

## The Badass Project Transcript

**Johnny B. Truant:** Hey everybody it's Johnny B Truant. I'm here for the Badass Project today with Chris Finn.

Chris is the coach of the US Power Soccer Team, and if you're not familiar with power soccer, we've linked some videos here to show you exactly what that is, but it's soccer played in power wheelchairs, which is pretty cool stuff. And there's a bunch of videos on Youtube you should go check out.

I wanted to talk to Chris, who took his team from the bottom of the pile, or unranked, to the champions in 7.

First of all, welcome, and thanks for being here.

**Chris Finn:** thanks for having me Johnny, it's great to be a part of what you're doing, and get my word out about power soccer and people with disabilities and what it is to get out and live a life, and move on and do some good things.

**Johnny:** So, speaking about moving on, and getting on with life, can you tell us a little bit about your story, 'cuz I know you had a history when you were younger about wanting to play soccer, and that transformed for you... can you take us through that?

**Chris:** Sure. When I was growing up, as a little kid in Whitefish Bay Wisconsin, a suburb of Milwaukee, the thing you do is play soccer, to get all that active energy out (laughs). And so, I grew up playing soccer in the back yard, and with all my friends. I wanted to be the next Pele, I had a dream that I wanted to be the next Pele and play for my country in the world cup, and even won the state championship as a little kid. I played all through high school, and went on to college, and had a spinal cord injury at the age of 21.

I fell in a bathroom – just a freak accident, don't really know exactly how or why, but was out one night having a few beer with some friends, and had to go to the bathroom, and next thing I knew I was on the floor and couldn't move. And then, after that, went back to school... got a degree or two, and was looking for a job and searching for something to do, and always wanted to get back involved in sports, but there was nothing for people in power wheelchairs.

I had moved out to California from Wisconsin and found out about a sport called power soccer. Went to my first practice and the minute I got on the court, and hit the ball for the first time, I was hooked! It was like, "this is where I want to be,

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what I want to be doing, and I found my passion for sports again. The ability to be involved at that level with the team and being able to make an impact on my own life of getting back into things and feeling energized. I had found a place. I had applied for over 50 different jobs around the area and I didn't get any hits... so I finally found something to get my juices flowing again.

**Johnny:** Not to be too melodramatic about but, when you say that it almost sounds like the power soccer was the thing that reinvigorated you. Was that a major thing before, when maybe you had one mindset about maybe what you could do and what was possible, and then afterward it was like “ok, this is what I'm meant to do.”

**Chris:** Well, before my injury I was always passionate about what I did, and I was out there making a difference in people's lives. After my injury I knew I could still do that, and I just was looking for my place. I thought, well I've got that degree or two, then I'll find that job, and I thought well, I've got a degree in educational psychology, I could get back in the schools and make a difference in kids lives thru counseling and then maybe coach a few sports. Along the way to bring the sports back into my life, which I knew I wanted, and couldn't find a job and then I found out about power soccer – went and that brought the sports back into my life. The team, the active aspect of having something that someone in a power chair like myself, could actually go out and be independent at what I was doing. And be an active person on the court. After my injury, when I was looking for a sport, the guys who played wheelchair basketball sometimes would allow me to come onto the court and play with them (laughs) but it was more like I would sit there and move around a little bit and they'd all move around me... throwing the ball and that. I couldn't really fully participate.

But Power Soccer allowed me to fully participate in being independent, making my own decisions and being part of a team again. That really brought that aspect back to my life. And then, from there, as a player three months later they asked me if I wanted to coach the team – the local team – and I was like “wow this is really starting to grow and turn into something.” It allowed me, thru coaching, to start making a difference.

Taking my experiences from sports and life and put that into my coaching and make a difference in other people's lives by not only showing them what sports could do in their lives but also taking some life experiences and examples and relating the sports to how it coincides with what happens in your every day life. How working as a team instills leadership, trust, confidence – self-esteem things

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– it just can translate into your everyday life, so it really allowed me to - you know – to take those counseling skills that I learned and put them into effect and give some life examples. It just grew. I got more involved in the sport, and the sport started to grow – locally and nationally, and internationally. I just wanted to get more involved because it was an opportunity to be part of something at the grassroots level and make a difference. I knew what the sport did for me, it reinvigorated me with my life, and gave me an avenue to make a difference in other people's lives, and I wanted to be able to show people that there was a sport out there for people in power wheelchairs that they could actively and independently participate in.

