



Convenience & Luxury

For the athletes who use it, the Boston Sports Institute is far more than a unique athletic facility with an accessible pool and sled hockey-ready ice rink.

by Lisa Van Loo

When Meredith Koch arrives at Boston Sports Institute (BSI) for practice a few times a week with her Paralympic swim team, she never takes for granted how easy it is for her to park, enter the building and get in the pool.

Restrooms are big and easy for her to access. Parking is abundant. And the design of the pool and its spacious deck allow swimmers who require wheelchairs to access the area with ease. For her, BSI is different.

"It's personally one of my favorite pools to swim in, and ac-

cessibility is one of the reasons," says Koch, who swims with Paralympic Sport Club Boston. "There are some pools that are super nice, but they don't have parking. Or they have parking, but you have to take two elevators to get inside. No one has time to take 15 minutes to use two elevators."

A Refuge

At BSI, a new multi-use fitness facility in the Boston suburb of Wellesley, Mass., accessibility was clearly top of mind when it came to design, most notably with its pool and a fully sled hockey-compatible indoor ice rink.

ILLUSTRATION BY KERRY RANDOLPH
PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY COURTESY OF ALISON KIDDER





COURTESY OF ALISON KIDDER



COURTESY OF NORTHEAST SLED HOCKEY LEAGUE

Boston Sports Institute, a multi-use fitness facility in the Boston suburb of Wellesley, Mass., features a NHL regulation sled hockey accessible rink.

The \$23.3 million, 130,000-square-foot, mixed-use recreation facility constructed by the Dacon Corporation and managed by the Edge Sports Group has six athletics venues. BSI features two NHL-sized hockey rinks, including the sled hockey accessible east rink, a suspended track, indoor synthetic turf field, therapy pool and an accessible 25-yard competitive pool.

For Koch, who has lived with incomplete paraplegia since a piano fell on her in 2015, the pool is a refuge. It does have a lift, a common accessibility feature at many swim facilities, but with the way the pool is designed, Koch doesn't need to use it. She's not really fond of lifts anyway, because technical difficulties or personnel shortages could make using it challenging. So, she'd rather be able to get in and out of a pool on her own.

And, at BSI, she can. Thanks to the absence of a lip on the pool's perimeter, she can wheel her chair right to the edge of the blocks and climb in herself.

Swimmers' guide and support dogs have room to relax, and Koch's teammates who use prosthetics and crutches don't have to worry as much about

slipping on the pool deck's unusually grippy surface. It's those mindful courtesies that Koch says set BSI apart. More often, those types of conveniences seem to be overlooked.

"People don't think of things because they don't need it or it doesn't apply to them," she says.

A Luxury

Brian Bardell, a member of the Boston ICE Storm sled hockey team, can relate. He appreciates BSI for all the little things that add up, one being the fact that he can sit on a deep bench in the locker room to prepare for a game.

Bardell, who lost his left leg to cancer in 2015, says in other facilities he's sometimes forced to change on the floor because the shallow benches don't provide much space for him to balance.

"Normally, benches are right against the walls to maximize floor space. For some disabilities, this makes changing very difficult," says Bardell, 41, of Northbridge, Mass. "For someone with, say one leg,

COURTESY OF ALISON KIDDER



“Most folks [playing] are not able to walk, so they’re in those sleds, strapped in. So, you can’t walk onto the ice. You have to push yourself. If it’s level to the ground, it’s easier for the players to get on the ice.” — Mike Ciavarro

if they are putting on their sock or boot, they don’t have a second leg to balance on. If the bench is narrow and against the wall, they can’t lean back for balance and usually end up on the floor to change. Have you seen the floors of most locker rooms?”

Bardell also appreciates the accessible height of locker room wall hooks, which are reachable from a seated position, and the space the BSI locker room allows for wheelchairs to easily navigate and turn around. It’s a rarity.

“Nearly every rink we play at is not very accessible, so we are quite used to cramming into small rooms, playing Tetris with equipment and wheelchairs, changing on floors and maneuvering bathrooms that aren’t the safest,” Bardell says. “We are always adapting to our environment, and we always

do this with a smile because we are just happy to get on the ice. So for us, BSI is a luxury.”

Those subtle luxuries extend to the actual ice rink, too. Mike Ciavarro, president and commissioner of the Northeast Sled Hockey League, says most often, the teams and players in the league need to adapt to the rinks instead of the rinks offering adaptive features for them. But BSI is different.

Most notably, the BSI rink includes an accessible bench. Traditional rinks utilize a recessed bench, set off the ice and protected by a half-wall, so players can drop into the game by scaling the wall. To exit the ice, players would need to step over a lip that separates the ice from the bench.

It makes it challenging, if not impossible, for those strapped into sleds.



PHOTOS THIS PAGE COURTESY OF ALISON KIDDER

The Boston Sports Institute pools have wide decks, above, to accommodate wheelchairs and pool lifts, left.



BSI is one of only a handful of sled hockey accessible rinks in the northeastern United States. When the teams in Ciavarro's league play at non-accessible rinks, they use a portion of the ice as their quasi-bench, leaving players exposed to an ongoing game and removing a portion of the boards from play. An accessible bench, like the one at BSI, changes all that.

"Now, you have the whole sheet of ice available to you as a player," Ciavarro says. "Overall, it's a better situation because you have the players behind the boards, and it's also a little safer."

The BSI rink separates players on the bench from the ice with a clear sheet of plexiglass, so those players can still see the game from a seated position. While Ciavarro says that setup dulls the sounds on the ice, he conceded it's a small trade-off for safety and better accessibility. And the ease of entering and exiting the ice, on level ground, is priceless.

"Most folks [playing] are not able to walk, so they're in those sleds, strapped in. So, you can't walk onto the ice. You have to push yourself," Ciavarro says. "If it's level to the ground, it's easier for the players to get on the ice."



Boston Sports Institute's amenities include an indoor synthetic turf field.

As a player, Bardell says he finds it dangerous to play at rinks that don't offer accessible benches, as players charge to clear a puck or hope to use the boards for a solid bounce. Measured as a whole, Bardell says the thought and planning that went into the bathrooms, the space, the hooks, the bench's height and the accessible entry add real value to the experience at BSI.

No Assistance Needed

Koch feels the same way. She never considered competitive swimming until she experienced what the water did for her paralysis while recovering in a rehabilitation facility after her injury.

She readily admits she doesn't have decades of experience to compare notes on multiple facilities, but as someone who uses a wheelchair to get around, she now looks at the world with a different eye.

Koch notices curbs that box her in while parking. She sees when doors don't open with a button. Koch figures out how to reach items from a high shelf

when no one is around to help. She makes things happen for herself — a lot — because she must.

At BSI, Koch doesn't have to as much. And for her, that's a welcome favor. Just as her Paralympic teammates understand each other's unique needs and nuances, so, too, does BSI.

And that's a good thing, especially for Koch, who visits the facility several times a week, putting in 2,700 yards in the pool each go. The water is one place her body doesn't need assistance in order to perform.

"That was where my body was able to function as it had been used to, as opposed to learning something new. It finally felt like something recognizable," Koch says of swimming. "It's the only sport I do where I don't need an outside device."

For more information, visit bostonsportsinstitute.com.

S'NS