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PROGRAM ADAPTS WORKOUTS FOR THOSE WITH SPINAL CORD INJURIES, BUILDING STRENGTH AND MAKING DAILY TASKS EASIER

Support from community at CrossFit gym helps motivate adaptive athletes to get stronger

Orlando, Fla - For those who suffer spinal cord injuries, continuing their rehabilitation after leaving the hospital is crucial to adapting to daily life. Tasks like pushing a wheelchair and transferring in and out of their chair can be exhausting without proper and consistent training. However, working out at a traditional gym can be intimidating for these patients, where they not only face their physical limitations, but also the isolation of feeling different in a public place. To eliminate these barriers, [Orlando Health](#) developed an adaptive athletics program that allows those with spinal cord injuries to workout alongside everyone else, partnering with a CrossFit gym and training their coaches to modify their daily workouts.

“The encouragement they get from their coaches and other gym members helps these adaptive athletes keep up their routine, which is really important to make daily tasks easier and improve their quality of life,” said Andrea Cooper, a certified therapeutic recreation specialist at Orlando Health. “Working out consistently helps them continue to improve their functional skills, and each time I see patients who are participating in the adaptive program, they’re able to do something they couldn’t do before.”

Traditional CrossFit workouts are customized to be done in a wheelchair, focusing on upper body and core strength while increasing endurance and stamina. Maintaining a fitness routine is not only important for everyday tasks, but also prevents long-term health issues that often affect patients in wheelchairs such as diabetes and heart disease.

“We work with each athlete to get a sense of their current abilities and their future goals,” said Robert Zambrana, co-owner of SOCF CrossFit in Orlando. “But even though we are modifying for their needs, they’re working out with everyone else in the gym, and our expectations of them are the same as any other athlete.”

For David Kellam and CJ Bellamy, the adaptive program gives them a chance to compete like athletes again. Competition has always been a part of their lifelong friendship, even after spinal cord injuries four years apart left them both paralyzed.

“Working out with everyone else makes me feel how I used to feel on the basketball court,” said Bellamy. “But now I look at someone lifting weights and think, ‘I can do that.’ It helps me test myself and

see how far I can push to get better.”

Since starting the program, David and CJ say daily life has gotten a lot easier. “Transferring in and out of my chair is super easy now and takes a lot less time than it used to,” said Bellamy.

“My muscles used to get sore just from doing things in my daily life,” said Kellam. “But now my workouts make me sore and the day-to-day things are like nothing.”

They say going to the gym used to make them self-conscious, and they often left without getting an effective workout, but the inclusiveness of the adaptive program has helped encourage them to keep coming back and improving every day. “Everybody’s so positive, and they all want to see you succeed,” said Kellam. “You never know what you’re capable of until you try.”

The program was made possible by a grant from the Craig H. Neilsen Foundation with goals to decrease hospital readmissions, prevent injuries and increase social support while also promoting independence in individuals with spinal cord injuries. The grant also allowed Orlando Health to purchase accessible gym equipment and subsidize gym membership fees. Experts hope to use the pilot program as a model to help more gyms adapt their workouts for those with physical disabilities, encouraging inclusivity at fitness facilities across the country.

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Courtesy: Orlando Health Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children

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ABOUT ORLANDO HEALTH

Orlando Health is a \$3.4 billion not-for-profit healthcare organization and a community-based network of hospitals, physician practices and outpatient care centers across Central Florida. The organization is home to the area’s only Level One Trauma Centers for adults and pediatrics, and is a statutory teaching hospital system that offers both specialty and community hospitals. More than 2,900 physicians have privileges across the system, which is also one of the area’s largest employers with more than 20,000 employees who serve more than 112,000 inpatients, more than 2.4 million outpatients, and more than 10,000 international patients each year. Additionally, Orlando Health provides more than \$450 million in total value to the community in the form of charity care, community benefit programs and services, community building activities and more. Additional information can be found at www.orlandohealth.com.