

# Fitness for the handicapped

By Mona Grigg

There was a time, not so many years ago, when the prescription of a wheelchair was a "sentence" to the disabled person and the chair itself became a prison.

No more, says Mary Beth Jones, director of the Tri-City Therapeutic Program (covering the communities of Wayne, Westland and Garden City).

"Almost any sport or recreational activity can be adapted to compensate for a disability," Jones said. "If the adapting equipment isn't on the market, we brainstorm and come up with an adaptation. It's amazing what you can do with just strips of leather or blocks of wood or lengths of pipe. Sometimes the simplest rigging allows someone to participate in an activity where before they could only sit and watch."

But beyond the brainstorming and simple riggings, equipment adaptation for the handicapped has become big business. Thumb through any issue of "Sports 'n Spokes," a magazine for wheelchair competitive sports and recreation, and its companion magazine, "Paraplegia News" (both published by Paralyzed Veterans of America) and the variations on wheelchairs alone are enough to boggle the mind.

The wheelchairs range from the ultra-lights (16-20 pounds) with high-pressure tires, built for track and street racing, to the heavyweights with heavy tires (sometimes "cambered" or tilted inward for stability) used for playing floor games like basketball, soccer or tennis (yes, tennis!).

There are even "off-road" wheelchairs with big, double-wide tires and an add-on ball-like front wheel designed to get through all but the most rugged terrain.

A Montreal-based company called Unicycle Inc. puts out a hand-driven unicycle that hitches on to a wheelchair and converts it into a fast, sturdy tricycle.

The would-be motorcyclist bound to a wheelchair can purchase a model that looks, at first glance, like an ordinary motorcycle with an attached sidecar. The "cycle" is actually seatless — its only purpose is to drive the sidecar, where the driver sits.

For the highly competitive there are wheelchair marathons, national basketball and tennis competitions, and the Wheelchair Olympics sponsored by the United States Olympic Committee — but for the thousands of active disabled more interested in the participation and the

camaraderie than the trophies, more recreational sports are opening up, thanks to the use of adaptive equipment:

- **Bowling** is fast becoming a popular sport for the disabled. Some alleys provide portable ramps that rest on the wheelchair arms, allowing the bowler to maneuver the ramp and roll the ball onto the alley.

- **More mobile players** use a ball with a handle. Adapted for the bowler who cannot fit fingers into the holes, or who doesn't have the strength to grip the ball, the handle provides leverage and automatically retracts when the player releases the ball.

- **Swimming:** Water is the great equalizer for the disabled. The natural buoyancy allows greater freedom of movement and less strenuous exercise can be implemented for seldom-used muscles.

- **Golf:** Motorized golf carts have opened up the course to the disabled as well as the elderly. One clever adaptation is simply a suction cup attached to the end of a putter for picking up the ball.

- **Archery:** A year-round sport, it can be played both indoors and outdoors, in and out of a wheelchair. A leather bow-sling can be fitted around the wrist and bow to help stabilize the movement. Camera tripods can also be modified to hold the bow steady.

- **Boating, fishing and other water sports:** Even the most severely disabled person can experience the exhilarating thrill of sailing with a seat made by the Sallsafe Co. that swings from side to side for steering, yet quickly frees the boater in case of a spill. Hydraulic lifts, flat-bottomed boats and canoes have opened up boating to the disabled. Harnesses for the one-handed fisherman and wrist-rod stabilizers give everyone an equal chance at hauling in the big one.

- **Waterskiing,** a tough enough sport, is no challenge for the disabled person with one strong leg and a good sense of balance. Some skiers have learned to ski on one leg as well as any able bodied water-skier, but for those who can't, there is either the "sit-ski," a sled-like ski pulled by a tow-rop, or the "outrigger" ski, a water-ski attached to a crutch that wraps around the arm just below the elbow.

- **Horseback riding:** "Horseback riding is a phenomenal activity for the disabled because the horse becomes their legs," says Jones. "It gives them such a sense of freedom. The horse can take them into places, wild places, they never could have gone into otherwise." Jones says there are

## Everyone can enjoy sports!

adaptive saddles, but sometimes all that's needed is a simple crossbar attached to the reins that allows the one-armed or weak-wristed rider to guide the horse.

- **Winter sports:** Skiing — both downhill and cross-country — is fast becoming a popular sport for the disabled. For the single-limb amputee, the "outrigger" ski (similar to the one used for water skiing but with a shorter ski) promotes them from the "baby" hills to the "killer" hills and on to greater challenges.

The sit-ski, a short sled with upturned sides, and the toboggan are both useful for the skier who cannot stand but still wants to hit the slopes. Some resorts are even adapting special courses to the needs of the handicapped — including the blind.

Ice skating, and even hockey, are sports that are no longer off-limits to the disabled — thanks to adaptive equipment. Hockey on sleds is not that much different from, say, basketball in wheelchairs.

- **Weight-training and physical fitness.** Exercise and weightlifting equipment has been adapted, both commercially and through brainstorming, for use by both the wheelchair and non-wheelchair disabled.

"I don't like the word 'handicapped,'" Jones said, "and I'm not crazy about disabled" — with all the things these people are capable of nowadays, they've proven they're neither of those things. Those words are out-of-date. I guess that's the next thing we need to brainstorm about.

