

Competitor fueled by anger

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Wharf to Wharf



Jerry Deets, working out on West Cliff Drive in Santa Cruz, wants to be in on the prize money that goes to Wharf-to-Wharf runners.

JUDITH CALSON — MERCURY NEWS

Lack of prize money irks wheelchair racer

BY LEE QUARNSTROM
Mercury News Staff Writer

After threatening to take first-place money by outpacing all runners in the upcoming Wharf-to-Wharf race in Santa Cruz, wheelchair competitor Jerry Deets says the event's organizers "have only tossed us a bone" by creating a category for contestants in wheelchairs — with no prize money attached.

"They did as little for us as they could possibly do," complains Deets, 42. He was talking about plans to have an "elite," or professional wheelchair-racer division on an exhibition basis during the July 26 event. The race follows a six-mile course from the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf to the Capitola wharf.

Winners of the elite running division will

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split a \$20,000 pot. First-place male and female finishers will each take home \$5,000, second-place runners, \$3,000, and the third-place man and woman, \$1,000 apiece. The top local finishers, man and woman, will each get \$1,000.

Deets, who lives in Santa Cruz and makes his living as a wheelchair racer, thinks he and other wheelchair racers deserve a crack at the prize money in the Wharf-to-Wharf.

"Every big-time race in the world has a chair division" with cash prizes for top finishers, he says.

But Wharf-to-Wharf organizers, says Deets, "don't encourage chairs, and chairs don't come here."

Deets' threat to enter the "open" division, and compete for the cash, prodded race officials to create the wheelchair division.

"We're going to do it on a trial basis, like they do with a new event in the Olympics," says Kirby Nicol, director of the annual Santa Cruz-to-Capitola race. "Then we'll consider incorporating it into our total format in years to come."

Deets, a paraplegic who has been racing

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for almost nine years and whose sponsors include a Milpitas vitamin company, a Berkeley manufacturer of a "sports nutrition bar," a Morgan Hill bike-component firm and the Washington company that made his racing chair, says he has never moped about being disabled.

"I never thought about what I couldn't do," he says. "I've just thought about what I could do."

Deets believes that, with his

lightweight steel racing wheelchair, he could easily have finished first among the 12,000 entrants in this year's Wharf-to-Wharf — and claimed the \$5,000 prize.

Nicol points out that "in our 20-year history we've always welcomed disadvantaged athletes of all varieties and there have almost always been wheelchair racers." This is the first time elite wheelchair racers will be able to compete against one another.

Nicol makes a distinction between racers such as Deets and

slower "wheelchair joggers" who, he says, will start this year's event at the back of the pack, with runners pushing their babies in strollers and other devices with wheels.

Nicol agrees that Deets could have finished first, were there no wheelchair division.

"In an event like this," he says, "the 'disadvantaged' have an enormous advantage."

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

The Wharf-to-Wharf race gets under way at 8:30 a.m. July 26.