

# Fire on Ice

David Crandell, MD '89, the man behind the rise of amputee hockey

## “DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HOCKEY.”

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.



Crandell



Skater Jimmy Daley finds little to slow him down on the ice.

By  
Nicole  
Peradotto

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ecause teams can be coed, upright amputee hockey is played without checking. Competitors are classified according to their disability on a point system, which allows a maximum of 12 points per team on the ice during play. Some athletes play with their prosthesis, and some choose not to.

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“AT THE PUREST LEVEL, this is great competition,” says Crandell, an assistant clinical professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation and orthopaedics at Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston and an instructor at Harvard Medical School. “And if you know anything about what these athletes need to do to compete, it’s obviously even better.

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From its debut as a 10-minute exhibition skate in 1999, upright amputee hockey has blossomed into an international phenomenon, thanks in large part to Crandell. Teams currently exist in five other countries, and players have competed in three world championships. Too, the level of play—perhaps the most telling benchmark of its success—has improved dramatically.

“When we were in Lake Placid at our first training camp, we were teaching people to skate,” Crandell recalls. “To make the U.S. team right now, you have to have been playing hockey for over a decade. If you can’t play well enough to be on an able-bodied team, you’re not going to make the U.S. [amputee] team.”

By nurturing a competitive group of American players and ferreting out worthy opponents, Crandell has achieved two of his goals for the sport. Still, he won’t be satisfied until he scores a career hat trick: ushering amputee hockey into the world’s second-largest international sporting event, the Paralympics.

“I’m very passionate about this, and I think in the purest sense, it’s because I love the game,” says Crandell, adding that his wife and two daughters support his endeavor, even though it consumes so much of his free time.

“I just feel that unless I apply that same level of passion to getting this sport into the Paralympics, it won’t happen, or it won’t happen in the timeframe that some of these athletes want it or need it to.”

### 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 strolled out to the track field. What he saw forever changed 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 the courtside physician at the National Wheelchair Quadriplegic Rugby Tournament, the no-holds-

barred 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 kilometer.

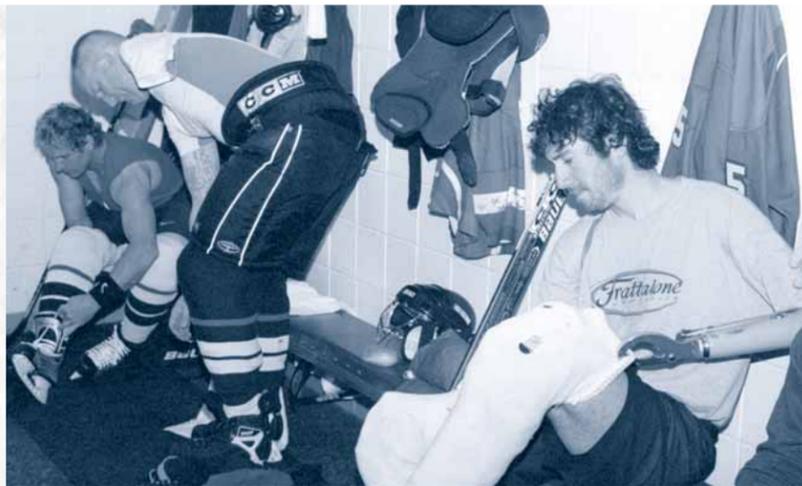
After the American racer was turned upright, he continued to the finish line, where Crandell discovered that the man had separated his shoulder. “He had raced the entire marathon like that, pushing his wheelchair with a separated shoulder. You can only imagine what every stroke must have felt like for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



**LEFT:** Suiting up, left to right, are Todd Pasick, David Goodwin and Karl Stuemke.  
**BELOW:** Karl Stuemke visiting with a child at Shriners Hospital in Minneapolis.

### A Sport Is Born

Word spread about Crandell's involvement in sled hockey. One of his former colleagues, Tufts research professor Mark Pitkin, PhD, 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 he 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 sports as a goalie for Harvard University's Division I team. But an entire team of amputee players would be a first.

"I thought there had to be more [amputees] out there playing upright hockey," Crandell says. "I had seen single-leg, below-knee amputees run the 100 in less than 12 seconds. There had to be hockey players too, right?"

In St. Petersburg, Pitkin began assembling the first-ever amputee team, consisting largely of landmine survivors injured during the Afghanistan War. Meanwhile, Crandell helped organize an exhibition skate for the St. Petersburg Elks between the second and third periods of a college hockey game in suburban Boston. Without enough

time to recruit a disabled American team, he invited an able-bodied club from the local post office to compete against the Russians.

