

## VPSA Conducts Power Soccer Clinic In Washington DC

### **"MLS DC United players participate in wheelchair soccer"**

**29 April 2009 – Washington DC:** The Virginia Power Soccer Association (VPSA) conducted a power soccer clinic in Washington DC to help the National Rehabilitation Hospital (NRH) form a new team. In order to help promote this new endeavor, six professional soccer players from the storied Major League Soccer (MLS) team, DC United, came to participate, share photos, and sign autographs.

VPSA was represented by two players from the Tidewater Piranhas, Kevin Mulholland (age 22) and Samuel Sawyer (7); their coach, Steven Belechak (47); and the VPSA Commissioner, Chris Mulholland (51) (all from Southeast Virginia). Two additional groups of power soccer players came to help promote the sport and kick off the new team. Baltimore was represented by 3 players sponsored by the Kennedy Krieger Institute ([www.kennedykrieger.org](http://www.kennedykrieger.org)) and Northern Virginia was represented by 4 players sponsored by Fairfax County Parks and Recreation ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/rec](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/rec)).

The clinic began with a brief introduction to the history and rules of the game before the athletes took to the floor and were introduced to warm-up drills designed to "stretch the envelope" of their wheelchair driving skills.

All the athletes and their families were thrilled when six DC United players showed up to observe and participate in the clinic. The players were veteran Clyde Simms (26) and five 'rookies'; Dejan Jakovic (23), Milos Kocic (23), Brandon Barklage (22), Chris Pontius (21), and Rodney Wallace (20).



DC United players Dejan Jakovic, Rodney Wallace, Brandon Barklage, Milos Kocic, and Clyde Simms with Kevin Mulholland, a founding member of VPSA and the Tidewater Piranhas.

the scoreboard at RFK Stadium.

Additionally, a newsman from Washington DC's Fox affiliate, Channel 5, filmed a story about the event which was broadcast a few weeks later. The story can be viewed at [www.myfoxdc.com/dpp/news/dc/052109\\_power\\_soccer\\_in\\_dc](http://www.myfoxdc.com/dpp/news/dc/052109_power_soccer_in_dc).



DC United's Brandon Barklage with one of the youngest power soccer players in Virginia.

By this time, the special athletes had been divided into 2 teams and were

preparing to play a scrimmage match. As a special treat, each of the professional 'outdoor soccer' players took turns getting into a wheelchair and playing soccer with the exceptional athletes. As Channel 5's David Ross described it, "The power soccer stars became power soccer students."

Afterwards, Chris Pontius said, "It's SO much harder than it looks! Those kids have a talent - and it's something they're definitely more skilled at than I am!"

A DC United video crew filmed the event and interviewed a number of the participants. One of their goals is to produce a short video segment that can be played during halftimes on

Another short video about the event is posted on the DC United website ([www.behindthebadge.com/2009/06/video-rookie-life-episode-12.php](http://www.behindthebadge.com/2009/06/video-rookie-life-episode-12.php)) and features an interview with Chris Pontius.

The National Rehabilitation Hospital has begun conducting regular practice sessions every Wednesday evening between 6-8 pm at the Emery Recreation Center in Washington Dc (5801 Georgia Avenue NW.) The point of contact at NRH is Gabrielle Thornton at 202-877-1517.

At the end of the clinic, the DC United players handed out photographs and signed autographs for anyone and on just about anything - shirts, hats, and



After the clinic: all of the soccer players, professional and special, gather for a photo opportunity.

wheelchairs. Reflecting on the clinic, Pontius said, "It was a good time out there and to be able to see the kids' smiles and everything. It was definitely worth it."

Power soccer is the first competitive team sport designed and developed specifically for power wheelchair users and is very similar to futsal. This action packed team sport combines the skill of the wheelchair user with the speed and power of the chair itself, to participate in an extremely challenging game. Participants include people with quadriplegia, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, head trauma, stroke, and other disabilities. The sport has been played in various parts of the globe for more than 30 years and already held its first World Cup in Tokyo, Japan in 2007 - which the US won! It is a team sport played by individuals of both sexes and all ages on a regulation basketball court by two teams of 4 who attack, defend, and maneuver an oversized soccer ball in an attempt to score goals. Power Soccer offers individuals in power chairs the freedom to play and achieve success independently which improves self-esteem and full inclusion in their communities. It is also an inspiring sport where people can watch and learn how individuals with even severe physical challenges can participate and play in a competitive sport.

VPSA is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization with the mission to develop, support, encourage, and foster the participation of Virginia's power wheelchair athletes in the competitive sport of power soccer. You can read more information about VPSA and the game of power soccer at [www.freewebs.com/vapowersoccer](http://www.freewebs.com/vapowersoccer) or contact VPSA at [vapowersoccer@cox.net](mailto:vapowersoccer@cox.net).