



Hit the Wall

Antonio Ramunno was simply trying to find a way to exercise and improve his own independence and health after his SCI. But his inspired innovation, Wallgym, might be a game changer for any wheelchair user seeking a home-based way of getting in better shape.

ANTONIO RAMUNNO HAS ALWAYS BEEN A HANDS-ON GUY.

Up until four years ago, the 50-year-old father of four ran his own roofing and siding company in his hometown of Kamloops. When he wasn't up a ladder or on a roof, he could often be found tinkering in his garage. In short, he was used to solving his own problems with ingenuity and hard work long before the 2014 motorcycle accident that left him with C5 quadriplegia, so it was only natural that he solved one of his most pressing post-injury dilemmas in exactly the same way.

Ramunno spent a total of about one year in hospital and rehab. In that time, he became convinced that the key to maximizing his abilities and independence lay in exercise—nothing else was more important in his quest to regain range of motion and strength. He made the most of his time with GF Strong's physiotherapy staff, working with therabands (resistance training) and other accessible fitness equipment.

Back in Kamloops, he quickly discovered that continuing his exercise regimen

wasn't going to be easy. His funding coverage for physiotherapy ran out, and when he started to investigate accessible, assistive workout options at Kamloops-area fitness facilities, he struck out.

He then considered the idea of working out at home. But again, he hit a dead end.

"I needed gym equipment to get better but just couldn't afford it," says Ramunno. "But even if I could afford it, all I could find were huge machines that I just didn't have space for."

And that's when he hatched the idea for a wall-mounted gym station that would take up little room and be entirely usable without him needing to transfer out of his wheelchair. Back in rehab, staff would stand behind him and hold his resistance bands while he would stretch them in front of him. He began to envision a way of hooking the bands to the wall so he could use them independently.

His first attempt was simple—basically, hooks mounted to a board that was screwed to the wall.

"It was very simple," he says. "But then I started to add things to make it

more complex. Over the period of one year, with the help of my family, I slowly expanded my initial concept and built my first prototype. That gym is in my bedroom, and I still use it all the time."

People around Ramunno—his family and friends—began to take notice.

"Everyone kept telling me that I was on to something," he says. "So I got back to work and built two more refined versions—one was ordered by a local gym, and another one I donated to our local YMCA, which provided so much support for me when I was struggling to keep exercising and maintain my strength and range of motion."

By this point, Ramunno's brainchild had morphed from its humble beginnings into a polished piece of exercise kit—a one by two meter panel that mounts with lag bolts to the studs of a wall. The system, which has since been dubbed Wallgym by Ramunno, is thoughtfully laid out with eye bolts to anchor various tensions of therabands. In turn, the therabands attach to a variety of handle grips and bars. The system also includes



hand weights, a hand strengthener, an accessory panel, Bluetooth speakers, leg bands and ankle straps.

"I can literally exercise every muscle group in my body on Wallgym," says Ramunno. "I know it's given me more mobility and strength in my arms, and improved my ability to walk with a walker. For sure, it has totally improved my confidence. But it's not just for me—I designed it so it could be used by people with a wide range of requirements and disabilities."

Positive feedback continued to roll in, and it dawned on Ramunno that he might have a commercially viable product. He applied to Community Futures Thompson Country for assistance in developing a business plan. He was quickly approved by the community-based organization, which is funded by the federal and provincial governments in order to support entrepreneurs, business owners and job seekers.

With a completed business plan in place, he moved the production of the

Wallgym out of his mother's home, leasing a commercial space in Kamloop's North Shore business area.

Today, he's hard at work, ramping up production and getting prepared to officially launch sales. Wallgym continues to receive plenty of media interest, and Ramunno is already fielding queries from Peers, including several Paralympic athletes. He's looking into advertising, and recently launched a company website (www.wallgym.ca).

At the time of writing, he hadn't quite dialed in a price, but he hopes to offer Wallgyms for about \$1,200, with an option to discount to under \$1,000 for any Peer who can demonstrate financial hardship.

For the moment, he's juggling all aspects of the business himself, including building the actual product, which he says will continue to evolve.

"It's just the beginning; I have many more ideas," he says. "It will always be changing and advancing. As for assistance, I know at some point that I will have

to hire more workers and move into a bigger facility when demands increase."

Commercial success is the priority, but it's far from the only end game—simply refining the concept and being back at work full-time has been remarkable therapy for Ramunno, who admits he struggled at times in the early days after his accident. Not surprisingly, he's grateful to those who have helped him along the road.

"I would like to thank my immediate family for supporting me, and in particular, I'd like to thank my mom because she supported me through it all by letting me turn her living room into a construction site to start it all off—I literally turned it into a wood working shop! I would also like to thank GF Strong staff for their unbelievable care and dedication, and the tools they sent me home with to further my recovery. And I would also like to thank WorkBC and Community Futures for all the help they gave me."

Visit www.wallgym.ca to learn more and see more photos. ■

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