That was huge, because being able to be independent on the court and playing a sport isn't something that's readily available to people in power chairs, and the thing about it is that a lot of the players don't have the chance in life to be fully independent, and making their own decisions. (dog barking in background) Myself, you know, I need care to help me get out of bed, doing activities of daily living, and some of the players need 24-hour care, dressing, bathing, feeding, toileting, everything... and when they get out on the power soccer court its their one opportunity to be totally independent. They can make their own decisions, be part of a team, and not have someone over their shoulder, saying “well, you should do it this way, or let me do this for you.” now, it's all down to you! And for them to have the power of that decision making and independence, is great.

Sports does so many things for so many people, in general, but I think power soccer does that by about a thousand for people who play, because it's not everyday that they can just get up and go out and play in the yard. It's, you know, a once a week or twice a week that people practice and are able to get out on the court and have that independence. So it's a phenomenal feeling for those who just started playing.

**Johnny:** So, you've mentioned that there's different levels of ability and mobility within the folks who play Can you maybe bring some of this out for us, 'cuz I know that the guy who did “murder ball” which is a different sport, obviously – they use a manual wheelchair – he's a quadriplegic but it would appear to people who are used to quadriplegic's having no mobility – ie. Christopher Reeve – above the waist. It looks like he can do a lot of things with his hands. I notice that you can, as well, but you're quadriplegic and I noticed that some of the people in the videos, it looks like they really don't have much mobility at all above the waist, so does that make a difference?

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I guess it's a two-part question: number 1, what is it considered to be, and I'm sorry if this is a xxx question, what is it considered to be quadriplegic. And number 2, does your level of mobility affect your ability to play power soccer?

**Chris:** bot great questions. Being a quadriplegic, the technical definition is not having full function of all four of your limbs. So, the Mark Zupan – they guy you're referring to from the movie “murder ball”, he doesn't have full function of all four of his limbs, but he does have a lot of function. And the way the spinal cord works is there are 8 cervical vertebrae, going down from right under your brain stem and skull, down to the bump in the back of your neck, that you can feel behind there. And as you go lower, on the vertebrae, the more function you get. Christopher Reeve was, I think, was right around C2 vertebrae, really high up, so the only technical movement that you're supposed to have by the books is maybe being able to move your head a little bit, and you need some assistance breathing and that's why he had the ventilator and the tracheotomy. As you go down to the C3 and C4 vertebrae, you might have little shoulder movement, maybe be able to move your shoulders up and down a little bit, and then further down below the C4 you might be able to lose the ventilator and have better breathing. I'm between C4 & C5 and then you start getting arm movement, so for instance, the C5 shows up for me on the left, where I can raise my bicep and have some deltoid or shoulder movement. On my right side I can just get my right arm up against gravity and have some shoulder movement over here. That shows that my bicep is really week and more the C4 side of things.

As you move down, the C6, you get some wrist movement and a little bit of hand movement. The C7 you start getting some triceps where you can raise your arm up in the air (like you're' in a classroom) and a little bit more hand & finger movement. If you get a lot of the finger movement, but nothing totally back, and then when you start getting down to the next level of vertebrae, that's where you have a lot more trunk control and a lot more of that mobility that you see with some of those guys, like Mark Zupan. So that's a rough definition of how the levels work.

As far as what your injury level or what your disability level is to play power soccer, for people with spinal cord injuries, there is right now, actually we're just internationally, we're coming out with what's called classification. And what that is, is a team of classifiers would look at your disability and take you thru some tests and some drills, and see what your level of mobility is. And we're starting to establish what the minimum criteria are for being able to play power soccer for any disability. Because power soccer isn't just for people who are paralyzed, it's

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for people with muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, and variety of other different disabilities... all people requiring to use a power chair to play sports.

And so, a rudimentary way of looking at it is, if you don't have enough movement or ability, stamina or strength or whatever the case may be, to play another sport in a manual wheelchair, that's kind of a rough estimate of ... well, then you'd be eligible to play power soccer. Because you require that power chair to play a sport and be active for that 30-40 minutes. And when you start getting to people like Mark Zupan, from "murder ball", he probably wouldn't be eligible to play power soccer, based on that new classification, because he has the ability to play murder ball, and maybe some other sports.

So, for me, I would easily qualify because I'm not able to get in that manual chair and actively participate in other sports.

