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MIT's wheelchair tennis champ

Graduate student Marcus Causton just wants to hit

Morgan Bettex, MIT News Office correspondent

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Until three years ago, Marcus Causton, 31, a graduate student in MIT's engineering logistics program, hadn't played much tennis. But after a rock-climbing accident in Wales five years ago left him paraplegic, he took up wheelchair tennis. Since it can be played on any court using regular rackets and balls, Causton can hit with anyone — even able-bodied players. The only difference is that wheelchair players are allowed two ball bounces on their side of the net rather than one.

"You can do it on your own terms; you don't have to rely on a team," Causton explained recently as he prepared to hit some balls at MIT's James B. Carr Tennis Center, an indoor facility otherwise known as "the Bubble." He was waiting for Spritely Roche, the assistant coach for MIT's men's tennis team, to play.

It was 4 p.m. on a Thursday afternoon. Three weeks earlier, Causton had won the Men's Open singles division at the [National Collegiate Wheelchair Tennis Championships](#) in Alabama, where he represented MIT as the number-one seed in the Tier 1 singles competition.

The last time he checked, he was ranked 77th in the world among players of wheelchair tennis, one of the fastest-growing wheelchair sports, according to the International Tennis Federation. Causton didn't know his current national ranking and didn't seem to care. "The world ranking is the main indicator of how good you are," he explained.

Causton had been resting for a few weeks and was eager to play. He twisted a yellow and black Babolat racket in his right wrist and swung his torso from side to side to warm up. "The mobility aspect is the hardest," he said. "You have to get your wheelchair in the right spot. There's a lot more anticipation than in able-bodied tennis. You are always moving and have to get used to pushing while also holding your racket."

He strapped his waist and feet into his tennis wheelchair, which has wheels angled inward, like a skier would angle his skis, to provide more stability and make it easier to turn. On the back of the chair there is also a small wheel, similar to an office chair's, that keeps him from tipping over. While able-bodied players stuff balls into the pockets of their shorts, Causton puts his between the spokes of his wheels.



Marcus Causton, a graduate student in MIT's engineering logistics program. Photo courtesy of Marcus Causton

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Causton asked Roche to serve some balls. "Should I mix up spins?" Roche asked. "Sure, do some tough, do everything," Causton said. And so began an hour of tennis between a pair of squeaky sneakers shuffling across the court from two constantly circling wheels.

"I'm free to hit any way I want to when I play with him. Our levels match up nicely," Roche explained, noting that the strongest part of Causton's game is his serve return. "He can really dictate points when he is returning serve. He can also produce tremendous power on his ground strokes and has terrific court coverage."

Roche acknowledged that he tends to avoid certain shots when he plays with Causton — a drop shot and then a lob or a big high spin to a backhand followed by a short ball to the other corner — because he is able-bodied and might be able to cover responses to those shots more easily than Causton's wheelchair opponents.

For almost every play, Causton's game followed a pattern regardless of whether he was hitting a forehand or backhand. He angled his chair so that his body faced somewhat away from the court. He turned his head to face Roche, both hands grasping the wheels while one hand also clenched his racket, as he prepared to spin the chair one way or another. Once the ball was served, Causton quickly turned toward it, fiercely pushed his weight across the court, let go of his right wheel, raised his racket and whacked the ball back to Roche with such force it sounded, thanks to the echo effect of the Bubble, like a bullet.

Causton has always been a dedicated athlete. Before his accident, he played rugby in college and loved rock climbing, skiing, hiking and cycling. He still skis and also plays wheelchair basketball, but tennis is his main focus. He met Roche while practicing at the court one day, and Roche was immediately taken with Causton's skill. "There is a very rare combination of power and touch," he said of Causton's style. "And he's just a cool guy."

Born in France, Causton has lived "all over the place," including 12 years in the United States, most recently in Vermont, where he worked as a quality engineer for an aerospace company. He is studying the supply-chain field in his engineering graduate program, and hopes a master's degree in logistics will give him more flexibility in his career choices. After graduation in the spring, he hopes to score a job for a company like Adidas. When he is not playing tennis or immersed in schoolwork, Causton hangs out with friends and follows professional soccer, rugby and tennis. His favorite able-bodied tennis player is Roger Federer because of the "very smooth way he hits the ball."

Causton practiced his serve next, bouncing the ball three times before throwing it up, eyeballing it and hitting it across the court. While his hit is so powerful that it often swings his chair in the opposite direction, it appears that Causton's true skill is how well he maneuvers his chair across the court, making tight turns within split seconds. He missed a ball and rolled his eyes. "It's a frustrating sport when you don't get it the way you want it," he said.

In January, Causton plans to go back to his intense training schedule of playing three to four times a week for up to two hours. He mentioned the Paralympic Games, the elite sporting event for athletes with a disability, and the World Team Cup, the largest annual international team competition for wheelchair tennis. "It depends on what work will allow," he said.

As Causton wheeled himself across the Bubble and packed up his racket, Roche pointed out a new player on this year's team who was practicing on a nearby court. Causton asked to be introduced.

Comments

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perezfranco - **Congratulations, Marcus!**

2009-11-13 05:01:42

Hey, Marcus... congratulations on the Open win. Best of luck with the training and the coming events. Regards,

Roberto

Nuno - Congratulations Marcus!

2009-11-16 05:14:59

Hi Marcus,

Congratulations for the win.

We should play again some time soon, I'm sure that the practice we had together helped you winning the tournament :-)

Nuno

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