



# VVAF SETS

ANDREW HOUGHTON



The Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation (VVAF) has launched an exciting new initiative called Sports for Life. VVAF was founded over twenty years ago by a visionary group of American veterans who decided to transform their experience of war into a mission of peace building and healing. They devoted themselves and VVAF to assisting civilian victims of conflict and tackling issues of injustice. Today, VVAF works in seven countries around the world running innovative rehabilitation, education, and advocacy programs. Building on the strengths of its existing activities in Kosovo and Cambodia, VVAF plans to go global with its sports and recreation programs for people with disabilities in war-affected countries and to further develop the use of sports as a tool for reconciliation and peace building.

### **Taking Sports for Life Around the World.**

In the coming months, VVAF plans to expand Sports for Life into countries in Africa and Asia where VVAF currently runs rehabilitation programs. Sports for Life will support the development of activities at the therapeutic, recreational, and competitive levels in each of these locations. VVAF will also assist its partners with advocacy and awareness-raising, using sports as a vehicle for promoting rights and reconciliation, as well as rehabilitation, well-being, and fun. In May 2002, a VVAF assessment team, including consultant Andrew Houghton, visited disability and sports organizations and government representatives in southern, central, and northern Vietnam to gauge the possibilities for developing a Sports for Life

project there. The team found that there are numerous barriers preventing people from participating in sports and recreational activities, but groups throughout the country expressed an overwhelming interest in moving past those barriers. Sports for Life will attempt to find ways to help them do this. In Angola and Ethiopia, VVAF staff members are building relationships with local disability and sports organizations and exploring avenues for developing sports-related programs. Ultimately, VVAF intends to gather together the information and experience it gains in these many corners of the world to create models and materials that may be used by others to promote sport, integration, and reconciliation.

sports for life  
IN MOTION



**Kosovo: Building Community Through Sports.** Since the spring of 1999, when the war in Kosovo ended, the province's citizens have been working hard to rebuild their homes and their lives. However, much work remains to be done in order to bring unity and peace to Kosovo's communities. This is reflected by the fact that many people with disabilities continue to be sheltered and treated as mere social welfare cases, while members of some minority groups can only leave their villages under the protection of military escorts. Through its programs, VVAF is encouraging the recognition and integration of all of Kosovo's citizens.

In 2001, VVAF employed program development specialist and wheelchair athlete, Andrew Houghton, to initiate VVAF's disability sports and recreation activities in Kosovo. Houghton discovered a great deal of interest in sports throughout the province, but found that most groups did not have the equipment, training, or information that they needed to develop meaningful programs. For example, eighty athletes expressed a desire to compete in wheelchair basketball, but only twenty sports chairs could be found in the whole province. Furthermore, rules for the game did not exist in local languages. So, VVAF translated rules and began providing sports equipment to local groups and schools.

VVAF also learned that many people, disabled and non-disabled alike, had never been exposed to disability sports activities and therefore lacked an understanding of what was possible. Houghton observed that "many people didn't even want to try, but after one went out and started to play, the others followed. It's typical—people never know what it will be like until they get out there and participate." With this in mind, Houghton organized three wheelchair tennis clinics; facilitated recreational activities for youth; and brought together disability organizations, the Department of Sport, the Kosova Olympic Committee and the tennis and basketball federations to organize a major disability sports and recreation exhibition. After this event, the sponsors signed a joint proclamation declaring their commitment to developing disability sports and recreation programming in Kosovo.

In May 2002, VVAF kicked off a new comprehensive sports program in Kosovo, building on the groundbreaking work done by Houghton. Through this new initiative, VVAF is organizing sports and recreation activities that bring people with disabilities together with able-bodied participants and that unify people from a variety of ethnic communities torn apart by conflict. VVAF conducts sports clinics and tournaments to introduce participants to new activities and develop their skills



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and confidence. At the same time, VVAF is helping local disability organizations to form Disability Sports Advisory Committees by providing training and equipment. These groups will be responsible for implementing activities in their respective regions throughout Kosovo. Down the road, VVAF hopes that the groups will move beyond sports to address other issues of concern to them, such as education, employment, health and social services, and political rights. Ultimately, if there is to be real and lasting change in Kosovo, it is Kosovo's citizens who will themselves have to create it. VVAF's Sports for Life program is providing people with the tools and opportunities they will need to engage in this process.

**Cambodia: Changing Attitudes, Changing Lives.** In Cambodia, traditional belief maintains that disability is a sign of bad karma—in other words, people "earn" their disabilities by misbehaving in a previous life. Such beliefs are reinforced by pervasive images of people with disabilities facing extreme hardship, like the many who circulate through city streets begging for small change. For the past two years, though, Cambodia's standing volleyball team has been turning its society's notions of disability upside down.

In 2000, with sponsorship from VVAF, the team realized its dream of participating in the Paralympic Games. Although Cambodia won only one match in Sydney, the exposure to elite international competition proved extremely powerful, whetting the players' appetites for more. In 2001, VVAF secured sponsorship from Cathay Pacific, DragonAir, Czech Air, Otto Bock, the German and Australian governments, and singer-songwriter Nanci Griffith, enabling the Cambodian to travel to the World Cup Games in Slovakia. There, the team showed marked improvement, narrowly losing the battle for the bronze medal. Now the players are back at home training hard for the 2002 FESPIC Games and demonstrating their talents in competitions around Cambodia, recently

placing fourth against non-disabled teams in a prestigious national tournament.

The efforts of the volleyballers are having a great impact on Cambodian society, as well as the lives of individual players. Cambodian are taking pride in the achievements of their team, while young people with disabilities are finding new role models to emulate. What is more, the players are showing an unprecedented sense of self-confidence. The team's coordinator, Chris Minko, has noted that "some of the players have been seen strutting through the streets of Phnom Penh wearing shorts and showing off their prostheses," a scene that would have been unimaginable in Cambodia just two short years ago.

In June and July of 2002, VVAF coordinated the first-ever national league competition for people with disabilities. Eight volleyball teams from around Cambodia traveled to Phnom Penh to participate. The first year of the league proved to be a resounding success. Particularly exciting was the zeal with which former national team players set out to recruit and train new team members. Local businesses, government leaders, and media organizations also threw their support behind the effort, reflecting a significant change in attitude toward athletes with disabilities, and people with disabilities, in general. At the end of the league competition, a selection competition was held and a new national team was identified to play in the upcoming Far East Asian (FESPIC) games in October 2002 in Busan, Korea. This newest team is determined to add a gold medal to the long list of remarkable achievements Cambodia's volleyballers have already established.

#### Sports for Life

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