**Johnny:** right. Now, so the guys who have any more mobility – so if somebody had MD and had very little movement, and they can basically just move whatever is needed to operate the chair – whether that's finger movement or breath movement, or whatever – versus, say, you who has more arm mobility and so forth... does that give you an advantage? How does the sport work in that way?

**Chris:** Sure, not necessarily. I'll give you a good example. For myself, with my disability, just because I have some arm movement and a little bit of strength that way, when I control my wheelchair, with my joystick, it's basically I'm driving with my shoulder, because I don't have any fine hand control or finger control, so it's a lot of just driving from my shoulder when you really think about it. Because I don't have really good balance, I wear a chest strap to make sure if I hit a big bump I don't fall over or something like that. So, my balance and my body control – I don't have much of that.

So when I'm out there on the court, and doing these big spins and quick maneuvers, my body's flying this way and that way, and I have to really strap down to be able to even play, and then with my gross motor control is thru my shoulder, I don't have the fine motor control – my whole body would move in the joystick any slight movement really fast, is really hard for me to control. Compare that to, there's an athlete on our US National team, his name is Jerry, and he has a form of Muscular Dystrophy – spinal muscular atrophy – and pretty much all the movement he has, he can move his arms a little bit, but his main control is with his fingers. He as a couple he can move a little bit, and control a joystick, and his body is strapped down, his head's kind of tilted to the side and strapped in,

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because he can't even hold his head up. But he controls his joystick with his fingers and he's able to do a lot more things, a lot better and faster, and quicker than I can on the court. So, with as little as a couple a couple fingers – if that's all you can control with your body – you can be a better player than someone like me who has a little bit more movement and able to do some things, xxxxxxxxxx...

**Johnny:** Interesting. Ok, let's talk busting pre-conceptions here, because when I watched this videos, once you sort of see that these folks are in power wheelchairs, and you think, ok, their in power chairs and they have some disability, and so forth, and once you get past that all you notice is that they're spinning around, and they're moving fast... do people... I don't know, the families of the athletes, people in general do they ever kind of react and go, boy, I don't know – I think there's this perception, that if somebody has any sort of a limitation, a lot of people kind of want to coddle them, and they're worried they're going to get injured, and stuff... what do you think about that, with these guys spinning around and stuff... is it like freedom? And that sort of thing? Or is there any concern there?

**Chris:** well, when I get new athletes, I've had a couple kids come out .. they're between 5 -10 years old, their parents may have coddled them, as you say (laughs), and kind of sheltered them from maybe being involved or doing a few things – they turn their speed really low so they can't go fast in the house, and so they don't break the walls down or damage the furniture.. but when some of these players get on the court for the first time, and they see some of the other players moving around really fast, it's like the first thing they want to do is “turn my speed up!! ‘cuz I wanna go as fast as those people!” and they want to be able to do those things.

We had a girl come up for the first time, just a couple weeks ago, and when we turned her speed up and started allowing her to be able to do some of those different maneuvers, it was like a whole new world opened for her. And she was like, I wanna go there, and I wanna go do those things, because mom & dad have been holding me back! (chuckles) and some of the parents are well-intentioned, you know, they want to do what they think is best for their kids and keep them safe because they think they may be fragile or not able to do things on their own. But, you know, the best thing for the kids is actually just the opposite. So let them go! Let them fall down, let them tip over, let them, you know, go as fast as they can and see what they can do! Because sometimes, you know, I've seen a guy who he controls his chair with his head – it's a headrest with his head – and when he started playing soccer, he was crashing

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into everything, but after 2 or three years of playing, he was going faster than he'd ever gone before and doing some maneuvers and driving his chair, doing these fine movements, weaving in and out of people, he would have never been able to do that if wasn't XXXXX able to grow and do new things...

So, I say let the kids loose! Let them get out there and do those things, because it helps their chair control, it helps their confidence, it helps their self-esteem - "ya, I can actually do things and progress and be more than what I'm actually led to believe I can be." And when you get out, you know, and now some of the elite athletes out there in the sport with the US National team. I had one woman on my team in 2007. 2 or 3 years beforehand she'd never even played the sport. I invited her to come out and play with the local team, and when I saw her for the first time, I was like, "she's gonna be a good soccer player" and I invited her to come out. We got on the court, because we use a basketball court for boundaries. There was one time when I said, go over where the free throw line is, and she just kinda stared at me, "what are you talkin' about?" (laughs). She didn't know what it was. She had noooooo idea of anything about sports. But then, two or three years later, her she is, winning the gold medal in the world cup in Tokyo Japan, in 2007! And so, it's things like that...

