took place on the Historic Brewer Courts located within the facility. The interviews took place within the Student Recreation Facility too, specifically, head coach Ron Lykins's office.

#### Data Collection Procedures

The data collected for this research occurred from December 3 to December 5, 2017. This included nine hours of recorded semi-structured face-to-face interviews using the initial interview questions found in Appendix A and Appendix B as a guideline. To help with the development of my analysis, I used a field log to write detailed notes during observation hours. The semi-structured interviews were recorded using both an audio device and handwritten notes. I also kept a field diary to log my own feelings and perceptions throughout the research process.

The data collection process for this thesis research consisted of a system that involved both collecting and analyzing observation notes as well as interview data. While collecting the data on the University of Missouri wheelchair basketball team, coding of the information began to help determine certain themes and patterns. A detailed account of all participant interviews emerged from transcribing all recordings of the semi-structured interviews.

To begin the transcription process, the interviews were transferred from an MP3 recording device to a Microsoft Word Document using a software system, called Happy Scribe. Afterwards, to ensure that all transcriptions were accurate, I listened to each of the interviews and made corrections to the software transcription. To do so, I reviewed all interviews again to ensure that all words were accurately illustrated in each of the transcriptions. The conclusion of this process resulted in a total of 157 pages of transcription interview documents. Immediately

following the conclusion of the data collection and transcription process, interviews were fully coded and analyzed to complete the thesis research.

### Analytical Procedures

In order to generate a proper qualitative analysis, I used a technique grounded in comparing responses to interview questions that had been centered on the complexity and negotiation of identities associated with college wheelchair basketball players. As such, the first step under this qualitative analysis technique was to identify major symbols by grouping repetitive terms and similar data together, thus allowing for thematic patterns to emerge through comparison (Anderson, 2009; Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000). During this phase, I coded the interviews line-by-line, and the following terms became symbols due to their frequent occurrence: Special Olympics, the same basketball, promotion and education, recognition and the NCAA, the purest of sports, Coach Lykins and survival.

The second step of the analytical process involved extensive reading of all nine interview transcriptions to determine the construction of meanings regarding these symbols and how these meanings developed into patterns of themes. Furthermore, through this phase, the struggle with legitimacy of wheelchair basketball materialized as the overarching theme. Afterwards, I began grouping the symbols together to support this mass narrative, and in doing so, three symbolic themes emerged: struggling with the legitimacy of wheelchair basketball as a ‘real’ sport, struggling with belongingness to the NCAA, and struggling with managing wheelchair basketball. Lastly, reoccurring narratives from each of the interviews supporting these themes were used to help construct the analysis portion of the thesis, and to display the identity construction of collegiate wheelchair basketball players through symbolic interactionism.

## Data Verification

All data obtained in this study was confirmed using several strategies. First, triangulation enhanced the credibility of data obtained this study (Creswell, 2013). More specifically, to enhance credibility and trustworthiness, information was collected from all players and staff of the University of Missouri wheelchair basketball team through both observation and semi-structured interviews.

Secondly, to further ensure for credibility, it was imperative that more strategies were put into place throughout the course of the research. As such, a detailed description of the purpose of the study, the position of the researcher within the study, reasoning behind selection of the University of Missouri wheelchair basketball team as participants were all reported to further support reliability.

Finally, the overall credibility of the data analyses was enhanced through extensive discussions among three coders of the interview data. Precisely, three researchers read and coded interview transcriptions, and any disagreements were eliminated through productive discussions among themselves. Lastly, each of coders all agreed with the symbols that affected identities of the participant wheelchair players.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Struggling with the Legitimacy of Wheelchair Basketball as a ‘Real’ Sport

Prior to entering the office of the coach who has won both gold medals in men and women’s Paralympic wheelchair basketball, stood a three shelf book case with trophies and game winning basketballs representing seasons of hard work and dedication. A small recording camera faced toward Brewer Courts 7 through 10. On most days, the camera would record practices to allow players to further improve their skill sets on the court. However, on this particular day the camera was turned off as people engaged in pick-up basketball games below. As I stood in that room, I began to sense a program yearning to be elite in a sport that has been viewed previously as ‘slow’ and ‘recreational’. In the days to come, I encountered players that would further validate that feeling I had on the first day of my arrival.

As the interview process began to unfold, a common element throughout was the strong socio-linguistic practice of jokes towards each other and society. Through the lens of humor, players were only able to see each other as having disabilities when telling jokes. Player D describes how the wheelchair is only noticeable when telling jokes within the team:

*A lot of the team will joke around about their disabilities like I know our team here at Mizzou will joke around about how disabled somebody is or how not disabled they are. So, like honestly it just becomes like more of a joke than really a disability at that point. We don’t view each other as in wheelchairs except when we’re telling jokes.*

The team has instilled a culture grounded in humor to resist against their disability and misinterpretation of the sport. The jokes embedded within the culture create a symbolic meaning

that is not only associated with being a coping mechanism, but also implies their culture. For instance, with a confident tone, Player F depicted their unique culture and ability to accept disabilities:

*We say those jokes to each other all the time, and we have no problem with it. I think having been disabled, you have to know how to laugh at yourself. I think everybody in the world has to know how to laugh at yourself. We just do it a lot.*

Player F also described the program as a sense of family, “like your brothers”. By working towards a common goal, the members on the team have created a ‘brotherhood’ that does not allow for their physical impairment to be an excuse. Members of the team are known to be made fun of if “you use your disability as a weakness”. The no excuse mentality that is so intertwined within the culture of the program creates a fortitude to withstand the unrecognized competitive characteristics of the sport.

*Special Olympics.* In the interviews, one of the most common phrases mentioned by the athletes and staff was “Special Olympics”. For instance, Player D further advocated and displayed an eagerness to not be associated with this ideology:

*They think you’re part of the Special Olympics. But we’re not. So, I mean we’re just as much of the athletes as normal people are so that’s probably the biggest thing.*

Furthermore, Player D’s response reflects the boundary placed within the program towards Special Olympics and the societal belief that all individuals perceived to have physical impairments are “imperfect, incomplete and inadequate” (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 185), therefore they are not classified as ‘normal’ athletes. Precisely, the common sports fan is known to struggle with seeing an athlete with a disability receive a medal at an elite competitive event next to ‘normal’ athlete (DePauw, 1997; Hardin, 2003; Schantz & Gilbert, 2001), and thus allowing sports to mirror the values and norms of the culture within society (DePauw, 1997; Hardin, 2003). As such, there is the prevalent belief that individuals with physical impairments that must

use a wheelchair for transportation only participate in physical activity for rehabilitation, and not for strenuous, competitive purposes (Brittain, 2004). The societal structure and format of sports has created a perception that wheelchair-bound impairments are equivalent to inability (Brittain, 2004). Player B further explained the cause to this lack of understanding:

*Many people misinterpret it for things like the Special Olympics programs, which are more recreational and much more of an opportunistic aspect than I would argue a competitive aspect until you get into the higher levels of Special Olympics programs.*

As such, in Player B's comment, "Special Olympics" was highlighted as a misinterpreted label for wheelchair basketball, one that placed wheelchair basketball in a fixed, recreational category. Furthermore, the lack of understanding of the competitive nature of collegiate wheelchair basketball and the misuse of the term "Special Olympics" has created an uncompetitive connotation to the sport. Player D also supports this negative and uncompetitive view by saying:

*Yeah, so like I mean their depiction of wheelchair basketball is that it's not very competitive in that I mean I've had people say that, oh you want to make the Special Olympics. Nah, it's the Paralympics. It's not the Special Olympics; we are not part of that. So, I mean it's definitely a different mindset.*

The narrative of Player D clearly manifests that for a wider public, there is a lack of knowledge between the differences in the Special Olympics and Paralympics. During the 2002 Paralympic Games in Salt Lake City, for instance, one reporter referred to the mobility impaired competitions as, "[I]t's a bone they throw to them to make them feel better. It's not real competition, and I for one, don't see why I should have to cover it." (Golden, 2002, p. 13; Hardin, 2003). Media coverage as such has certainly fostered the perception of wheelchair basketball as an inadequate sport.

This could be further illustrated by that while discussing the competitiveness of the sport, if 'Special Olympics' was used, both players and staff were quick to deny association with the

term, often in a scornful tone. For instance, Player A provided the following comment with a subtle grin:

*You kind of think of Special Olympics you know. And then once you get in the chair and start pushing seeing what you can do and then you start challenging yourself, it's different. Cause when you talk to a random person at the airport and you tell them anything wheelchair basketball, "Oh yeah, I've gone to a couple of the Special Olympics tournaments." Oh no, like totally different. So, you know like part of it is, you know, in society we are not educated with disabilities.*

In this instance, the player denied and disassociated wheelchair basketball from "Special Olympics". In doing so, it highlighted the common assumption of wheelchair basketball as an uncompetitive sport and the player's struggle under such misleading stereotype. Indeed, in today's knowledge hegemony of sport, being competitive has already become a socially constructed norm that qualifies a "sport" to be a "sport" (Andrews, 2006). The players' resistance to being seen as a part of the *Special Olympics*, an organization that encourages athletic participation for individuals with intellectual disabilities, indicated an eagerness for wheelchair basketball to be accepted as a legitimate competitive sport, and perhaps not without an ironic undertone, a victimhood that the players have fallen under the hegemonic ideology of competitiveness. Meanwhile, in interviewing Staff Member B, the question was asked, "Have you ever gone to the Special Olympics?" he was quick to respond in a mocking tone, "No, I have never gone to the Special Olympics." Staff Member B, who is full-bodied, was immensely confident in his response, further validating the team's resistance to being associated with the Special Olympics organization. Therefore, it is to be concluded that the entire program has taken a firm stance against Special Olympics, and the socially constructed view of sport that is closely aligned with the stigma that only non-physically impaired people participate (Burger, 2008; Hardin, 2003). By stereotypically being characterized as a Special Olympics team, a sense of



fear has been created of not being viewed as a ‘normal’ legitimate athlete in a sport similar to ‘standing’ basketball.

*The Same Basketball.* In an attempt to understand the fears of players not being viewed as a ‘normal’ athlete and the inadequate connotations surrounding the sport, I began to examine the infrastructure of the team’s facility. As I began to observe the environment, it became apparent that each of the three-point lines were precisely painted and the height of the basket was noticeably the same as “standing” basketball. As such, the length of the court was of similar dimensions too. However, there were differences displayed such as each of the four basketball courts were tightly aligned together, with nothing to separate them from each other but painted sidelines. On one side of the courts, three rows of bleachers were placed up against the wall for spectators who wanted to attend home games. In a contrasting tone, Player G aspired to one day compete on a court that was not inadequate in design:

*I mean there are times where I’m like I want to play in the Mizzou arena. But, I mean, cause that’s a full-size court, and this is not quite. This isn’t a full-size court.*

For instance, on Brewer Courts 7 through 10, there was no newly designed hardwood flooring, just eight simple basketball rims with hardwood floors deteriorating from multiple uses by the wheelchair basketball team and regular students. Player C displayed both admiration and frustration through his discussion of one day seeing the team play on Norman Stewart Court in Mizzou Arena:

*The sport grows and we don’t have to play in the rec. We play in like maybe like the Mizzou arena one day or something like that. See wheelchair basketball on ESPN one day, that would be cool.*

Player C’s response reveals a distinct difference between varsity basketball and collegiate wheelchair basketball. Contrary to varsity collegiate basketball, wheelchair basketball has not had commercialized industries, such as major sport networks and apparel companies, pour into

the environment (Benford, 2007). As such, funds have not been used to enhance facilities to which would lead to competitive arms race similar to ‘standing’ basketball (Benford, 2007). Player C and G had contrasting viewpoints regarding the infrastructure of facilities and rules of collegiate wheelchair basketball. For instance, Player G depicted a description of the infrastructure in a tone that presented collegiate wheelchair facilities as secondary and not optimal. Furthermore, Player C’s narrative highlighted an inequality in the glamor surrounding the facilities by placing a higher emphasis on the infrastructure of the Mizzou arena and the exposure drawn from televised games. Therefore, based upon Player C and G’s comments during the interview process, collegiate wheelchair basketball players have become aware of the lack of financial investments and revenue markets, resulting in a desire to play in an exclusive arena immersed with supportive fans. The desire to want to compete in a facility consumed with commercialization characteristics is driven by the similarities players have found between “standing” and wheelchair basketball.

When asked about the similarities to “standing” basketball, Player C strongly explained that collegiate wheelchair basketball has the “same rules, same length of court, same height of the um, rim, so everything, the only difference is that we don’t have double dribble, that is the only difference.” Furthermore, Player C displayed pride when discussing the similarities of collegiate wheelchair basketball to “standing” basketball by stating:

*There’s men’s basketball, there’s women’s basketball and there’s wheelchair basketball. There all basketball. You know we’re just in a wheelchair here.*

As such, Player C’s comment supported the team’s underlying belief that collegiate wheelchair basketball has minimal differences than other forms of basketball. As I began to investigate more into what seemed to be a case of similarities, it was apparent that wheelchair basketball players undergo schedules and competitive expectations congruent to varsity level

athletes, but do so with less adequate infrastructure. For instance, Player E expressed these equivalent schedule regiments in a discouraging tone by stating:

*At the end we do the same thing, like we practice every day, we work out three times a week. We play games. I mean we do the same thing.*

Precisely due to practice and competitive regiments all played on the same basketball court, Player E's comment highlights the underlying meaning behind the struggle for legitimacy in infrastructure and competition in collegiate wheelchair basketball. Meanwhile, from a coaching perspective, Staff Member A further described this regimented schedule by stating:

*They've got the same demands academically. The same demands are being put on them physically for training, lifting weights, skill development, practice times, all that sort of stuff. So, yeah it is a sport.*

In an advocate tone, Staff Member A's response on similar demands confirmed why the program continues to face the struggle of seeking legitimacy in both infrastructure and competition. As such, to offset the stereotypical view of being 'slow' or 'recreational', the team has sought to increase promotion and education surrounding the sport.

