Whenever David Crandell, MD, is overcome with the sensation that he’s leading a double life, that’s what he calls himself. Sinister connotations aside, it’s a fitting title for a man who divides his time between an examining room and an ice rink.

Most days, the 1989 graduate of the School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences sees patients at Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital in Boston, where he’s a staff physiatrist on the neuro-rehabilitation unit, or at Massachusetts General Hospital, where he takes care of musculoskeletal outpatients.

In his off hours, however, Crandell scouts linemen, sets up training camps and solicits sponsors for a hockey team he started seven years ago—a team that even has its own motto: “Put your disability on ice.” And that doesn’t refer to a cold pack, but instead a hard-driving three-period game for amputee athletes.

In cofounding the American Amputee Hockey Association, Crandell has cultivated a new sport within disabled sports. Traditionally, amputee players have joined able-bodied recreational leagues or competed in sled hockey, in which players use sleds and picks to propel themselves on the ice. Crandell’s efforts offer them yet another option: playing upright hockey with fellow amputees.
Immersion and Insight
Although Crandell didn’t discover disabled athletics until he became a doctor, much of his life has been shaped by sports. Growing up in the Long Island town of Centerport, he was active in high school basketball, soccer, track — and for one winning season — intramural floor hockey.

At Cornell University, where he earned a bachelor of science degree in neurobiology and behavior, Crandell played intramural soccer, club volleyball and lightweight football. While at UB medical school in the mid-1980s, he became interested in rehabilitative medicine, seeing it as a passport to a career in sports medicine. As a fourth-year elective, he worked with the team doctor for Buffalo’s indoor lacrosse and soccer teams, which cemented his commitment to the field.

In 1990, after completing an internship in internal medicine at Buffalo’s Millard Fillmore Hospital, Crandell began a residency in physical medicine and rehabilitation at Tufts. In the summer of 1993, before starting a two-year sports medicine fellowship at Tufts, he returned to Buffalo to treat injured soccer players at the World University Games. It was the first of his many volunteer stints as a sports medicine physician.

Back in Boston, Crandell learned that the University of Massachusetts was hosting the National Wheelchair Championships, a competition that includes such sports as swimming, weightlifting and archery. One afternoon, he strode out to the track field. What he saw forever slammed his view about competitive athletics.

“The first time I saw these athletes going around the track in racing wheelchairs, I was completely blown away. Just the idea that they were competing at this very high level intrigued me. In residency training, I was seeing people who were newly injured or generally not doing well. And here were these disabled athletes excelling. It added a lot to my perspective, and I got hooked.”

So hooked, in fact, that the next year he volunteered to serve as a courtroom physician at the National Wheelchair Quadraplegic Rugby Tournament, the paralimbed sport made famous by the documentary Murderball.

He followed up that by tending to the U.S. track and field team competing in the International Paralympics Committee (IPC) Championships in Berlin. While completing his Tufts fellowship, he was appointed medical coordinator of the 1995 National Wheelchair and Amputee Championships.

Even after Crandell accepted a position as attending physician at New England Sinai Hospital and Rehabilitation Center in 1995, a job he would stay in until 2004, he continued to lend his medical expertise to disabled athletic events. Whenever he traveled, he made sure to pack his camera. Taking pictures has been Crandell’s way of documenting the fortitude of the disabled athletes he encounters. As an example of that tenacity, he remembers the 1998 IPC World Athletics Championships in England, where two wheelchair marathoners were involved in a serious collision during the race’s first kilometers.

After the American racer was turned upright, he continued to the finish line, where Crandell discovered that the man had sepa rated his shoulder. “He had raced the entire marathon like that, pushing his wheelchair with a separated shoulder. You can only imagine what every stroke must have felt like for 26 miles.”

In 1998, Crandell immersed himself even deeper into disabled sports culture. One night, he showed up at a Boston skating rink to watch a sled hockey practice. It didn’t take much prodding to get the physician out of the stands and onto the ice.