We have another athlete on this year's team, and she had never thought about getting involved in sports at all, and now, here she is, on the verge of potentially going to the world cup and participating in winning a gold medal herself. And same with some of the guys on the team. It's like, one guy on this year's team, when he was first introduced to the sport, he thought, "i don't wanna be like some poor disabled person, out there just kinda doin' some sport or some activity just to be active." But then when he finally got involved in the sport, and saw what it does for people and what it did for him when he got involved, and how he could progress and actually that it was a sport. It just wasn't some "activity for poor disabled kids," It's an actual, viable sport, just like any other sport. You go out there and it's blood sweat and tears. You lay it on the line. You know, we're out here to win! But, you know, we have fun at the same time.

**Johnny:** I know that anything we say here would be opinion and neither of us are doctors or whatever, but from that perspective, there's the whole mind-body component of medicine, ie. The placebo effect. If you think you're likely to improve, then chances are you are. I'm just wondering if folks who get out and bang around and tip over and so forth, and discover that maybe they're not as fragile as they had been led to believe. I would think that would some sort of positive impact, even on their health.

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**Chris:** It could! It could, I think when you go out in the world doing a sport or doing anything, when you've not been allowed to do something, or been led to believe that it's only the one way... there's a movie about it – Truman, with Jim Carrey, where he grows up in a bubble (laughs) and the whole world is planned around him and him doing a certain thing... but when he finds out that there's a whole new world out there, outside the bubble, that he can go out and explore... that the opportunities just open up and your mind and your body, everything, start thinking and discovering that, HEY! I can actually DO something different. If I take a strap off, what happens when I test my balance a little bit more? Or maybe I can do something else, that I didn't realize was possible? And we start taking away those limitations, the possibilities are limitless. It's depending on how far you want to push yourself to go out there and do different things.

**Johnny:** Amazing. And the chairs, themselves, are they modified in some way. Do you add a guard to the front of it for the kicking part, or are they faster?

**Chris:** Ya. Some people use their everyday chair to play. The upper level athletes tend to sometimes get a dedicated power soccer chair. There are some different technologies out there where you can make them, maybe go slightly faster, respond a little bit quicker, which can be beneficial in the sport. And then the foot guards that just attach to the frame of the wheelchair, and go around the legs and the feet, to push & kick the ball with, and you can attach those to any type of wheelchair, in order to be able to do that.

**Johnny:** And then, from your perspective as a coach, you mention that you saw a lady that you thought would be a good soccer player, so when you moved into coaching this sport, and you see people... I'm just wondering what you look for in a player. You're able to take them to being a national champion, how do you, what do you look for in a good power soccer player and is there any difference in the philosophy of teaching the sport?

**Chris:** well, in looking for a player, I look at anybody in a power wheelchair (laughs) because I want to share the sport with anybody who uses a power chair around the world, because it's just an opportunity to get out there, play a sport, be involved and gain all those intangible skills that you get from sport that previously, people haven't been given that opportunity or been told that it's not possible for you to play, so I think, getting out there and sharing the sport with everyone is really important. As far as finding a good player to reach the highest level, it's some of the basics ... as with any sport, it comes down to



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fundamentals. Are you able to drive your chair well? Are you able to kick effectively? Are you able to manipulate your chair in tight spaces, and do it quickly, and have the body control to do that? So, just by looking at a person and how they drive and how they're able to maneuver their chair just around the house or around the place of work and then also, how they're able to communicate with other people.

Communication is a big thing for me as a coach. On and off the court, and seeing how they communicate with others and interact with each other, their ability to grasp different concepts and then be able to carry them out. You know, some of those are just the basic things that I look for. And then when someone's willing to learn, and put the time and energy and effort into practicing and doing those things, I think the possibilities are endless for people who want to do that.

**Johnny:** Do you know any players who can't talk or whose communication is impaired in some way?

**Chris:** I do. Not on the national team, so much, but on my local team I have a person who has Cerebral Palsy and he uses a keypad or a little computer to communicate/talk. He doesn't use it on the court. On the court he can let out different sounds or grunts – for lack of a better term – and you can just by being familiar with him and how he communicates you can understand if he's saying left or right, or whatever. I have another player on a different team who has head controls. He is non-verbal as well, but can let out different noises that you can understand, you can get a sense after playing with him what he's doing, and feeling, and communicating.

