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HOME

Archives

Select a date

- News
- Sports
- Arts & Entertainment
- Viewpoint
- Week in Photos

Newsletter

- What's Bruin
- View Print Edition
- Corrections
- About the DB
- Contact Us
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Hardly handicapped

Atif Moon hasn't let his disability stop him from being a tennis smash hit



JENNIFER DRADER/DAILY BRUIN SENIOR STAFF
Sophomore Atif Moon, paralyzed from the waist down since birth, was ranked seventh in the National Junior Wheelchair Open tennis rankings last year. Though Moon is unable to walk, he doesn't see his disability as a huge handicap, preferring to think of himself as just a regular student.

By **Andrew Finley**
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Circling around the parking lot at a local Torrance gym, Atif Moon pulled into the handicapped spot, not necessarily thinking twice about the fact that he didn't have a placard. After finishing his workout and finding a ticket pressed against his car's windshield, he was obviously frustrated.

After all, it's not often that lifelong paraplegics get ticketed for parking in handicapped spots. Yet that wasn't what upset Moon. Nor was he upset at the fact that he had left his handicap placard at home that day. The sophomore was angry that he hadn't parked in one of the regular spaces.

Since he first stepped onto a tennis court at the age of six, Moon has been raised to believe that he is not any different than any other student. Though paralyzed from the waist down since birth because of a spinal cord injury and confined to a wheelchair his entire life, Moon doesn't see himself as limited in the least bit.

"I don't really think about it much," he said of what life would be like with functional legs. "Certain

things would be cool, but I realize I can do a lot of things with my disability."

Chief among those activities is tennis. In 2004, he finished the year ranked seventh in the nation among Junior Wheelchair Open players. Without a steady coach or a regular practice schedule since enrolling at UCLA, he has succeeded by playing during his spare time with able-bodied partners. And it's not as though his friends and family are doing him favors by hitting with him. He's quite capable of keeping up.

"His disability allows him to maneuver better than other people I've worked with," said Michael Watson, who began coaching Moon when he was eight and has worked with other disabled students for 20 years. "It's easy to work with Atif because you tell him something and he understands what you're saying right away."

Moon's father, Munir, and stepmother, Elena, always wanted their son to have the same experiences able-bodied children had. Tennis became the first activity that ensured that was possible.

"We were looking for easy things to get him involved with," Munir said. "The whole goal was to keep him busy in some kind of sport so he didn't feel disappointed or depressed."

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While other parents pushed their children into sports to learn the value of teamwork, Munir and Elena wanted Atif to gain independence through sports. The individual and non-contact nature of tennis made it an obvious choice, so Moon's parents signed him up for a wheelchair class offered at El Camino College. Moon admits he wasn't immediately drawn to the sport, but became hooked as he started improving and succeeding.

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"At first, I never really cared," Moon said. "My parents really forced me to get involved."

Except for the allowance of two bounces, wheelchair tennis retains the same features as the regular version of the sport. However, the training regimen is markedly different for Moon and other wheelchair players. With his leg muscles continuously atrophying, all of Moon's strength must come from his upper body. At UCLA, he works out three times a week to keep his arm and shoulder muscles fit enough for competitive tennis. Even when he was a young child, his upper body was naturally more developed because of his dependence on it.

"I was amazed that his handshake was almost like an adult," Elena said of when she first met Atif 15 years ago. "It was so heavy and very strong."

As Atif grew and matured, Munir and Elena kept finding ways to instill strength and independence in their son. Four years ago, when strolling down the street, Moon tripped over a bump in the road and fell out of his wheelchair. But rather than asking whether their son needed help getting back up, Munir and Elena only sought to make sure he wasn't hurt.

"We were thinking, if we weren't here, how would he get up?" Elena said. "We coached him a bit on how to put the chair up and put the brakes back on himself."

In college, some of Moon's closest friends have similarly made a conscious effort to avoid taking care of him.

"At first, a lot of us felt like we should try to help him out as much as we can," third-year student and friend Adnan Nasir said. "But it makes him that much stronger to be on his own. We don't want to make him feel dependent because he's definitely not. He's able to depend only on himself."

Though tennis is Moon's most successful sport, he has participated in a host of others. Growing up, he played goalie in neighborhood hockey games with his older brother. During lunch breaks in elementary school, he regularly sank more shots than his able-bodied classmates in basketball. And over the past year, he has expanded his horizons and tried out jet skiing, kayaking and swimming. With each activity Moon picks up, he receives a stronger feeling of independence and a lesser feeling of disability.

"They don't know how I do it, but no one discourages me," he said.

Nevertheless, many people do sympathize with Moon. At the dining hall, students frequently ask if there's anything they can do for him.

But those who spend the most time with Moon are usually the least sympathetic. These people don't look to treat him differently, and that is a reason why they are some of Moon's closest friends.

"I don't feel sorry for him," Nasir said. "There are actually a lot of people who are worse off than he is. He's actually blessed to be where he is, studying at a prestigious university with an abundance of resources in terms of support and friends."

As part of the Muslim Student Association, Nasir and Moon volunteer together at a medical clinic in Watts. His experience there has helped Moon forget about his disability all the more.

"When he looks at other quadriplegics and goes to Watts, it helps him get an appreciation of the opportunities he does have," Munir said.

Working legs would undoubtedly make some things in life easier for Moon. But from the tennis court to the classroom, he has become increasingly independent without them, making it harder and harder to consider him disabled.