*Promotion and Education.* While introducing myself on the first day of the research process, I immediately noticed each of the players' firm handshakes, to which were highly correlated to their muscular each of their upper-body physiques. The muscular physiques of each of the players exemplified why male athletes with disabilities, who use a wheelchair to compete, are fitting for advertisements (Hardin, 2003). From a commercialized viewpoint, wheelchair-bound athletes are used the most in advertising because the upper-body is still described as 'normal' and strong even though the wheelchair is used for transportation (Hardin, 2003; DePauw, 1997). Furthermore, certain companies will use images of these athletes to generate higher revenue sources and grow their market share in the physically impaired population (Hardin, 2003). For example, Volkswagen redesigned the look of a wheelchair in one of their ads

to a symbol of athleticism to draw an appeal to some consumers who rejected the stereotypical standard of disabilities (Hardin, 2003). Despite these attempts at bringing media to wheelchair athletes, promotion and other forms of education are still being sought, specifically by collegiate wheelchair basketball players. These highly talented athletes still face the battle of being excluded from mainstream advertisement and promotion due to being an expense and burden financially (Burnett & Paul, 1996; Hardin, 2003).

During the interview process, when the players were asked about the promotion and education process surrounding the team, Player G optimistically stated:

*I mean there needs to be more awareness for wheelchair basketball but there is definitely more awareness than there was several years ago. So, I think we're going to get to that point where wheelchair basketball and able-bodied basketball are the same. That's just right now is not the time.*

Player G displayed an attitude of confliction, when he was both optimistic but still hesitant about the promotional aspect of collegiate wheelchair basketball. Though the players within the study would be characterized as athletes with disabilities who would produce the highest revenue from advertisements, they too, still experience a lack of promotion and education about their sport. Most of the promotion and education to which they seek is deeply embedded in the need for recognition of being classified as a 'normal' athlete. Player D supported this conclusion by very enthusiastically stating:

*It's getting our name out there without really depicting us as wheelchair athletes. So, I mean we love being viewed as just normal athletes. And that's what we want to be depicted as.*

Ultimately, the exposure to which these athletes have been given is associated with projects and interviews. Player D went on to further explain the outcome to which they hope to achieve from these avenues of promotion and education:

*We've had tons of people do projects on our team. And it actually just helps us to get our word out there and get what we feel out there. So, I mean projects, things that we can get on YouTube and things like that. The more views we get, the more people seeing our program. Uh, I mean the better our goal is. I mean the closer we are getting that big stadium with tons of people in it.*

With an honest tone, Player D revealed the need for legitimacy and recognition as the overarching purpose in the team wanting to have more promotion and education around collegiate wheelchair basketball. Furthermore, throughout the interview process, I became aware that the players were displaying an identity of advocacy by the way they discussed their sport and themselves. Towards the end of each interview session, I asked each of the players how they viewed me along with the interview. Player E stated with a positive tone:

*I view you as an opportunity to try to represent what the ideals of everybody before, hopefully, after me are going to have you know. It's kind of difficult, we really try to present ourselves in the best way possible because we want, at every opportunity, we want to have the best possible experience.*

Both Player D and E's statement depicts the motivation behind the players wanting to participate in the research. As such, the players viewed my role in the research process as an advocate to bring awareness to the legitimacy of collegiate wheelchair basketball. However, my purpose for the research was to fill the gap in the literature regarding the understanding of negotiation and identity construction of collegiate wheelchair basketball players through symbolic interactionism. Therefore, through this interaction process, how the players viewed the interview process and research ultimately reflected their struggle as individuals to obtain legitimacy in a competitive organizational environment. In an attempt to bring legitimacy to collegiate wheelchair basketball, they have placed the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) as the highest of standards to achieve.

## Struggling with Belongingness to the NCAA

*Recognition and the NCAA.* The trophies and signed championship basketballs that greeted me prior to entering Coach Lykins's office told the story of where collegiate wheelchair basketball stood with relation to a governance association. The logo of the NCAA was not displayed on any of the memorabilia found outside Coach Lykins's office. Though collegiate wheelchair basketball is not governed by the NCAA, the team however strives to meet the same standards and expectations of it. Player A proudly stated that though "we are not part of the NCAA, but you know the program here is ran like it was part of the NCAA". Under the supervision of Ron Lykins, the program has implemented NCAA guidelines and has sought help from in-house compliance in order to meet those qualifications. Player F began to unpack very enthusiastically the major reason why the program is run like an NCAA team:

*Every team in the country runs their program like an NCAA sport because we want to be NCAA; we want to be recognized as a collegiate athletic organization. Um, and so, we're going to run it just that way until we're given that status. Um, here at Mizzou, we're not part of our athletic department which is a little bit unfortunate. Um, but we're doing everything we can to be a part of that and we're going to run it exactly by the book; how every NCAA sport is ran to achieve that status.*

In this instance, Player F illustrated a response grounded in a need to be a part of the NCAA for recognition leading to further legitimacy. Unfortunately, collegiate wheelchair basketball is recognized by the NCAA as an emerging sport with benefits that only reach to minimum financial support (Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014). However, the program is able to have similar benefits as varsity level sports through the use of the university contract on campus. In a tone full of humility and gratitude, Staff Member A depicted this unique relationship between the athletic department on campus and the wheelchair basketball program:

*Athletics lets us use their contract to get our apparel. So, we pay the price what the other sports do...They don't have to do that. They can say nah. But, they do. And that doesn't*

*cost them anything, but their valuing saves our program money. Without athletics, we couldn't operate at the quality that we do because they help us in so many areas.*

Along with using the athletic clothing contract, the program is also provided university buses to travel to competitions. These benefits give the team a similar experience as other NCAA varsity level sports, but does not give full financial stability to the program. For instance, according to Staff Member A, the scholarships granted to players is provided by state resources and not the athletic department. The financial aid assistance given by the program to players is imperative to the competitiveness of the team. Furthermore, Staff Member A illustrated why providing scholarships was essential to obtain an elite status in the collegiate wheelchair basketball environment:

*If we didn't offer scholarships, we couldn't get the players we do. I mean there's competition among schools to get some of the players to come in. So, to get top level players and that, I mean you got to offer scholarships. Some of the schools offer them, some don't.*

Unfortunately, a sense of instability has occurred with scholarships precisely because of the decrease in funding to the University of Missouri (Canon, 2017). To counterbalance the decrease in funding, the program has sought other resources such as summer camps for monetary donations. However, monetary donations are non-comparable to the financial stability that would be granted to the program if they were to be included as a varsity level sport under the NCAA.

