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Kris Mercer of Zebulon, left, shakes hands with Jerry Stackhouse before the two take the court against one another at N.C. Central.

Ray Black III, Ray Black III for The News & Obs



Jeremy Smith goes all out to try and gain control of a loose ball during Sunday's wheelchair basketball game at N.C. Central. John McPhail, right, looks on.

Ray Black III, Photo by Ray Black III for The News & Observer



Jerry Stackhouse, center, uses both hands to gain an edge while battling Chris Baker (3) for a rebound Sunday in McLendon-MacDougal Gym.

Ray Black III, Photos by Ray Black III for The News & Observer

Stackhouse schooled in wheelchair hoops

NBA players, college stars gain an appreciation for athletes who know how to roll

BY ROBBIE PICKERAL, Staff Writer

DURHAM - It's not often that NBA veteran Jerry Stackhouse gets outscored, out-assisted and just plain tired out.

Then again, it's rare that he is trying to shoot, rebound and defend from a wheelchair.

But that's just what the former Tar Heels All-American guard was attempting Sunday afternoon as part of the Greater North Carolina Pro-Am at N.C. Central.

Before the championship game of the summer league (when Team P.J. Tucker beat Team Navy 126-111), several college players and professionals -- including former UNC players Jawad Williams and Donald Williams, as well as Hayward Fain of St. Augustine's -- borrowed some special wheels to play a good-natured exhibition against youth players from the Triangle Thunder and Charlotte Bobcats wheelchair teams.

The final score of the 25-minute blowout: Thunder/Bobcats 28, College/Pros 9.

"That might be one of the most grueling things I've ever done," said Jawad Williams, who now plays for the Cleveland Cavaliers and was missing so many shots from the sitting position that at one point he popped out of his chair and ran to the hoop for a behind-the-back dunk (which didn't count). "I have a newfound respect and appreciation for wheelchair athletes."

And that was the point.

Bridge II Sports, a Durham-based non-profit organization that tries to create opportunities for physically-challenged people to participate in athletics, helped set up the exhibition for the second straight year as a way to show folks what wheelchair athletes are capable of. It recently received a \$114,000 grant from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation of North Carolina, and plans to use the money to further educate different groups state wide -- including public schools, parks and recreation departments, the UNC university system and support groups -- about its mission.

In the meantime, the athletes on hand at McLendon-McDougald Gymnasium were on a mission, too.

"It was fun to show people that people with disabilities can still play basketball -- and play it well," said Raleigh's Akeem Hassell, 19, who has been playing for the Triangle Thunder for three years.

Added Bobcats player Chris Baker, 18, who sped by the pros, snagged steals and scored on multiple occasions: "To play against a Hall-of-Fame type player like Jerry Stackhouse is probably a lifetime achievement for me."

The event began with a half-hour game during which a combined Tornados/Bobcats team out-wheeled the Triangle Thunder 32-29.

And it was competitive. At least one nose was bloodied. A couple of chairs almost toppled. Trash talk ensued. Of course there were no alley-oops or high-flying blocks, but the speed, passing game and bumper-car-like picks created an entertaining and wheel-jarring precision that the professional and college players later struggled to emulate.

"You can grab the wheel, and you think you're spinning one way, and you end up spinning around the other way," said a laughing Stackhouse, founder of the Pro-Am who worked up a steady sweat trying to keep up with the seasoned wheelchair players. "It's a lot of fun, but it's a lot harder than it looks. You can't take for granted that you can get around on both legs."

On a couple of occasions, he too left his wheelchair to snag a loose ball or good-naturedly try to block a shot.

Frustration?

"No," he said, grinning. "Fatigue."

Briefly: In the championship game of the Pro-Am, former Tar Heel Raymond Felton led Team P.J. Tucker with 29 points. Tucker himself added 20. Kentucky-bound freshman John

Wall led Team Navy with 39 points, while Jawad Williams chipped in 33.

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