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PARA ICE HOCKEY IS A FAST-PACED, FULL-CONTACT, NO-NONSENSE SPORT PLAYED BY SOME OF THE NICEST PEOPLE YOU'RE EVER LIKELY TO MEET. DON'T BELIEVE US? WHY NOT GIVE IT A GO FOR YOURSELF?

The rink at iceSheffield is alive with noise, adrenaline and action as the Sheffield Steelkings para ice hockey squad thunders across the ice on double-bladed sleds. The players propel themselves with a pair of sticks; one end spiked for gripping the ice while the other has a blade for hitting the puck. It's quickly apparent that, much like wheelchair rugby, this is a full-contact, no-holds-barred sport that is definitely not for the faint hearted. It's basically murderball (as wheelchair rugby is affectionately named) but on ice.

And Andrew Mead (left) absolutely loves it! “You can get up to speeds of 30mph, and when you've got two players going at each other, gung-ho, it can be like a small car crash!” he says with relish. “It's full on, which is why you need protective gear. It's not too ferocious at club level, but at the national level it can be a bit daunting. I'm much faster on my sled than on my prosthetics, which is partly why it feels so fulfilling after a match. I'm dead on my non-existent feet, but feel so good!”

Andrew, 55, is a relatively recent convert to para ice hockey, but has improved so

PARA ICE HOCKEY

rapidly that he is already being considered for Team GB, with an eye on the 2022 Paralympics in Beijing. If he does make the grade, it will be the latest chapter in something of a remarkable life.

Born in Canada, he moved to Newcastle when he was nine years old (“I got beaten up a lot because of my accent”), before joining the Royal Navy at 16. He served for seven years and “travelled the world but didn’t see that much of it because I was underwater”. Leaving the Navy at 23, he went backpacking in Australia and ended up staying for 27 years. During that time he joined an improvisational comedy group, trained as an actor, and ended up performing in more than 250 theatre shows, as well as doing lots of TV and film. “And before you ask, yes, I have been in *Home and Away!*” he laughs.

In 2016, Andrew came back to the UK, but upon his return his life was almost immediately turned upside down by injury. “I was playing football, we were silly old guys, and the older we got, the lower we went down the league – but we loved playing,” he says. “One day I was involved in a bad tackle. I broke three toes, but the skin split and I contracted septicaemia. In the hospital, I was told: ‘You’re going



to lose some toes’. Then it became: ‘We’re going to take your feet’. I asked if I could think about it and they replied that if I left it past lunch, they’d have to take my knees as well, so I said go for it! I also lost my little finger on my right hand and the tips of three other fingers. It was horrendous – although the good news is that we won the match 3-2, and I scored the winner!”

Top right: Blesma Member Andrew Mead has only been playing para ice hockey for a year but is already training with Team GB

Andrew’s legs were eventually amputated below the knees, but he coped extremely well thanks to his fitness, a number of unique physical skills, and a positive mental attitude. “I’m a fairly easy-going guy so I got my head around it quickly,” he says. “I’d learned circus skills at theatre school, so I could juggle, fire-breathe and stilt-walk. I told the hospital staff that I’d take to my prosthetics pretty quickly because I didn’t think it would be much different from walking on stilts. They thought I was joking, but I was right. As soon as I got my prosthetics, I was up on them, walking around.”

A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

Andrew recuperated at his sister’s house before getting his own home in Derbyshire, where he met his fiancée; “a beautiful German woman who works as a BMW mechanic and is a semi-pro footballer.”

It was this sporty union that would eventually guide him towards ice hockey. “NAME wasn’t happy with me sitting around, so she took me to try some sports,” Andrew recalls. “I tried wheelchair tennis, but I almost fell asleep, I hate wheelchair basketball, and I tried sitting volleyball, which I admit was kind of fun.





MEET THE BOSS JAKE OAKLEY

Jake, 33, is chairman of Sheffield Steelkings – as well as coach and player for the current national champs

How did you get involved with the team?

The club has been going for five years and I've been involved from the start. I've always been a big ice hockey fan, and I had a motorbike accident in 2005. Thankfully, it wasn't too serious but it meant I couldn't run any more so this was a way to stay fit and active.

Is it a tricky sport to learn?

It's difficult to master but it's a sport that you can enjoy straight away. I've not met many people who have come off the ice after a taster session and not loved it. But it takes a few years to get really good. You have to play games, learn to launch a puck and how to push yourself, learn the rules and intricacies of the game. It's a fast-paced contact sport, and very competitive – but in a friendly way.

How has Andrew settled into the team?

He has only been with us for a year since he came to a 'learn to sledge' session. It's an ideal sport for him – physical but skilful. You have to do a lot with your upper body. He's come on because he likes to be pushed and works hard.

Have you seen the sport help people?

Mental health is a big thing with this sport. Being on the ice offers you freedom. You work hard, get up a sweat, everything else is forgotten for a while. The sport gives us a level playing field, and what counts is how hard you work. We have a triple amputee playing, who is doing great.

And there's also the opportunity to progress to Team GB level...