*The Purest of Sports.* With minimal revenue aspects and even less professional athletic opportunities after college, players have placed academics at the forefront of their collegiate careers. Player F gave an enlightening description of the future reality he must face once he receives his degree and has expired his athletic eligibility:

*I mean in the sport of wheelchair basketball [it is] unique because there's no, there's nothing afterwards. I'm not going to go play and make millions of dollars professionally. So, what am I going to do after I'm here at Mizzou. And so, I really have to lean on that education and that has to be a priority or I'm not going to be able to make it.*

Player G depicted a similar reality faced by all collegiate wheelchair basketball players by stating:

*Like school is more important because like there's no professional wheelchair basketball league in America that I can go play for. If I want to go play professionally, I have to go overseas, and even then, it's not going to make millions of dollars like you know LeBron James. So, I'm really a student first and then I'm an athlete.*

In a prideful tone, Player G and F's comments highlights a program centered on being the purest form of collegiate sports, with academics being at the forefront. Meanwhile, it is important to note that while the NCAA creates financial stability leading to legitimacy within the sport of collegiate wheelchair basketball, it would also significantly change the culture and mindset of the program. For instance, Staff Member A discussed the possibility of a negative influence on the program if financial stability was present and high amounts of revenue were generated:

*Now if you offered these guys lots of money, they'd take it. But I think then you would see an attitude change eventually. An entitlement, I want this, I want that. It's not about what I need, it's about what I want. And that's the difference, need and want. And that changes. You know it becomes greed.*

Therefore, an internal conflict was present by the program seeking to be viewed by society as legitimate athletes under the NCAA but not wanting to become entitled under the recognition of this elite status. When a sport falls under the umbrella of the most well-known athletic governance system in higher education, the programs experience support through financial endorsements, and as a result, are viewed by society as more authentic (Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014). Furthermore, from an individual stand-point, NCAA student-athletes are reported to have higher levels of self-esteem and self-worth due to the legitimacy of the system (Larkin, Cottingham, & Pate, 2014).



Staff Member A further supported this claim by stating, “We are not going to go pro in anything. We go pro in something else. And that’s whatever your degree program is in.” The narratives given by players and staff were vastly different than “standing” intercollegiate basketball players perceptions, who often place a high emphasis on athletic performance at the expense of academic achievement (Adler & Adler, 1985). These collegiate wheelchair basketball players do not encounter this turbulent relationship between academics and athletics because of the non-commercialized environment they compete in. The term ‘student-athlete’ is heavily displayed in their daily schedule that begins with a two-hour practice at 5:30 in the morning, allowing for the rest of their day to be filled with academic commitments such as classes, tutors and study sessions. Wheelchair basketball is classified as the purest form of collegiate sport due to the lack of commercialization and the necessity for a higher education degree. Furthermore, Player F passionately depicted the uniqueness of collegiate wheelchair basketball by describing an undeniable environment surrounded by pure love:

*So, you got players that purely play for the love of the sport, and you’ve got coaches who almost coach just purely for the love of the sport which is a very pure form of the sport which I really enjoy and love.*

Though collegiate wheelchair basketball is unique in this regard and does not face the same turbulent relationship between athletics and academics as revenue-generating NCAA sports encounter, they too must face their own conflict. The commercialization aspect intertwined within NCAA sports transfers a student-athletes focus from excellence in the classroom to a primary concern of athletic achievement to meet competitive expectations (Adler & Adler, 1985). The price of obtaining legitimacy with the NCAA will cost the program its standards of being one of the purest forms of sports in the institutional environment. As such, collegiate wheelchair basketball players would forfeit their pure love of the sport and academic centered

daily routines. Furthermore, Lykins has sought to bring an athletic model of leadership to promote a system of becoming elite despite a player's physical impairment (Berger, 2008), and to defeat the struggle with the legitimacy of managing collegiate wheelchair basketball.

### Struggling with Managing Wheelchair Basketball

*Coach Lykins and Survival.* During the process of analyzing data, I noticed the term "Coach Lykins" was frequently mentioned by players, particularly as a symbol associated with struggling with obstacles in managing the program. Similar to his coaching approach at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Lykins has brought an athletic model full of elite expectations to the campus of the University of Missouri in order to combat the lack of understanding planted in the competitive nature of collegiate wheelchair basketball (Berger, 2008). For instance, Player D depicted this elite athletic model by stating:

*He probably thinks we are better athletes than the other people in his mind. So, he thinks we should get the same treatment as regular college athletes.*

Player D's response emphasized his personal perspective of Coach Lykins's unique coaching style of eliteness within the program. Staff Member B also began to discuss the new direction of eliteness given by Coach Lykins:

*We've kind of gone through a little bit of a change. So, you know we used to take anybody and coach always had this philosophy you know we'll bring them in and make them a basketball player. You know that could only get us so far. You know we had to start we had to make a change and you know attract those individuals who wanted to be students and athletes who just didn't want to receive the gear, receive the jersey and say they are on a team. So, you know we try to change the mindset to you are a student-athlete. These are your responsibilities as an athlete. And you know we demand that out of you. There is the offseason workouts, the pre-season workouts, just encompassing everything and not just you know saying because you're on the wheelchair basketball team you're part of sport, your an athlete. You've got to earn that title.*

Precisely, Staff Member B's response highlighted a competitive roster, to which a lot of the players had some previous athletic background prior to enrollment at the University of

Missouri. However, those who did not meet those elite expectations were rejected. For instance, on the first day of my fieldwork, I met all of the players on the Brewer Courts prior to them participating in a volunteer event. During the community event, players were introducing over two dozen young children, who were also wheelchair-bound, the skills and techniques of wheelchair basketball. Due to the selective recruiting under Coach Lykins's elite athletic model, too many of these young children, though they have passion for the sport, will never have the opportunity to compete for the University of Missouri wheelchair basketball program.

Furthermore, the selective recruiting and elite expectations environment of the program is caused by the program having no other option within the market system. Player E described these elite expectations by how he "wants us to be even better, (like he) wants like the best from us. Like he wants 110% you know." As such, Player E's statement is similar to what a father expects from his son. Along with managing a program with higher expectations, Lykins has sought to draw a more competitive stereotype to the sport by the way he approaches each player individually.

