

EMMY KAISER

America's top-ranked female wheelchair player has her sights set on the 2012 London Paralympic games

BY CHRIS ODDO

EMMY KAISER WAS ONLY FIVE YEARS OLD WHEN SHE ATTENDED A WHEELCHAIR TENNIS CLINIC NEAR HER KENTUCKY HOME, but the event would leave a lasting impression.

"My parents made me go, and one of the people there handed me a racquet and pushed me on court, and I've been doing it ever since," says the 21-year-old, who was born with Spina Bifida, a congenital disorder that affects the spine.

For a young woman who has lived in Kentucky her entire life (she giggled when admitting to moving across the freeway once), Kaiser has the passport of an international jet-setter.

"World Team Cup this year was in South Africa," says Kaiser. She continues: "I've been to France for the juniors. I've been to Netherlands, Brazil, Sweden, Italy, Czech Republic – I have to go in order or else I'll forget them – Turkey, and I was just in Austria and Belgium. And England, I forgot that one."

There are two reasons why America's No. 1-ranked female wheelchair tennis player must travel overseas for competition.

Reason No. 1: "It's hard to find enough people to have a draw in the States, unless there are huge tournaments."

Reason No. 2: She's excellent at what she does, and as a member of the US World Cup wheelchair tennis team, she's been all over the globe chasing medals.

A BRUSH WITH GREATNESS

Few players have locked horns with the greatest wheelchair player of all-time. Yet, in 2008, Kaiser found herself in competition with a living legend, Esther Vergeer. As of this year's US Open, Vergeer has won 18 consecutive Grand Slams, 429 consecutive matches and hasn't lost since 2003. Was Kaiser inspired by the experience, intimidated, or both?

"Her backhand is just like oh-my-god. It's amazing...Of course I was scared because of the reputation," she says, "but honestly, she was really nice on court, really helpful. At the end she was saying how I have lots of potential, so it was a little bit of both."

The American didn't come up with the win that day, but playing Vergeer was a great experience during her first year of international competition.

Kaiser is also a fan of the able-bodied game and enjoys watching players like Roger Federer and the Bryan Brothers. She says Kim Clijster's is her overall favorite, but when I asked her if she thought Federer was the GOAT, she was quick to answer.

"No. Esther is by a longshot."

THE INS AND OUTS OF THE WHEELCHAIR GAME

Wheelchair tennis has the same rules as able-bodied tennis, except that the ball can bounce twice in rallies, instead of once. Like able-bodied tennis, movement and anticipation are at the core of a player's shotmaking capacity. A complex system of movement is incorporated by today's top players, and the ability to handle rather than be handled by one's chair is an art unto itself, as today's technologically advanced



Robbie Sauters

chairs feature angled wheels for better movement and rear support so that they do not rock or tip while serving.

"Your momentum and a lot of your power come from your mobility, and so learning to use your chair to your advantage – not just getting to the balls but using it for your strokes themselves – is huge."

But before you get your chair to the court and start tracking down and hitting tennis balls, a player must avoid other pitfalls and annoyances. We've all heard stories of able-bodied players losing racquets or bags full of shoes to the airlines while traveling, but what Kaiser and her contemporaries sometimes endure can be far worse.

"When you're traveling at airports, it's a problem," says Kaiser. "They bend rims, they break spokes. Nothing major has happened to me, but I've also had friends whose chairs were completely destroyed going into a tournament, and they couldn't play."

Once she's on the court, Kaiser rarely has problems. "Sometimes if it's too hot out, you might blow a tire. With me, my wheels on my everyday chair are exactly the same as the wheels on my tennis chair, so while they're fixing the one I can still play and not have to worry about using my time-out yet."

EYES ON THE PRIZE

While Kaiser is determined on returning to London for a second time, to compete in the 2012 Paralympic games (she missed qualifying by one spot for the 2008 games in Beijing), she still prioritizes school. She studies psychology and plans to attend graduate school for Sports Psychology. Her tennis travels will take a back seat to her education, but Kaiser still sees a future that includes tennis.

"I'm graduating in December [2011], and I'm planning on taking spring semester off to play for a little while, up to London," she says, "but I haven't really looked past that."

There is one thing, however, that is abundantly clear to Kaiser about the future: she'd like to make a difference by helping to grow the game.

"Depending on where I end up living, if they don't have a wheelchair program, I'd like to start one there," she says.

Kaiser appreciates the exposure to sports as a young girl, but she also knows – and is concerned about – that there are many disabled people that have no idea about the sporting opportunities that are available to them.

"Before I left for Europe, I was at the courts, and I saw a guy working out who was a single amputee," she says. "I asked him if he ever thought about playing tennis. He was apparently a recent injury. He's never played wheelchair sports, never thought about it."

According to Kaiser, this is a commonly occurring phenomenon. "Nobody even knows – that's why they're not playing. We definitely need to get the word out there."