Exactly. We want to help develop the next generation of GB players. For Service men and women, that's huge. They get to serve their country again, to wear their colours with pride. They've got that grit and determination. We are particularly looking for women players because the International Paralympic Committee wants to add the women's sport to the Paralympics in 2026, and if we can get a team together, GB can be there.

How can Blesma Members get involved?

We're trying to arrange a try-out session soon for Blesma Members. In the meantime, if anyone wants to come to training, they are more than welcome. The first two sessions are free, and we have all the equipment you'll need.



“WE’VE GOT ABLE-BODIED PLAYERS NEXT TO OTHERS TAKING LIMBS OFF AFTER TRAINING – THAT’S GREAT FOR DISABILITY AWARENESS”

“I remember **NAME** coming home one day and saying: ‘We’re going somewhere tomorrow’. That was when we went to Sheffield and met Jake Oakley from the Sheffield Steelkings ice hockey team, and the rest is history. What was fantastic was, when she dropped me at the rink, they said: ‘Hey, don’t you want to stay and play, too?’ So she did.

“You don’t have to have a disability to play at club level, and it’s the most inclusive sport I’ve ever come across – young and older, men and women can all play on the same team. Once you strap yourself into the sled, you’re on a level playing field. And the sport appeals to ex-Service personnel like myself because it’s full contact. The missus and I never argue because if we have a problem at home she can take it out on me on the rink. The gloves come off!”

Andrew and his fiancée, **NAME** now play regularly for the Sheffield Steelkings, one of four UK sides that make up the national

league – the others are the Peterborough Phantoms, Manchester Mayhem and Cardiff Huskies. Sheffield are the current reigning champions, and Andrew is one of their rising stars.

“Being Canadian, I was able to skate before I could walk, so I’ve always loved ice hockey, but anyone can give it a go. You need good hand-eye coordination, but I’ve seen people who can’t even spell ‘hockey’ take to it like a duck to water. The thing I love the most is the team spirit, and I’ve never met a nicer bunch of people, especially the volunteers who help to run the team.”

THE MOST INCLUSIVE SPORT

Andrew has seen up close how the sport can change the lives of those who play it. “I got to grips with amputation pretty well,” he says. “In fact, they thought something was wrong with me, because I didn’t really grieve about it. I’m just a pragmatic person.

“BEING ON THE ICE GIVES YOU FREEDOM. YOU WORK HARD, SWEAT... EVERYTHING ELSE IS FORGOTTEN FOR A WHILE”

They gave me a wheelchair and got me around the wards talking to people who'd just been injured, cheering them up and telling jokes. But there are other guys on the team who have had their lives turned around by playing hockey.”

Andrew stresses that for those who don't quite fancy the rough and tumble of this sport, just getting involved in a team, or an activity, is the most important thing. “It can be life changing and can get you away from sitting at home watching TV,” he says. “And I love the fact that the sport is inclusive. In the changing rooms, we've got able-bodied people as well as players who are taking their arms and legs off after the training session – that's great for disability awareness.”

Blesma has played a key part in Andrew's fledgling hockey career. “They funded my purpose-built sled, so I can't speak highly enough of Blesma,” he says. “My BSO Sam Wileman came to visit and asked if I needed anything. When I told her that the hockey equipment was kind of expensive, she said: ‘Let's get you sorted.’”

Andrew was so grateful that he named his sled Sam in her honour, and covered it in Blesma stickers. “She is so proud,” he laughs. “She's never had anything named after her before. She's always asking how Sam is doing. I tell her: ‘Fine!’”

Earlier this year, Andrew was invited to train with Team GB, and is now being touted as a future national player. “I never dreamed that I could be representing my country,” he says. “It's kind of freaky. People in my village are beside themselves about it, but it hasn't hit me yet.” It's been a good start to the new decade so far, in fact; Andrew has also just got a new job, and is getting married in July. “I'm as happy as Larry,” he says. But never happier than when he's crashing his sled into someone at 30mph!

Anyone interested in a taster session with the Sheffield Steelkings can contact Jake on sheffieldsteelkings@gmail.com



THE FIRST RULE OF ICE CLUB..

IT'S A GAME OF THREE HALVES

The game comprises three periods, each 15 minutes long. Six players are allowed on the ice at any one time, and a total of 15 players make up a team.

NEXT GOAL'S THE WINNER

The side with the most goals wins. If there is a tie at full time, the match goes into overtime. If it's still a draw after that, teams face the drama of a penalty shoot-out.

SPECIALLY DESIGNED SLEDS

Athletes use specially-designed sleds fitted with two blades to move around the ice. They each have two playing sticks, which are used for

pushing – a bit like the ski poles in cross-country skiing – as well as to control and shoot the puck.

FROM STOCKHOLM WITH LOVE

The sport was invented at a rehab centre in Stockholm, Sweden, in the early 1960s. Originally known as sledge hockey, it was renamed para ice hockey in 2016.

A PARALYMPIC SPORT

The men's sport made its debut at the 1994 Winter Paralympic Games in Lillehammer, Norway. The International Paralympic Committee is hoping there will be enough women's teams for them to play in the 2026 Games.