According to Player G:

*He just sees each of us as different cause I mean, each of us has a different disability and we have different abilities. So, he just sees us like just for who we are and he knows like how to coach each player to their disability.*

In this instance, Player G's comment depicts Lykins's ability to bring an elite coaching model to a sport viewed in society as 'slow' and 'recreational' (Berger, 2004, 2008). Ironically, both Player E and G both interpret Coach Lykins's leadership regiment as a personal style, instead of fully grasping the market systems influence on his elite athletic coaching model. The sense of respect and appreciation players have towards Coach Lykins's is deeply grounded in the belief that only by making collegiate wheelchair basketball competitive at the elite level, does the sport flourish in market interest and brand image.

Though Coach Lykins serves as another outlet to which the program is able to fight against the lack of competitive nature of the sport, barriers and frustrations have formed on his journey to obtain legitimacy within the sport. Despite these players desires to become elite through playing in the Mizzou arena and seeking recognition through fan support, collegiate wheelchair basketball is currently still classified as an emerging sport under the umbrella of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014). By obtaining an NCAA status, an increase in financial support and recognition will be granted from athletic departments and institutions (Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014). Financial instability has also occurred at the University of Missouri during the last two years leading to budget and program cuts within academic and recreation departments. For instance, when walking through the hallways of the second floor of the University of Missouri Student Recreation Facility, doors remained closed of empty offices that once housed graduate assistants. In an attempt to offset the decreasing number of funding and freshman enrollment, the university has had to terminate over 400 jobs (Canon, 2017). Unfortunately, of the over 400 jobs that were eliminated, some were part of the campus recreation department. Staff Member B described the financial instability of the program as Coach Lykins's "biggest frustrater" and vividly described the emotions surrounding these frightening budget cuts:

*The budget cuts that we experience this summer or last summer because everything that happened two falls ago, you know, I think every department, every program was definitely rattled and shaken and, you know, very concerned about the status quo that we will be able to obtain and move forward with.*

Due to the collegiate wheelchair basketball program not being a sport that brings in financial revenue, the university budget cuts directly affected the program. Staff Member B depicted this reality in an honest tone:

*You know we're one of the 10 teams within the world to have or provide or offer a college wheelchair basketball team but on the flip side when you have budget cuts to higher education and especially you know a program that only serves currently eight individuals you know that chunk of change could be easily, very easily redistributed to other groups on campus very quickly, and you know depending on the individual making that decision it could be really hard for him or really easy so, there is always that constant pressure. So, yeah, that is something we deal with.*

To sustain the program, the staff has had to make strategic decisions to withstand the turbulent financial stress of being an emerging sport at a low gross revenue institution. In order to remain sustainable in the long-run Staff Member A candidly described the financial situation and raised the question he often asked himself, "I mean funding is tight, it gets cut. You know, how do we make our dollars stretch?". Furthermore, Staff Member A illustrated the strategic plans to which they had to make in order to keep the program functioning at a competitive, sustainable level:

*Our freshman enrollment is down. We had problems in 2015, and it had a major affect on the university. It had an affect on the programs and all that. So yeah, we are finding ways to make it work. Our rec sports department is helping us, not rec sports, the rec services is helping us out in ways. We got to be smart with what we do. You know we can't offer more scholarships. We might not be able to take this type of trip. Cut down on our apparel. You know just be smart with what we do and somehow you know we'll find a way to get through it.*

The players have also experienced the immense weight that has been placed on the program in order to sustain it. Player B's candid viewpoint illustrated a player's perspective into the constant battle of surviving on the campus of the University of Missouri.

*I mean it's just a constant fight for such things and when a school like ours is going through the kind of recession that we're going through, the school kind of looks at us and says like some people want to keep us; some people may not know if we're sustainable and it's our job essentially to prove to the entire university that we are sustainable um, and it can be hard. I mean sometimes getting smaller buses, may mean less tournaments or more compact tournaments for a lot of other programs as well. It may mean less players; it may mean a lot of different things, may mean using more older chairs, than getting new players new chairs. Um, and so, it's a careful budgeting game in many cases.*

Furthermore, Player B expressed gratitude to the staff for “not just putting the program on an IV and hoping it survives.” Lastly, by Coach Lykins striving to build an elite team, it is believed that the program would survive the current organizational system and adverse financial environment.

Each of these frequent symbols supports the mass narrative of collegiate wheelchair basketball struggling with legitimacy within collegiate athletics. As a result of the lack of awareness and resistance to uncompetitive theology, players have sought to bring promotion to the sport. In an attempt to obtain competitive legitimacy, the NCAA has been placed on a pedestal to attain. Though membership into the NCAA would initiate financial and organizational stability within the sport, players would enter into a collegiate environment heavily encompassed with commercialization aspects, immense levels of pressure to win and ultimately, surrender their academic ambitions (Adler & Adler, 1985). Precisely, collegiate wheelchair basketball players must negotiate between the different identity complexities of being a student-athlete with a physical impairment through the lens of struggling for legitimacy within the athletic and organizational environment.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

During the 1940's, over 400,000 militant soldiers lost their lives on the battlefields of the Second World War (The National World War II Museum-New Orleans, 2018). Those who survived the war returned home with catastrophic injuries and searched for rehabilitation efforts to regain mobility (NCAA, 2013). To meet these rehabilitation needs, wheelchair-bound veterans began to participate in basketball, thus creating the birth of competitive wheelchair basketball (NCAA, 2013). By 1948 in Champaign, Illinois, the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) was founded and the birth of an elite atmosphere at both the professional and collegiate level (National Wheelchair Basketball Association, 2017). Though the initial collegiate wheelchair basketball programs played tournaments in poor facilities and often struggled to meet a full roster of players, the National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) today consist of 14 collegiate teams (NCAA, 2013). In 2015, the University of Alabama reversed the stigma of poor infrastructure in collegiate wheelchair basketball by proposing a \$10 million adapted facility project that would encompass 27,000 square feet of campus (UA News, 2016).

However, despite such institutions attempts at creating an elite environment for collegiate wheelchair basketball, the sport is often associated with the perception of 'charity' due to it not being commercialized and driven by revenue (Larkin, Cottingham & Pate, 2014). Furthermore, collegiate wheelchair basketball players are often pitied due to the societal belief that sports were never created for those who were perceived to be inadequate (Britain, 2004; 2008; Devine, 1997;). As such, this thesis has sought to examine the construction of identities of collegiate

wheelchair basketball players by focusing on the symbolic interactions they experience in the collegiate environment. The theoretical framework was grounded in symbolic interactionism in order to further understand the negotiation of identities of each of the individuals in the study. Precisely, as symbolic interactionism is heavily enriched in the process of interaction, the theory also includes the use of meanings and symbols that are embedded within each of these communication networks (Askan et al., 2009; Burbank & Martins, 2010; Manis & Meltzer, 1972). Due to collegiate wheelchair basketball players not being bound to one specific identity, a constant negotiation process of identities must occur through the use of symbolic interactions (Robinson, 2007).

