



MobileNation is a dedicated source of consumer news for the mobility industry. To get this section into the hands of consumers, simply copy it or clip it from the magazine. For suggestions or contributions, contact associate editor Elisha White at (972) 687-6731 or ewhite@stevenspublishing.com.

# EXTREME Mobility Junkies

## Power Wheelchair Racing Allows Athletes To Live Life on the Edge

BY ELISHA WHITE

Do not try this at home — a label traditionally reserved for daredevils and stuntmen, taking it to the extreme has quickly become a battle cry from some wheelchair users. In today's innovative world of extreme sports, wild-at-heart athletes are paving the way for extreme adaptive equipment for such extreme sports as skiing, surfing and the new phenomenon of power wheelchair racing.

And the greater the risk, the sweeter the reward for extreme athletes.

### Survival of the Fittest

As extreme sports — associated with such organizations as ESPN's X Games and The Gravity Games — gain in popularity, injuries related to these activities also rise. Some injuries are fully recoverable, and these injuries, which are seen as a badge of honor for most athletes, only serve as motivation to get back up and try again.

But what if you can't get up and try again? The National Spinal Cord Injury Association estimates that approximately 8 percent of spinal cord injuries are sports related.

John "J2" Mryczko, founder of Extreme Chairing and a self-prescribed adrenaline junky, suffered a spinal cord injury after a 1999 motorcycle accident. He started a new Web site, [www.ExtremeChairing.com](http://www.ExtremeChairing.com), a year and a half ago to launch power wheelchair racing.

Described as a "revolution" of a new disabled extreme sport, the concept for power wheelchair racing is similar to motocross, Mryczko said. It involves large matches that pit athletes against each other. Points would be earned and then prizes awarded.

"The idea is that if more get involved in racing, depending on your mobility, how much mobility you have or what kind of injury you have," said Mryczko, "you would race amongst people with the same ability as you have or disabilities you have."

Currently, power wheelchair racing can be done by anyone who has a power chair, regardless of the level of injury or limit of mobility. The risks are minimal. Large-scale organization is still in the works. In the mean time, events focus more on beating the clock, with individuals racing their best time and distance.

In September, Mryczko organized a 40-mile, two-day trail ride for those interested in the sport. The trail ride, inspired by an 80-mile, three-day trip Mryczko took on a power chair in 2002, was the first event for Extreme Chairing and consisted of riding on off-road trails.



Photos Courtesy of Extreme Chairing.

John J2 Mryczko of Extreme Chairing.



Photos Courtesy of Extreme Chairing.

John J2 Mryczko of Extreme Chairing.



### EXTREME products

Wheelchair extremist J2 Mryczko shows off his stunting skills in the video "Chairing."

"The first jump I ever took on a power wheelchair was in the fall of 2000, and that was just from my head, 'Hey let me see if I can jump this power chair, why not?' So we just put the boards out and went to a local park where I used to skateboard every night. That was the first launch and that basically was the first footage we got for the Chairing video. It's that first jump on the video with the helmet. Then more footage came from 2001 and 2002 and the video was put together in 2002. Basically that's all we've got right now, but we're trying to put something together for next spring for a video."

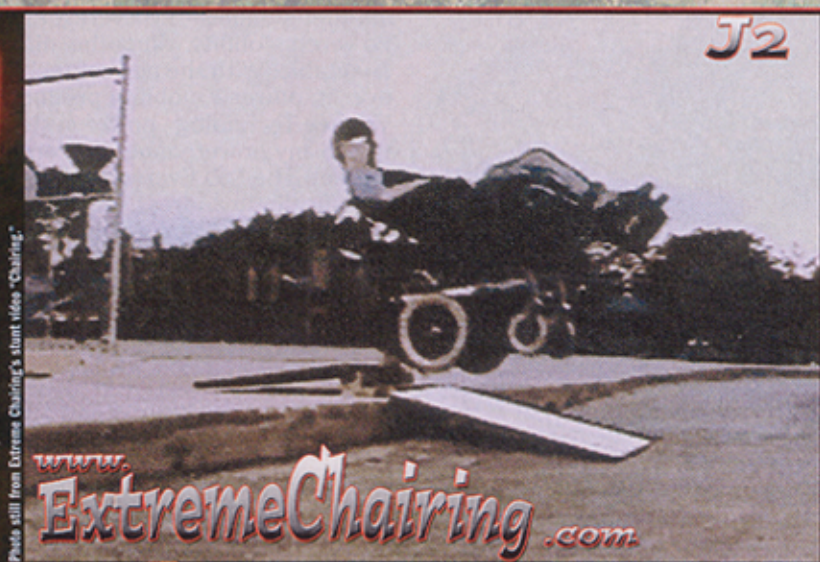


Photo still from Extreme Chairing's stunt video "Chairing."

### Charging the Market

Power chairs for the power wheelchair racing are fairly easy to come by. Adaptations to existing power chairs are necessary, however, to make the sport more extreme.

Currently, power chairs have a top speed of 10 mph, Mryczko said, which is decent but not fast enough. To combat this, Extreme Chairing is working with Rooster Racing to build a Pro Race Power Chair that will have a top speed of 25 mph, large air-filled knobby tires and a suspension to soften rough terrain.

"I'm sure there are some people out there who would love to race a power wheelchair that goes 25 mph amongst other athletes," said Mryczko.

For Mryczko, the industry that provides equipment for extreme adaptive sports isn't growing fast enough when compared to the number of injuries each year and the number of people who use power wheelchairs. He also said that not enough large, mainstream companies are getting involved.

### Sweeter Rewards

Getting a new extreme adaptive sport started is not an easy task. Mryczko has been working on getting sponsors and mainstream mobility companies involved for quite some time. He's convinced that the sport will take off however.

"They never used to race lawnmowers six years ago," he said. "Somebody just thought of racing lawnmowers and now it's a really popular sport and they have really big sponsors."

Mryczko hopes that power wheelchair racing will have the same draw as lawnmower racing, motocross and even other popular adaptive sports such as surfing, skiing and quad rugby.

Though danger is the primary draw of extreme adaptive sports, being involved can give a disabled person a sense of independence.

"A big loss when a person gets a disability is you lose much of your independence. When you're out on those trails, it's all you, you are not only competing against others, but competing against nature and yourself," said Mryczko.

"You know, it's bad being in a wheelchair," he continued. "But when you get in there, when you get in the wheelchair and you're flying down the trail, it's like having wings, some kind of freedom."

What limits the future of extreme mobility innovations is only the imagination. ●



Mike Copithorne

### The Extreme Word

Name: Mike Copithorne

Location: Napa, Calif.

Age: 30

Disability: Spinal Cord Injury (T-9/T-10 Paraplegic since 2000)

"I loved my life and being an athlete before my accident, but I truly appreciate being able to participate in sports more now. I have been very fortunate to have kayaked, whitewater rafted, jet skied, surfed, fished, backpacked, ridden quads and even dirt bikes, ski dived, bungeed, you name it. I have found you can sit around moping about how unfair life can be at times, or you can do like J2, Jesse (Billauer of Life Rolls On) and others have done. They reach a level that is even higher than before their injury because they went through it and triumphed."