The NY Rollin’ Knicks beat four time champions, the Dallas Mavericks, 76-53 to take the National Wheelchair Basketball Association championship in Louisville, Kentucky.

Co-sponsored by the New York KNICKS/Madison Square Garden, Westchester Independent Living Center (WILC) and the Wheelchair Sports Federation the team went undefeated this year. Assistant coach, player, and WILC Executive Director Joe Bravo pointed out how well the team performed all season and that it all came together for them to beat the number one team.

For Bravo wheelchair basketball has been a life changing experience. He started playing at 19, and it was the first time he met another person with paralysis. “It was my first exposure to a peer. Johnny Johnson was 26, a Vietnam vet, and a paraplegic, a man who was disabled and able” Bravo continued “I suddenly had exposure to men who worked, had girlfriends, went out and did things. It changed my world.”

Current team members range in age from 16-59. It’s a rough and tumble game with players having to propel their chair and shoot baskets. Every team member has a mobility disability running the gamut from amputation to paraplegia. A classification system is used to determine the mix of players on the court at any given time. The game is played on a regulation court with very few modifications in the rules.

Bravo played for a team throughout college and continued while building his career as a disabilities advocate at WILC and its Putnam County satellite Putnam Independent Living Services (PILS). He pointed out that there are more opportunities for athletes now with some colleges and universities offering Adapted Athletics Programs. In fact, one of the NY Rollin’ Knicks junior players, Fabrizio Shao, recently received a partial basketball scholarship to the University of Arizona.

Head Coach Gerry Fleming and Bravo encourage the juniors (as the new players are called), engage them in the competitive sport, and help them to develop teamwork and cooperation, skills which can be transferred to other areas of life including employment, independent living and self-sufficiency. The established members of the team become, in effect, mentors of the young men helping them develop their skills and athleticism.

Coach Fleming volunteers his time and expertise. His players live and practice in the New York metropolitan area but travel throughout the country for tournaments, with an average age of 35 for the starting players. This year Patrick Anderson and David Eng, former Canadian national team players, joined the team. Anderson scored an impressive 32 points in the final game.

An ongoing challenge for the team is sponsorship. Basketball wheelchairs are expensive as is the travel required. WILC recently received a Quality of Life Grant from the Dana and Christopher Reeve Foundation to
help purchase two sports wheelchairs. With proper support and comfort, and a lighter, stronger design the chairs allow a player to move down court quickly and absorb some of the rough contact inherent in the sport. New York Rollin' Knicks players are strong accomplished individuals and now, national champs. For more information call 914.682.3926 extension 2103.