To further understand the identity construction of collegiate wheelchair basketball players, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the University of Missouri wheelchair basketball team. For the purpose of the study, the players were the primary informants, but staff members were also interviewed in order to get a holistic viewpoint of all interactions that could influence identity construction. Upon beginning the interview process, I met the team at a volunteer community outreach event for which they were teaching young wheelchair-bound children the rules of wheelchair basketball. While observing their participation in the event, I began to notice a team that was enthusiastic about demonstrating competitiveness and bringing an elite awareness to their sport. Furthermore, this particular observation was later confirmed throughout the interview process, as players began to discuss their struggles for legitimacy in a sport that has often been viewed in society as a recreational activity (Berger, 2004, 2008). As such, each of the interviews were strongly overshadowed with a social-linguistic practice of humor towards each other and within society in an attempt to cope with the misinterpretation of their sport. The jokes



told within the culture of the program symbolize a coping mechanism to withstand the stereotypical viewpoints of collegiate wheelchair basketball being ‘slow’ (Berger, 2004, 2008).

Upon analysis of all interview transcriptions, three themes evolved depicting the overarching struggle for legitimacy with the sport. Precisely, the participants frequently used the term ‘Special Olympics’ when discussing the competitiveness of the sport. This reoccurring term highlighted the misinterpreted connotation that wheelchair basketball was recreational and uncompetitive. The players’ resistance to the use of the phrase reflected an eagerness for the program to be accepted as a legitimate competitive sport, and thus creating a boundary towards the stereotypical viewpoint of individuals with physical disabilities are inadequate to be an athlete (Hargreaves, 2000).

Furthermore, to understand the players eagerness to be a legitimate sport, discussions began to unfold regarding the infrastructure of the game. Through my initial observation, the basketball court used by the players were of the same physical standard to that of ‘standing’ basketball; however, minimal spectator seating was available and deteriorating hardwood floors covered the courts. As such, the collegiate wheelchair basketball players displayed both adoration and dissatisfaction when discussing their facilities in comparison to the Mizzou arena. These narratives highlighted the infrastructure of the sport is not optimal and equivalent in standards to that of ‘standing’ varsity level basketball players. As such, these collegiate wheelchair basketball players have become aware of the lack of financial stability engrossed within the sport, and have sought to play in glamorous arenas. The misinterpreted viewpoint of the competitiveness of the sport and inadequate facility infrastructure has forced the players to struggle with wheelchair basketball as a real sport.

As a result of the struggle with wheelchair basketball as a legitimate sport, players have sought to generate higher amounts of promotion and education towards collegiate wheelchair basketball. The collegiate wheelchair basketball players were highly motivated to participate in the research because it was seen to them as an opportunity to promote, educate and create legitimacy surrounding their sport. Furthermore, how the collegiate wheelchair basketball players responded to the research process directly reflects their struggle to obtain legitimacy from an organizational point of view, thus raising the National Collegiate Athletic Association on a platform to obtain.

The terms 'NCAA' and 'purest of sports' were also frequently used in the context of striving to be viewed as a legitimate program from an organizational perspective. It was apparent through the reoccurring use of the symbol 'NCAA', the team had placed the National Collegiate Athletic Association as a standard of legitimacy in institutional athletics, and yearned to belong in the organization. Furthermore, in an attempt to receive recognition, Coach Lykins had implemented NCAA guidelines to govern all aspects of the program. Ironically, despite the desire to be viewed as legitimate athletes within a commercialized environment such as the NCAA, players took pride with being one of the purest forms of a college sport. In contrast to commercialized collegiate sports, academics had been placed at the heart of the collegiate wheelchair program due to the lack of professional athletic opportunities after college. However, if collegiate wheelchair basketball players were to enter into the commercialized environment of the NCAA, they would relinquish their academic centered schedules and pure love of the sport in order to meet athletic expectations.

Lastly, obstacles have also developed when trying to manage the team. The symbols 'Coach Lykins and survival' were frequently used by players in relation to the managerial

aspects of the program. In an attempt to obtain legitimacy and increase competitiveness within the program, Coach Lykins has brought an elite coaching model to the University of Missouri. Under this elite model, individuals who do not meet the required skill expectations are rejected and not allowed to be a member of the team. Ironically throughout the interview process, players interpreted Coach Lykins style of coaching as a personal preference, instead of fully grasping the influence of the market system on his selective recruiting techniques. As such, the elite coaching model used by Coach Lykins reflects the belief that an increase in competitive characteristics of the sport would generate a higher development in brand image and revenue growth. However, despite selective and elite coaching techniques, financial instability has caused another managerial barrier for Coach Lykins and the program to overcome. Due to monetary budget cuts at the University of Missouri, the program has had to be financially strategic with their resources in an attempt to survive and remain sustainable on campus in the long-run. Thus, it can be concluded that Coach Lykins's vision to build an elite team in collegiate wheelchair basketball is a result of striving to survive the current organizational system and unstable financial environment.

Within the study, the term 'identity' was defined by the dynamic and changing recognition of self (Chrysochou, 2003). Particularly, this definition is highly correlated to the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, where an individual formulates his or her identity based upon the value placed on symbolic relationships through interactions (Chrysochou, 2003). Through these interactions, an individual is also able to construct a knowledgeable foundation of the world, resulting in a personal worldview (Chrysochou, 2003). Furthermore, an individual's worldview is often displayed in the identity to which they associate

with (Chrysochou, 2003). As such, the collegiate wheelchair basketball players have had to negotiate between different identity complexities due to the struggle with legitimacy of the sport.

One of the identity conflicts of the study related to the struggle to belong within the NCAA, but also displaying pride for being the purest form of collegiate sports. Therefore, the collegiate wheelchair basketball players were constantly striving to run their program under the same bylaws of the NCAA, but at other points were displaying pride for playing the sport out of pure love. Another identity conflict displayed within the study was the collegiate wheelchair basketball players remaining highly academically driven, but still seeking to have athletic success. Though the relationship between academics and athletics was not turbulent compared to varsity level collegiate sports due to not being contaminated by commercialization aspects, the collegiate wheelchair basketball players had to negotiate between being both a student and an athlete for a different reason. These student-athletes negotiated between these identities in an attempt to gain legitimacy within collegiate sports, but also sought to gain academic success and complete a degree because of the lack of professional athletic opportunities after college.

Furthermore, based upon the analysis, collegiate wheelchair basketball players construct their identities through the struggle of being recognized as a legitimate sport. In other words, the findings concluded that collegiate wheelchair basketball players struggle with negotiating the illegitimacy surrounding their athletic identity due to the additional complexity layer of having physical disabilities. Furthermore, the study advances the current inquiry of collegiate wheelchair basketball by using the theory of symbolic interactionism to identify these identity negotiations, along with the incorporation of the NCAA which highlights the sports struggle in this institutional environment. As no prior research has attempted to understand the identity

struggles in all of these context, the study brings awareness to the identity negotiations associated with collegiate wheelchair basketball players as ‘student-athletes’.

