

Hands-on approach to raise awareness for para-sports

Nicole Chia

As a goal defender for Bishan Park Secondary School's netball team, Jaslyn Song is constantly on her toes as she jumps for the rebounds during the matches.

However, at the annual ROMP youth sports carnival yesterday, Jaslyn could use only her arms as she tried her hand at wheelchair basketball for the first time.

The experience left the 16-year-old with a newfound appreciation for wheelchair basketball players.

She said: "It was very hard not being able to use my legs – as I usually jump for the ball during netball games. Not being able to take it on the rebound was very difficult.

"It's also not easy because you have to dribble and manoeuvre the wheelchair at the same time."

The wheelchair basketball station was one of four disability sports that were open for try-outs at ROMP, which took place at the Ministry of Education (Evans) stadium at Evans Road.

The carnival is organised by the

W.A.D! (We Are Different) Club, the youth arm of non-profit organisation Harvest Care Centre.

This year, ROMP partnered the Singapore Disability Sports Council and Runninghour, an initiative that promotes integration and an inclusive society, to inspire its youth athletes to overcome their limitations to fulfil their dreams.

It also marks the first time that the carnival is featuring disability sports stations like handcycling, boccia and blindfold walk/run.

Parent Leong Lai Kuan, whose 16-year-old son Owen Li – born with cerebral palsy – is a handcyclist, welcomed the inclusion of disability sports to the programme, saying the hands-on approach would raise awareness of the challenges faced by para-athletes.

She added: "If you only hear of their challenges without being involved and participating in the process, then you would think it's easy."

Wheelchair basketball player Choo Poh Choon agreed, lauding the inclusion of the disability sports stations as a sign of growing recognition for para-athletes.

The 35-year-old, who featured at last year's Asean Para Games, added: "We've been talking about inclusiveness over the past year, so having us here is a really good start.

"Who knows, there could be a wheelchair basketball tournament at next year's carnival."

And having a competitive disability element at next year's edition of ROMP is exactly what ROMP chairman Nigel Lee hopes for as well.

Said the 27-year-old: "We want to see how we can work with the Singapore Disability Sports Council and other organisations to bring this into ROMP. We hope for ROMP to be an iconic sports event in Singapore that can break the barriers between able-bodied athletes and those with physical limitations."

About 1,200 competitors and volunteers were present at yesterday's carnival, now into its fifth year.

Parliamentary Secretary (Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth) Baey Yam Keng was the guest-of-honour, and participated in handcycling and blindfold-running.

cnicole@sph.com.sg



Able-bodied participants such as 16-year-old Jaslyn Song (centre, in light blue) had their chance to experience playing wheelchair basketball at the ROMP youth sports carnival. PHOTO COURTESY OF HARVEST CARE CENTRE