



Jerry Deetz
lobbied
for a
wheelchair
division

Chairs wheel into race

Wharf To Wharf makes it official

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SANTA CRUZ — The race hasn't been run yet, but wheelchair athletes claimed victory Thursday.

Wharf To Wharf Race officials bowed to pressure from wheelchair athletes, one in particular, and established an "exhibition wheelchair competition" for the 20th edition of the race July 26.

It's the first time a division for wheelchair athletes has been organized for the popular Santa Cruz-to-Capitola road race. Wheelchair athletes, however, have participated nearly every year without a division.

"What we're trying to do is follow the Olympic model," said Kirby Nicol, the race director. "We're looking at a new event and running it one time as an exhibition event to see how it goes."

Nicol said there is no guarantee the wheelchair division will continue in the future. "But we hope to learn enough from the experience ... this year to incorporate a pro wheelchair athlete division in years to come," he said.

Marty Ball, a member of the National Wheelchair Athletes Hall of Fame who lives in Corralitos, has been enlisted to coordinate the wheelchair portion of the race. It will feature up to 10 racers, both men and women. No prize money will be awarded to the winner of the wheelchair division. A commemorative medal will be given to each wheelchair participant.

A \$5,000 prize will be paid to men's and women's open division winners. Jerry Deets, a local world-class wheelchair racer, had threat-

Please see RACE — A3

Race

Continued from Page A1

ened to claim the top prize if Wharf To Wharf did not establish a chair division. Deets has covered the 6-mile course two minutes faster than the course record for runners. That turned out to be the leverage necessary to force the change to include a chair division.

"When the money popped in, the leverage happened," said Deets, speaking from Bloomington, Minn., where he is preparing for a race. "I had the leverage and I used it. We won one and that's important."

Deets, a Santa Cruz resident, said he felt bittersweet about the outcome because the wheelchair division will not include prize money, and is being run on a trial basis. "I'm a little bothered by that designation," he said. "But I think we can show we belong. If this is how we have to do it, then that's fine."

Ball, also in Minnesota for the Kaiser Roll race, felt the decision by Wharf To Wharf is a positive first step.

"This year, we have to prove ourselves and we're willing to do that," said the 55-year-old Ball, who has been an advocate for wheelchair racing for many years. "What the (race committee) has shown me is they're open-minded enough that in the future we can talk about making it bigger and better."

Wheelchair racers will start before the rest of the field and finish far ahead of the rest of the pack. They will complete the entire course, including the downhill grade into Capitola, which Nicol said was a major point of safety.

"I've seen wheelchairs go down hills steeper than I would care to run down," said Gary Goettelmann, a local running coach who helped mediate the controversy between the race committee and Deets. "These guys are pros. They are physically capable. Their arms are stronger than most people's legs. They are not a threat. Nothing but an asset."

In addition to the demonstration wheelchair race, the Wharf To Wharf committee also formed a task force to explore other options for disabled athletes in the future, including blind and hearing-impaired athletes.

Deets and Ball proved to be a formidable team in securing a chair division, something that has been proposed in the past but never carried through. Deets was the proverbial squeaky wheel in search of oil, while Ball played the role of diplomat.

"Jerry told them, 'if you're not going to have a division for chairs then I'm forced to compete in the open division and I have to go against runners,'" said Ball. "They were reluctant to create a division but the money forced them. They finally realized it had to be that way."

"Jerry and I and most of the other guys will show that we're interested in promoting the sport and watching it grow. We want to be accepted as athletes. We don't want to be seen as tokens."

Deets, who has battled with Wharf To Wharf for six years, said, "I think Kirby and everybody else will see that this is a sport and it's safe and it's important."

He added: "Hopefully, nobody will crash."