Several limitations were considered after completion of the research. First, the interview and observation process was conducted over the span of three days. In order to combat for the short amount of time given to conduct the research, both interviews and observations were used to generate reliability within the study. Secondly, only seven collegiate wheelchair basketball players were interviewed and observed. Due to the small proportion of participants, the results may not be able to fully depict construction of identities of the total population of collegiate wheelchair basketball players. In an attempt to validate and expand the analysis, two staff members were also interviewed. Meanwhile, due to my role being viewed as somewhat of an advocate because I am not an athlete who uses a wheelchair, players may have manipulated their responses to generate promotion and legitimacy. In order to enhance future academic works, it is recommended to study a larger population of collegiate wheelchair basketball players over an extended duration by an individual who also has a physical impairment.

## REFERENCES

- Adler, P., & Adler, P. A. (1985). From idealism to pragmatic detachment: The academic performance of college athletes. *Sociology of Education*, 50(4) 241-250.
- Anderson, C.M. (2010). Linking perceptions of school belonging to academic motivation and academic achievement amongst student athletes: A comparative study between high-revenue student athletes and non-revenue student athletes. (Doctoral dissertation, The University of California, Berkeley). *Dissertation & Theses*. (UMI Number 3444591)
- Andrews, D.L. (2006). *Sport-Commerce-Culture: Essays on sport in late capitalist America*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Askan, N., Kisac, B., Aydin, M., & Demirbuken, S. (2009). Symbolic interaction theory. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 1(1), 902-904.
- Benford, R.D. (2007). The college sports reform movement: Reframing the “edutainment” industry. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 48(1), 1-28. doi:10.1111/j.1533-8525.2007.00068.x.
- Berger, R.J. (2004). Pushing forward: Disability, basketball, and me. *Qualitative inquiry*, 10(5), 794-810.
- Berger, R. J. (2008). Disability and the dedicated wheelchair athlete: Beyond the “supercrip” critique. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 37(6), 647-678. doi: 10.1177/0891241607309892.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Brittain, I. (2004). Perceptions of disability and their impact upon involvement in sport for people with disabilities of all levels. *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 28(4), 429-452.
- Burbank, P.M., & Martins, D.C. (2010). Symbolic interactionism and critical perspective: divergent or synergistic? *Nursing Philosophy* 11(1), 25-41.
- Canon, S., & Williams, M. R. (2017). University of missouri struggles to rebuild image after hits to reputation, enrollment. *The kansas city star*. Retrieved from <http://www.kansascity.com/news/state/missouri/article152939139.html>.
- Chrysochou, X. (2003). Studying identity in social psychology: Some thoughts of the definition of identity and its relation to action. *Journal of Language and Politics* 2(2), 225-241.
- Chu, D., Segrave, J.O., and Becker, B.J. (1985). *Sports and higher education*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

- Cooley, C.H. (1902). *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Creswell, J. (2013). *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. New York: Sage Publications.
- Darling, R.B. (2013). *Disability and identity: Negotiating self in a changing society*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Darling, R.B., and D.A. Heckert. (2010a). Activism, models, identities, and opportunities: A preliminary test of a typology of disability orientations. In *Research in Social Science and Disability* (pp. 203-229). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- De Garis, L. (1999). Experiment in pro wrestling: Toward a performance and sensuous Sensuous ethnography. *Sociology of sport journal*, 16(1), 65-74.
- Devine, M.A. (1997). Inclusive leisure services and research: A consideration of the use of social construction theory. *Journal of Leisurability*, 24(2), 3-11.
- Fernback, J. (2007). Beyond the diluted community concept: a symbolic interactionist perspective on online social relations. *New Media & Society*, 9(1), 49-69.
- Gershick, T.J., & Miller, A.S. (1995). Coming to terms: Masculinity and physical disability. In D.F. Sabo & D.F. Gordon (Eds.) *Research on men and masculinities Series*,(8),183-204.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre.
- Hargreaves, J. (2000). *Heroines of sport: The politics of difference and identity*. London: Routledge
- Harris, M.M. (1993). Developmental benefits of athletics. *Student Athletes: Shattering the Myths and Sharing the Realities*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Harmon, N. (2010). Bottom line: Overscheduled and overcommitted. *About Campus*, 14(6), 26-29..
- Hebel, S. (1999). Supreme court says colleges may be liable for student-on-student harassment. *Chronicles of Higher Education*. A40-A41.
- Hosick, M.B. (2011, August 16). NCAA committee looks into new sport. *NCAA*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncaa.com/news/ncaa/2011-08-16/ncaa-committee->



looks-new-sport.

- Jary, D. & Jary, J. (1999). *Dictionary of sociology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Glasgow, UK: Unwin Hyman.
- Keller, R. & Stice, A. (2016). MU faces 'financial crisis' of lost enrollment and state support, official says. *Columbia daily tribune*. Retrieved from <http://www.columbiatribune.com/f58d83a7-c570-5f0c-869c-fabea63facdd.html>.
- Kihl, L.A., Richardson, O., & Campisi, C. (2008). Toward a grounded theory of student-athlete suffering and dealing with academic corruption. *Journal of Sport Management*, 22(3), 273-302.
- Kish, M. (2014, December 8). Nike nabs college football playoff teams for a bargain \$15M. *Portland Business Journal*. Retrieved from [http://www.bijournals.com/Portland/blog/threads\\_and\\_laces/2014/12/nike-nabs-college-football-playoff-teams-for-a.html](http://www.bijournals.com/Portland/blog/threads_and_laces/2014/12/nike-nabs-college-football-playoff-teams-for-a.html).
- Larkin, B., Cottingham, M., & Pate, J. (2014). Exploring the legitimacy of wheelchair basketball as an NCAA emerging sport. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*, 8(3), 168-185.
- Lanning, W. (1982). The privileged few: Specialized counseling values of athletes. *Journal of Sports Psychology*, 4, 19-23.
- Lawrence, S.M., Harrison, C.K., & Stone, J. (2009). A day in the life of a male college athlete: A public perception and qualitative investigation. *Journal of Sport Management*, 23(5), 591-614.
- Mandler, G. (1962). *Emotion: New directions in psychology*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Manis, J.G., & Meltzer B.N. (1972). *Symbolic interaction: A reader in social psychology* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Martens, M.P., & Lee, F.K. (1998). Promoting life-career development in the student athlete: How can career centers help?. *Journal of Career Development*, 25(2), 123-134.
- Montgomery, N. (2017). 2016 marks first year without combat amputation since Afghan, Iraq wars began. *Stars and Stripes*. Retrieved from <https://www.stripes.com/2016-marks-first-year-without-combat-amputation-since-afghan-iraq-wars-began-1.459288>.
- Morris, J. (1991). *Pride against prejudice: Transforming attitudes to disability*. London: Women's Free Press.

