

A&M graduate races in wheelchair

By Ron Pippin
Reporter

Sam George has put many miles in his wheelchair, and at the age of 31, he intends to run the tread off of any tire before he's finished. George, a father of three and grandfather of four, has been racing wheelchair for more than four years. George received his master's degree in educational psychology from Texas A&M in 1978. He has competed in five and ten kilometer races, and even 26 mile marathons. He's been the Austin Marathon champion twice, with a best time of 1:44. He's also won over 13 trophies in races in Bryan-College Station, Houston and Dallas. He says there are approximately 200 wheelchair racers in Texas. "All but three of the races were no competition," George said with a sigh. "By the way, I always try to wear an A&M outfit when I race. Everyone watching seems to get a kick out of it." George said he became involved in wheelchair racing after a friend of his, former Texas A&M student Jim Megladenski, let him take a ride in a customized racing chair. "I rode Jim's chair once around Kyle Field," George says. "Once I got going I'd never had such a neat thrill. It was a real kick to make a chair go that fast. I've been hooked ever since." George likes to train in the evenings, and said he rides about 50 miles per week. "I like to go around the baseball field and freshman parking lot," he

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says. "All the lady Aggies practicing softball and the bus maintenance crews have become friendly with me. They all know me. The bus drivers will not run over me."

George readily admits his strengths and weaknesses.

"I know my coat size has increased over time," he says. "I'm no arm wrestler, and there are a lot of guys out there who can roll a chair longer than me, but not many grandfathers."

George said wheelchair racing requires a special chair — one that weighs less and tracks better than a standard chair. For instance, his standard chair weighs 60 pounds, and is one of the sturdiest chairs available. His racing chair, however, weighs 15 pounds and is more aerodynamic.

He said two engineering students are designing a more sophisticated chair for him as a class project.

"They're going to design a chair with a hand brake that stops both wheels," George said.

The idea came about following last year's Boston Marathon, when one racer was seriously injured.

"The racer had to brake hard," George said. "Because of the single

brake and wet pavement, one wheel slid while the other locked up, tossing the man from the chair and messing him up pretty bad."

George feels the new brake system will alleviate a lot of injuries.

Wheelchair racing has become a big money-maker and most racers are customizing their own chairs, he said.

"Some of the more high-tech chairs may cost between \$2,800-\$3,000," George said. "It's become a booming business — sports and sports equipment for the disabled."

Although there are more sports and competitive opportunities available for the disabled today than in the past, George doesn't feel there is enough participation at A&M.

"Back in 1980 or '81, Megladenski and I set up the Association of Handicapped Athletes," he said. "We had about 10 guys show up and we played wheelchair basketball in DeWare for a while. But, people quit coming and it sort of fizzled out."

Last spring he and Megladenski composed a list of 80 disabled people in the area and sent letters to each of them encouraging participation in organized sports—archery, tennis, bowling and basketball. Only

two of the 80 people responded. "I wish we could get more people involved in athletics for the disabled," George said. "But, it's going to have to be done by the students. We also need more interest from the people of the community."

Recently, George and the Texas Games' Committee contacted 17 wheelchair basketball teams across the state, trying to get at least eight to participate in a tournament. Only two teams responded, so wheelchair basketball was canceled.

"I don't understand it," George said. "We were all very enthusiastic about the tournament here. I guess people have other things they would rather be doing."

George works as the division manager for the Bryan-College Station branch of Goodwill, which opened in Bryan in May.

"We're doing good things here," he said. "We have 11 employees. Out of 11, only three are non-disabled. We're here to serve the disabled, mostly through offering job opportunities. As we grow we will make more services available for the handicapped."

Although George keeps busy with the Goodwill program, he intends to increase his training in the future.

"It's every racer's dream to go to Boston," George said. "I'll need a 2:20 to qualify. Hopefully when I get my new chair I can get serious about it (Boston). My times keep dropping. Who knows?"

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