"What people saw was this group of five Russians that had barely been skating. These guys probably had more ice time in the United States than in St. Petersburg. So they were slipping and moving kind of slowly, but it was OK," 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?"

"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-period 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 into 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 representing the U.S. during the opening ceremony—that's an experience that's reserved for an elite few. If you have a disability or an impairment, I think the experience must be that much more meaningful."

Currently, Crandell is leading a USA Hockey effort to earn the right to host the Paralympic World Hockey Championship in Massachusetts in April of 2008. "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 bent on seeing the American squad best the undefeated 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.' That's been one of the nicest things about this whole movement. We now have players from the Youth Program who are getting that opportunity to compete internationally."

Bret Chernick, one of the team's original players, never imagined that he'd play hockey after a 1998 accident left him disabled. While he was driving home from a college game he had been officiating, the Connecticut man stopped to help victims of a highway rollover accident. As he was retrieving towels from his truck to aid two bleeding men, a drunken driver hit Chernick, who had to have his left leg amputated above the knee.

Three years later, he received a call from Crandell.

Today, he's the team's head coach.

"It's been an overwhelming experience to see how people overcome their obstacles," Chernick says. "Each person has his own obstacle to overcome, and they do it because of their love of the sport. It gives the group such a strong bond because we all have that in common."

**A**S PART OF THE TEAM'S outreach efforts, Chernick and his players bring their sticks, pucks and can-do attitude to inner-city neighborhoods, where they encourage kids to try the game.

"We've done the whole thing where they come into the locker room and see the players strapping on their prosthetics and then going out and playing," Crandell says. "So the kids recognize that everyone has barriers but, when you focus on the game, and try to be the best you can be, all those things go away."

And that's no small victory. Just ask Lee Havemeier.

"I've been able to play a sport that I love and represent my country," says Havemeier, who played for the team from 2001 to 2006. "It's really something special to step out on the ice with the USA logo on your jersey."

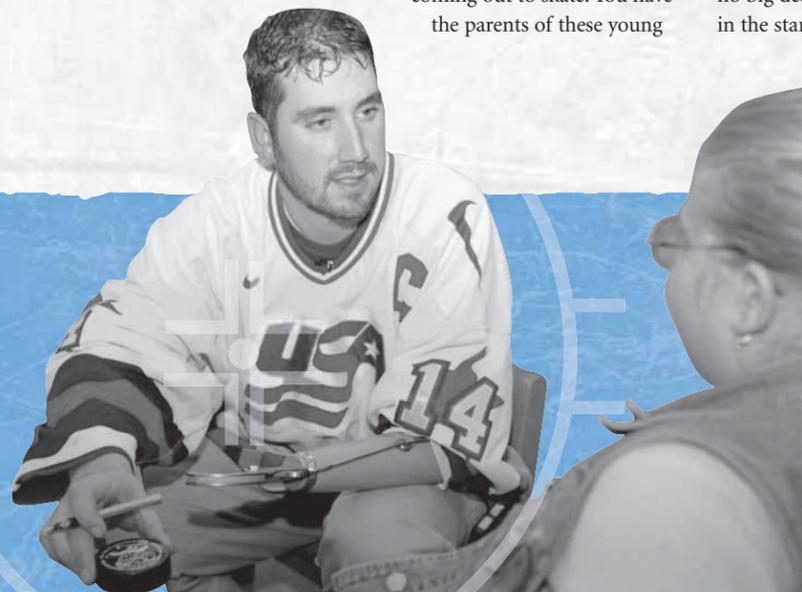
"It's the disabilities that we have that bring us all together," he adds. "At first that was a novel thing, but then it just evolved into no big deal: He's missing a leg, I'm missing a hand, but nobody in the stands notices because the equipment covers it up. We

had people coming up to us after a game asking, 'What's your disability?'"

Havemeier acknowledges that without Crandell's contributions—his time, his unflagging moral support, his generous financial donations—the American team could never have flourished.

"I've never met someone who's more passionate about something than Dr. Crandell is about this. There are a lot of unsung heroes in the organization, but it always comes back to Dr. Crandell. He's so focused and driven that it's tough to see if he's having a good time. But you can always tell because, at the end of every event, he takes out his camera. His favorite part is to see the smiling faces."

Even if they are missing a few teeth. **BP**



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