- National Wheelchair Basketball Association (2017). History. Retrieved from: <http://www.nwba.org/history>.
- NCAA (2013, January 25). Boundless determination. Retrieved from <http://www.ncaa.org/champion/boundless-determination>.
- Page, S.J., O'Connor, E., & Peterson, K. (2001). Leaving the disability ghetto: A qualitative study of factors underlying achievement motivation among athletes with disabilities. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 25(1), 40-55.
- Parsons, T. (1951). *The Social System*. New York: Free Press.
- Pascarella, E.T., Bohr, L., Nora, A., and Terenzini, P.T. (1995). Intercollegiate athletic participation and freshman-year cognitive outcomes. *Journal of Higher Education*, 66, 369-387.
- Pascarella, E.T., Truckenmiller, R., Nora, A., Terenzini, P.T., Edison, M., and Hagedorn, (1999). L.S. Impact of intercollegiate athletics participation: Some further evidence. *Journal of Higher Education*, 70, 1-26.
- Plummer, K. (2000). A world in the making: symbolic interactionism in the twentieth century. *A Companion to Social Theory*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Web document], Blackwell [Cited 15.12.2011], 193-222.
- Presley, C., Meilman, P., Cashin, J., and Leichter, J. (1997). *Alcohol and Drugs on American College Campuses: Issues of Violence and Harassment-A Report to College Presidents*. Carbondale, IL: Core Institute, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.
- Robinson, L. (2007). The cybershelf: the self-ing project goes online, symbolic Interaction in the digital age. *New Media & Society*, 9(1), 93-110.
- Shogan, D. (1999). *The making of high-performance athletes: Discipline, diversity, and ethics*. Ontario: University of Toronto Press.
- Shott, S. (1979). Emotion and social life: A symbolic interactionist analysis. *American Journal of Sociology*, 84(6), 1317-1334.
- Simons, H.D., Rheenen, D.V., and Covington, M.B. (1999). Academic motivation and the student athlete. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(2), 151-161.
- Simons, H.D., Bosworth, C., Fujita, S., & Jensen, M. (2007). The athlete stigma in higher education. *College Student Journal*, 41(2), 251-274.
- Smart, J. (2001). *Disability, society, and the individual*. Gaithersburg, MD: Aspen.

- Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. (2012). Disability, sport and physical activity. *A critical review*. In: Watson N, Thomas C, Roulstone A, eds. *Routledge handbook of disability studies*. London: Routledge, 336-47.
- Southall, R. M., & Staurowsky, E. J. (2013). Cheering on the collegiate model: Creating, disseminating, and imbedding the NCAA's redefinition of amateurism. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 37(4), 403-429.
- The National World War II Museum-New Orleans. (2018). Research starters: Worldwide deaths in World War II. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-worldwide-deaths-world-war>.
- Mayo Clinic. (2018). Spina bifida. Retrieved from: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/spina-bifida/symptoms-causes/syc-20377860>.
- Staurowsky, E. J. (2011). A radical proposal: Title IX has no role in college sport pay-for-play discussions. *Marq. Sports L. Rev.*, 22, 575.
- Staurowsky, E. J., Maxcy, J., Karcher, R., Southall, R., Berri, D., & Otto, K. (2015). College sport reform calls for a focus of college athletes' rights. Retrieved from <http://www.care-fc.org>.
- Stubblefield, H. (2016). *Paralysis*. Retrieved from: <https://www.healthline.com/health/paralysis>.
- UA News (2016, February 5). UA trustees approve \$10 million budget for adapted athletics facility. Retrieved from <http://uanews.ua.edu/2016/02/ua-trustees-approve-10-million-budget-for-adapted-athletics-facility/>.
- University of Missouri Stats, Info and Facts. (2018). *Cappex*. Retrieved from <https://www.cappex.com/colleges/University-of-Missouri>.
- Watt, S.K.; & Moore, J.L. (2001). Who are student athletes? *New directions for student services*, 93, 7-18. doi:1002/ss.1.

## LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR WHEELCHAIR BASKETBALL PLAYER

**As an athlete:**

1. How were you introduced to wheelchair basketball?
2. How do you describe your experience playing wheelchair basketball?
3. What does wheelchair basketball mean to you? [Probes: How important is it for you? What makes you invest your time and energy for wheelchair basketball?]
4. How do you describe yourself as a college student-athlete?
5. How do you see some differences from 'standing' basketball players?
6. Do you have to run summer camps to help the teams to be economically sustainable? Does this make you feel different? How are scholarships acquired?
7. How do you describe your future as a wheelchair basketball player? [Probes: Are you willing to play after your graduation? Are you hoping to play on a national team?]
8. Why are you practicing and training the way you do?

**As a student:**

9. How do you describe yourself as a student?
10. How are you balancing your time as a student and as an athlete?
11. Please tell us how you see instructors' and professors' attitudes and responses to you in class?
12. How about other classmates' responses to you?
13. Please describe what motivates you to play wheelchair basketball, despite many challenges, such as balancing with school work?

**As an individual with a disability:**

14. How do you describe your disability? [Probe: When did you acquire your disability?]
15. How do you describe your life before you acquired your disability?
16. What are some changes in your life after you became to use a wheelchair?
17. Overall, how do you like/dislike your life in a wheelchair?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STAFF MEMBERS

### **Wheelchair Basketball, in general:**

1. How did you come to know about wheelchair basketball?
2. What made you become a coach/support staff and work with wheelchair basketball players?
3. How do you see some similarities and differences from 'standing' basketball?
4. What does wheelchair basketball mean to you? [Probes: How important is it to you? What makes you invest your time and energy for wheelchair basketball?]
5. (Specifically, Coach Lykins) Do you have to run summer camps to help the team to be economically sustainable? How do you feel about what you have to do to remain economically sustainable? Does it make you feel different?
6. (Specifically, Coach Lykins) Do you align rules and regulations for your team with NCAA compliance standards?

### **Wheelchair Basketball Players:**

7. How do you describe players in your team?
8. How do you describe any differences from 'standing' basketball players?
9. If any, what are some of the things you are keeping in mind when interacting with your players? [Probe: Any accommodations you provide for players?]
10. What are some of the challenges you have experienced in your team? How did you handle them?
11. Please describe what motivates you to work in this wheelchair basketball team.

### **Players' lives as students:**

12. How do you support players in your team as students? [Probes: How about scheduling for training? Other accommodations, such as during mid-term and final exam periods?]
13. Tell us how you think your players are managing their time as a student and an athlete.



## VITA

ALISON HOVATTER

---

### EDUCATION

B.A, Business Administration, University of Mississippi, 2016