

# WHEELCHAIR GAMES ATHLETES SAY EVENTS OPEN UP OPPORTUNITIES

By: MEGAN MIDDLETON, Staff Writer



**AND THEY'RE OFF:** Linda Arnold (left) hitches a ride from Michael Carpenter back to the start line after a 50-meter race at the 6th annual East Texas Wheelchair Games on Saturday at the Robert E. Lee High School practice field. (Staff Photo By Tom Worner)

After watching a quadriplegic man compete at a water skiing event several years ago, Tim Giroux of Flint knew there were very few limits to what he could do.

"That was the big event for me that opened my eyes," said Giroux, who has a spinal cord injury and uses a wheelchair. "I realized I can still do just about anything I really want to." And it seems he does.

The 34-year-old recently returned from snow skiing in Aspen.

"I'm on the go every day," he said.

Giroux was among 20 to 30 people who gathered this weekend to compete in the sixth annual East Texas Wheelchair Games in Tyler. Participants came from across East Texas and Dallas.

With a loud pop of the gun, the wheelchair races began Saturday for manual and electric chairs. Participants also competed in a variety of track and field events, including discus, shot put and hand cycling.

But the competition in these games is not nearly as important as the camaraderie, organizers said.

John Mitchell, the president of East Texas Wheelers and Walkers, an event sponsor, said the purpose of the event is to

allow those with injuries to meet others and exercise their competitive spirit.

He said for those who have been recently injured, the games offer a chance to stay active.

"This gives tho□

ell said.

Giroux, a member of the East Texas Wheelers and Walkers board, was a Green Beret injured in a 1995 military free-fall accident in the Middle East.

Although he said he was "down on it" for the first year or two after the accident, it was attending the water skiing event in Alabama that impressed him and raised his spirits.

In a similar situation, Judie Moffett, a 34-year-old Longview woman who was injured in a motor vehicle accident when she was 25, was motivated by others she met in wheelchairs.

"I met all these people in chairs, and it just opened my eyes," said Ms. Moffett, a paraplegic. "I realized there's things we can do - we just do it in a different way."

Shortly after her accident, she said she didn't see a lot of people her age in wheelchairs. She said she also questioned how good a mother she would be in a wheelchair.

But her physical therapist introduced her to a man her age who showed her how he exercised and how he drove a car.

"That changed it," she said, adding she realized she could do anything she put her mind to.

It was then she thought about creating a support group.

"I knew he couldn't be the only other guy in East Texas in a chair," she said.

Ms. Moffett helped found a Longview organization called POWER Inc., or People on Whe-els Encouraging Responsibility.

"It's all in the attitude," she said. "How would I have ever met anybody if I'd been sitting in the house all day?"

Ken Dugger, 51, of Quitman, who was in a motorcycle accident in 1988, stays active with hunting and fishing trips as part of his association with the Texarkana Challenged Outdoorsmen.

Soon after his accide□

people who use wheelchairs.

"A lot of people don't have anything to participate in," Dugger said. "If they've got stuff like this going on, they have something to look forward to. If people would get out and get involved, it would be a different world for them.

"This kind of stuff will change their lives."

A member of Longview's POWER group, Michael Carpen-ter of Gilmer, who has used a wheelchair for 23 years, said he loves talking to people and telling his story in hopes of motivating them.

When he was 18, he lifted a 25-pound load at work, causing a hemorrhage in his spinal cord, he said.

"You go on with life," Carpenter, 42, said. "You can't complain about everything. If everybody complained about everything, nobody would smile. You give somebody a smile, and they turn around and give you a smile, and that gives you a nice feeling in your heart.

"You have to have a good attitude."

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Enthusiastic during the competition, Powell said he was having fun - the same kind he would have competing in a race on foot.

"The excitement is very real," he said. "I love to compete. Just because I have physical problems doesn't mean the thrill to compete has left my body."

The games are open to middle school and high school students as well as adults. Other sponsors for the event were the city's parks and recreation department, Holister, Texas Paralyzed Veterans' Association, Lone Star Paralyzed Veterans' Association, Pinewood Mobility, Custom Care Bracing, East Texas Medical Center and HealthSouth.