“I took off my suit jacket and they strapped me in. It was a lot of fun. And it was hard — a lot harder than I thought it would be. It’s that much more impressive when you see how fast these guys are going up and down the ice, and you go out there and can’t even move.”
U ndeterred, Crandell not only finished the practice, he joined the team. (Sled hockey allows able-bodied athletes to play if there aren’t enough disabled players to fill the roster.) During the first international sled hockey tournament in Buffalo, he served as both the event’s medical coordinator and a defender for the Boston Blades. When the team competed in a tournament in Kitchener, Ontario, his mother took the train from Long Island to watch her son score three goals and two assists. “She had seen me play every sport growing up. Even though I was in my 30s, this was no different.”

A Sport Is Born

Word spread about Crandell’s involvement in sled hockey. One of his former colleagues, Telfo research professor Mark Pitkin, MD, asked Crandell whether it would be feasible to form a similar team in his native Russia.

From experience, Crandell knew it would be a geographic challenge. In Boston, the team’s closest rivals were on Long Island and in Canada. The closest sled hockey team to Russia was in Sweden.

Furthermore, the specially equipped sleds and equipment were costly. So Crandell offered Pitkin another suggestion: Why not have the Russians lace up skates instead? If they played upright hockey, the athletes wouldn’t be forced to travel to another country to compete. They could challenge able-bodied teams.

At the time, Crandell knew of only one amputee playing competitive upright hockey: Buffalo native Mike Ginal. A below-the-knee amputee, Ginal had achieved celebrity status within disabled athletes. “He was this legend,” Crandell remembers.

“Then everything went from there.”

Several months later, Pitkin successfully campaigned for an exhibition match of upright hockey at the World Ice Hockey Championships in St. Petersburg. Finding players through hospital prosthetists, Crandell assembled a group of men willing to suit up for the first-ever U.S. team. Two months before the trip to Russia, they had their first practice.

“One below-knee amputee had been playing adult hockey, and some of the men had played hockey before losing a leg and hadn’t gotten back into it,” Crandell says of the original team. “But some couldn’t skate at all.”

In St. Petersburg, the hard-fought contest lasted all of 10 minutes. It ended in a 0-0 tie, with the captain of the Russian team chipping off half a tooth.

Upright amputee hockey had been born.

No Small Victory

After the St. Petersburg game, the American players had barely wiped the slush clean from their blades when they asked Crandell: “What’s next?”

Crandell himself was awe-struck. “These guys who went had such a good experience they wanted it to continue. They wanted to know why there wasn’t an upright version of hockey in the Paralympics. When you look at skiing, there is sitting-down skiing and there is upright skiing. So my answer was that I didn’t know. It was probably because nobody had ever tried.”

Dedicating himself to the cause, Crandell, along with a retired sports equipment manufacturer, formed the American Amputee Hockey Association (AAHA) in 2000. That fall, the first training camp was held at Lake Placid.

With the U.S. and Russian teams established, Crandell began encouraging the development of a Canadian hockey team. It came into existence in 2001, with the squad squaring off against their American counterparts in the first three-against-game of amputee upright hockey.

Since then, teams have been organized in Latvia, Finland and the Czech Republic. In 2002 Crandell created the International Standing Ice Hockey Federation, with the goal of meeting the eligibility criteria for the Paralympics.

In this regard, he knows he has his work cut out for him. Indeed, sled hockey was 25 years old before the U.S. Olympic Committee admitted it to the Paralympics. But Crandell thinks upright hockey stands a chance of being accepted—perhaps as soon as the 2010 or 2014 winter games.

“Just for these athletes to walk into the Paralympic games represents something the U.S. is missing. This would be the largest assembly of disabled hockey players ever, playing both in sleds and standing,” he says. “It will also help to grow the game here in the U.S.”

In the short-term, Crandell’s most pressing objective is purely nationalistic. He’s been on seeing the American squad beat the undefeat- ed Canadians. To that end, he organized the AAHA’s first youth camp three years ago, nurturing a new generation of players in the process.

“We have five- and six-year-olds, bilateral amputees who are coming out to skate. You have the parents of these young kids thinking they’ll never have opportunities, and then we tell them, ‘We think your son or daughter might be able to play for the U.S. national team.’”

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