There's another girl who has CP, as well, and it's the same thing. She's not able to communicate very clearly, but you can tell what she needs. A lot of it, too, is by her eyes. If she looks a different direction, or is looking down at something... after you get to know them by playing & coaching with them, you can get to know what their saying and wanting, you can communicate by different sounds & gestures, and different movements. You can get what the topic of their conversation is. There are plenty of people that are non-verbal out there that are playing.

**Johnny:** It's really interesting what you said earlier. I just talked to Erica Bogan about this. She's Miss Wheelchair America. She does a lot of different sports. I think there's a tendency for people that we'd consider able-bodied, to look at wheelchair sports and think, well that is just an inferior version of another sport...

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we're gonna take a sport that is typical and we're going to change it in some way so that different people are able to play it. But what you said, it seems to be totally spot on from what I understand, it's not a different version of an existing sport, it really is a sport in and of itself. And what you said just now, is, you said with understanding watching moving for eye movements from a player who's non-verbal or understanding different vocalizations. Comedian Josh Blue won "Last Comic Standing" and he said, he has CP, and what you don't realize about a lot of disabled people is that we see the world as a chess match. Like you would just look thru a room and say "I'm here and I want to go there" and he says, "well, I look and I think, hmm I can grab onto that thing, and that thing – to stabilize myself thru a maze, basically." It adds a different dimension of the sport, in my mind, that you're not just out there hitting a ball at the wheelchair, you're having to understand all of this stuff that maybe a lot of people take for granted.

**Chris:** Ya, when you look at some of the other sports, just compared to outdoor soccer, there's the guys who play outdoor soccer, you know we're very similar in the fact that the sport is soccer and the outcome is to score goals, and you've got to pass and you've got to dribble the ball, but it's a little bit different in that we have to maybe understand one or two different little things about ourselves and our bodies, and what we can and can't do with the wheelchairs. You know most of the outdoor athletes are able to run really fast, kick the ball, you know, real dynamically, but they have to train their bodies to do that, and as well we have to train our bodies to be able to do the same thing. I think it's similar and yet it's a little different, because there's maybe more to consider and I think that's where you were leading to.

There's more we have to consider – if I want to do that dynamic kick, well what are the things I have to do to allow my body to do that? (laughs) Instead of like someone who's able-bodied who can just go and kick the ball. For me, in order to make that dynamic kick, I have to strap my arms down to my arm-rests, my legs to my grips. I've to make sure my body is stable and that when I turn and kick the ball I only turn so far and so fast, and come around and make sure I follow through and those are like seven or eight different things that I have to look and process for myself to be able to do one action... versus someone who is able-bodied and can just bring their leg back and bring it forward and kick the ball!

**Johnny:** excellent... cool. Well, that's about on time today, Chris, so do you have any parting shots, anything before we tie up, that I might have just forgotten to ask about? Or anything?

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**Chris:** Well, one of the things... one of my “taglines” that I tell people all the time, through speaking and some of my writing, is that you are able! And that you are able to do anything you want to do, as long as you believe and take action. And sometimes, people hold themselves back from doing what they want to do or other people are outside forces holding them back from what they're doing. But if you really believe that there's something out there for you, and that you want to do... just take that action to go out there and find it, and do it.

Power soccer, for me, was something ... I believed there was a sport out there for me... I didn't know where or what it was, but when I finally got out there on the court, I was like YES! This is my passion, this is what I want to do, where I want to go. What I want to be involved with. From there I took action, I just got involved. I put everything I had into the sport. It took me to whole new heights that I never would have thought... I never would have thought I'd be travelling across the world, winning... I dreamed that I'd become a world champion back when I was 10 years old and look what happened! You know? You are able! You are able to do what you want to do.

**Johnny:** That's one of the things I forgot to mention, too, you have a book coming out!

**Chris:** correct...

**Johnny:** So we should mention that as well. Well, thanks so much, Chris. I really appreciate it. It's been great talking to you. I always enjoy learning about new stuff and meeting new folks. You've been great. Thanks so much.

**Chris:** Thanks for having me; it's been a pleasure. Check out Power Soccer, everybody!

**Johnny:** This is Jonny B. Truant signing off for The Badass Project.