

Dream team, dreams big

By **Dagmawai** - March 6, 2017



Ethiopia's first Paralympic basketball team could be in the making

Ethiopia has had a long but inconsistent presence in the Paralympics games. The country made its debut at the 1965 Summer Games in Tel Aviv, Israel. After that, the country was absent from the Paralympics for close to a decade and then had an appearance in 1976 with Abraham Habte, who entered athletics, lawn bowls and table tennis and who also represented Ethiopia again in 1980.

The next time Ethiopia sent a representative to the games would be in 2004 with runner Kiros Tekle and then in 2008 with a two man team. In 2012, Wondiye Fikre Indelbu became the first Ethiopian to win a medal in the Paralympics Games, winning silver in the men's 1,500 meters, and this continued on to today.

Participating in the Paralympics in the fields of running as well as table tennis has been the usual way to go for Ethiopia. Now there is a new team that dreams of reaching Tokyo 2020 Games, and this time in Basketball.

“When we started it was just to entertain them, it was for fun. But then when competition began to be organized on the regional and national level, we thought to ourselves, why not aim higher? So the dream is to



participate in the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics,” says Shimeles Dibaba who is a coach at Addis Guzo to a team that consists of 20 men who come from different walks of life.

Addis Guzo is an organization with a strong belief in people living with disabilities. It carries out different activities such as delivering professional wheelchair services, maintenance work for clients who are using wheelchairs, capacity building of stakeholders, economic empowerment activities to encourage self sufficiency, communication and collaboration with stakeholders for improved access to mobility as well as therapy, economic empowerment and sport activities.

It is there in Addis Guzo that the dream basketball team trains to achieve success in different national competitions and ultimately work to participate in Tokyo 2020, and if successful in reaching that stage, they would be the first basketball team to do so for Ethiopia.

According to Shemeles, for now, it will be only the men’s team that is being trained for the Paralympics, for no reason other than the women’s team started training recently.

“When we started, most of those that came to us to participate in the sport were veterans who were injured on duty. Now, we have many young men and women coming from different parts of the city, who are employed in different sectors but come to us to train twice a week,” Shemeles said.

One of the challenges facing the team is the fact that basketball as a competitive sport for those with disabilities has not been popular and it is just now gaining momentum.

“Basketball has not been given the attention other sports have but now it’s getting better, the government is also keen to support and work with us. We are seeing change,” Shemeles said hopefully.

The team is a tough bunch, very energetic and enthusiastic. They know it will be a challenge and will require a lot of work to participate in the Paralympics, but they train very hard and even if they won’t be able to make it, they say that being able to train and play as a team is fulfilling enough.

“The fact that we are able to have this space at Addis Guzo to play the sport that we love is something that is wonderful. We are training very hard to represent Ethiopia at the Paralympics. I believe we are very capable of reaching there, when you dream of something it’s not just with empty hope, there is a target that is set and that is how we are working,” says Temesgen Tekasew, a 24 young man that is part of the dream team.

According to 38 year old Alem Desta who is part of the team, five years ago, nobody knew or thought of playing basketball in wheelchairs, it was simply not something that people were used to.

“I really want to thank Addis Guzo for what it is doing. It has been a backbone for everything and for our community. We are now seeing good things happening in this sport, there are now

different teams in the country from the different regions. If more competitions are held, then the sport will gain more recognition and will be well recognized like other sports,” said Alem.

Although there are many positives, some challenges persist. “Addis Guzo does a lot, but it cannot be the only one doing this. There needs to be more support from the government, a federation needs to be established and needs to be taken seriously. If that is done, there will be a lot of success,” Alem points out.

He further pointed out that more space needs to be available for sporting activities and training and the existing well known facilities do not have wheelchair access.

Speaking on awareness creation on the capabilities of people with disabilities and to change existing perceptions Temesgen says that the more people with disabilities are encouraged to be part of the society, the more productive they can be.

“I am a person who is living with a disability, being part of this team has given me a boost of confidence, I know I can do whatever I set my mind on. Being able to play sports has given me mental and a spiritual satisfaction, and it is good for my health. It is really something I am happy to be doing,” Alem also points out.

Addis Guzo was founded by Bernhard Wissler who is a wheelchair specialist and his wife Christine Oberli who is a teacher. As the organization is small scale, it often has a lot on its plate.

“It does get too much for us. On one side you see there are a lot of things to do and you have to set a limit and say we cannot do more at the moment. Me and my wife Christine, we do this in addition to our normal job in Switzerland. For this we do all the fundraising, all the connections, the collection of wheelchairs in Switzerland, we try to do this with some friends together, it is a big challenge,” Wissler says.

As for the basketball team making it to the Paralympics, Wissler keeps an open mind. “With dreams, you can wake up too early and the dream might not be fulfilled. We call it a dream and not a goal for that reason. We have to look forward to the next steps, identify where we can get support and so on. Even if we don’t reach Tokyo, the journey is equally important,” he says.

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