



WATCHING: Conner Tinsley of Longview watches people fishing at Sports Fest. (Staff Photo By: Tom Worner)



Maddie, who was born with cerebral palsy, does not speak and uses a wheelchair, but Saturday at the third annual East Texas Sports Fest for people with disabilities, there seemed to be nothing she could not do, including water ski. "She's a very fun-loving kid," said her dad, Ladd Sheets, of Kilgore. "She's very strong." After their adventure around the lake on a special water ski, Sheets said Maddie "loves the bumps." "It's fun for me, too," he said. "Anything that makes her smile is great."

The sky is the limit at the annual sports fest hosted by People on Wheels Encouraging Responsibility Inc., based in Longview. Anything from kayaking to handcycling to horseback riding and fishing was made possible for people of all ages with disabilities. Professional adaptive recreation service providers were on hand, including Houston-based Texas Adaptive Aquatics, the Gulf Coast chapter of Turning POINT and Catch a Special Thrill for Kids.

Judie Moffett, POWER president and co-founder, said organizers expected at least 300 participants and spectators to come out. "This year, I'm seeing a lot of new faces, especially children," Ms. Moffett said. "That's what makes me absolutely thrilled." She said that when children or adults with disabilities have the chance to experience activities such as the ones at the sports fest, "it can change their life." "Kids need to know they can still go fishing," she said. "They can ride a bike with friends. It's just a different kind of bike. "We are concentrating on giving people the opportunity to see what they are capable of."

A car accident in May left Heather Oxford, 20, of Tyler, paralyzed and she now uses a wheelchair to get around. While she was in the hospital, her mom said she was upset at the thought of never riding a horse again. But those worries were squashed Saturday after Heather rode a horse and was able to feel "freedom" again, she said. "It makes me realize I can do a lot of things I thought I couldn't," Ms. Oxford said. Her mom said it is also nice for Heather to see other people in wheelchairs like her, who "go on with their daily lives."

Tim Giroux (right), of Flint, was a Green Beret injured in a 1995 military free-fall accident in the Middle East. After seeing a quadriplegic man water ski in Alabama, he realized there was more he could do than he originally thought. "That's what opened my eyes - an event just like this," he said.

Water skiing in particular is an activity that had a lot of participants. It makes you feel empowered and reminds you can do anything you set your mind to," said Linda Arnold, of Henderson, a POWER co-founder. Ms. Arnold, who frequently water skis, said the first time she tried it after her injury changed her whole way of thinking. "That's what opened my eyes that I was still alive," she said. "You can't imagine." When asked to describe what it felt like, she said, "Freedom."

Ms. Moffett, who was injured in a car accident when she was in her 20s, said POWER is an organization designed to help enable independence. She said with limited funds, the organization donates wheelchairs to people in financial need, provides ramps and other medical equipment. The group also tries to get recently injured people information on how to find a wheelchair and modify vehicles, as well as share resources about what is possible after an injury. They work "to get people out and about and be active," she said. "It's all about a healthy mind, body and soul." She hopes more people will find out about the sports fest. There are plans to bring inspirational speakers next year and a hot-air balloon designed for people who use wheelchairs. "It's just going to keep on getting bigger," she said.

