



[Newsroom Shepherd Center](#) 

Shepherd Smash Athlete Noah Smith Talks Expecting the Unexpected in Quad Rugby

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More than just a Shepherd Center activity, Shepherd Smash are the 2018 Division II National Champions and boast players with U.S. National team experience.



Every Tuesday and Thursday evening from 6 to 8 p.m., the Livingston Gym at [Shepherd Center](#), which was just moments before quiet and calm after a day full of therapy, comes alive again as practice begins. The sounds are loud, the gym gets hot and the athletes are strong. Even stronger are the friendships they form as members of the Shepherd Smash, Shepherd Center's quad rugby team.

The Shepherd Smash is just one of 12 athletic teams that are part of the [Fred, Shaler and Andrew Alias Sports Teams program](#) at Shepherd Center, a donor-funded program that enables individuals with physical disabilities to participate in sports on a recreational or competitive level.

Noah Smith, 20, plays offense in his second year on the Shepherd Smash, two years after coming to Shepherd Center for rehabilitation after sustaining a C6-C7 spinal cord on a trampoline.

"Expect the unexpected," is how Noah explains quad rugby tournaments, one of which is hosted annually at Shepherd Center. "You'll see people slamming into each other and chairs tipping over, but there's also a fluidity to it. It's quite calculating."

Watching quad rugby is nothing less than fascinating, and you don't need to be a sports fan to become engrossed in the constant action. Similar to traditional rugby, the game is a mix of passing, dribbling and crossing the goal line. It's fast-paced and hard-hitting, with intricate offensive moves and jarring defensive hits. Players use customized wheelchairs, with cambered wheels and hardware designed for offensive or defensive players. One glance at them makes the meaning of "full-contact sport" apparent. For the many adventurous, risk-taking athletes associated with Shepherd Center, it's a chance to engage in the camaraderie, athletic exertion and competitiveness they've always enjoyed.

Shepherd Smash coach and physical therapist Sarah Leonard, PT, DPT, explains the fundamentals of quad rugby, which is played internationally.

"Each athlete on the team has some impairment in all four limbs," Leonard explains. "All team members are evaluated by experts who classify them based on their abilities, assigning a point value from .5 (greatest disability) to 3.5 (least disability that still qualifies for the sport). The game is then played with four players on each team, with a maximum value of 8.0 points allowed. As the coach, it's my job to place each athlete in a role that best supports the team and maximizes his or her ability."

When Noah joined the team over a year ago, he approached the members with a great deal of earned respect. More than just a Shepherd Center activity, Shepherd Smash is the 2018 Division II National Champion and boasts players with U.S. National team experience. As the youngest player and the most recently injured athlete, he knew he had a lot to learn.

"The team welcomed me so warmly," Noah recalls. "When I was an inpatient, (coach) Sarah Leonard invited me to join, and (team members) Zach and Talbot invited me, too. A year later, when I came back to Shepherd, they invited me again."

This time, Noah took a chance.

As a second-year veteran, Noah's goals include becoming faster on the court. He'd also like to improve his knowledge of the game.

"He has a great deal of athletic ability," Leonard observes. "He's making lots of progress."

The team practices twice each week, which Noah fits into his schedule as a sophomore communications major at Kennesaw State University. To learn more about the Fred, Shaler and Andrew Alias Sports Teams program at Shepherd Center, visit [shepherd.org/sports](http://shepherd.org/sports). To make a gift, contact Courtney Harris at 404-350-3717 or [courtney.harris@shepherd.org](mailto:courtney.harris@shepherd.org).

***Written by Pamela Evans***

## **About Shepherd Center**

Shepherd Center, located in Atlanta, Georgia, is a private, not-for-profit hospital specializing in medical treatment, research and rehabilitation for people with spinal cord injury, brain injury, multiple sclerosis, spine and chronic pain, and other neuromuscular conditions. Founded in 1975, Shepherd

Center is ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* among the top 10 rehabilitation hospitals in the nation. In its more than four decades, Shepherd Center has grown from a six-bed rehabilitation unit to a world-renowned, 152-bed hospital that treats more than 935 inpatients, 541 day program patients and more than 7,300 outpatients each year.

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