

Wharf to Wharf 29-92

# Chairs wheel to a victory

## Disabled athletes garner place in Wharf race history

By JOHN ROBINSON  
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CAPITOLA — It took threats of lawsuits, heated meetings and claims on money, but Jerry Deets and his fellow wheelchair athletes rolled in their own competition Sunday morning at the 20th annual Wharf To Wharf Race.

Deets didn't win, but the victory was his to savor quietly afterward.

"We did exactly what we set out to do," Deets said. "We proved the course was safe."

At the post-race awards ceremony, race official Ken Thomas said the wheelchair competition will be back next year, "bigger and better."

It was a bittersweet victory for Deets, a professional wheelchair racer, who became the center of controversy last month when he told race officials he was going to compete for the \$5,000 first prize.

The goal was to force the race to open a wheelchair division and race officials were none too happy.

It was viewed by some as an affront to the tradition of the race, which for 19 years stuck to its policy of not offering a wheelchair division, or any other age-group or specialty divisions.

Race officials said Deets had no right to the prize money because racing in a wheelchair gave him an unfair advantage over other entrants.

They also claimed the course was too dangerous for wheelchairs because of the steep hill that marks the finish, as Opal Cliff Drive drops into Capitola.

But Deets wouldn't go away, and backed up his claim with threats of lawsuits.

It was a matter of respect, and of recognizing the wheelchair athletes as real athletes, according to Deets. Race officials compromised by offering an "exhibition wheelchair competition," without prize money.

■ *Aguta, Galliamova set footrace records — B1*

"It never should have happened," Deets said of the struggle. "I understand they had a race for 20 years and it is hard to change. But society has changed and they have to change with it."

Deets, with fellow professional wheelchair racer Marty Ball of Corralitos, set out to make the first wheelchair competition a race to remember as they called in top professionals from as far as Wyoming. The field featured eight wheelchair athletes.

The wheelchair race was won by Scott Parsons, 33, of Santa Barbara, who left the field behind. He opened up a half-mile lead by the finish, covering the 6-mile course in 25 minutes and 1 second, a pace of 4:15 a mile.

Footrace winner Lameck Aguta of Kenya set a course record with his time of 26 minutes, 42 seconds.

Next year, Deets and Ball want to see more wheelchair athletes, prize money and their race made an official division of the Wharf To Wharf.

Ball, 54, a member of the national Wheelchair Athletes Hall of Fame, indicated that potential sponsors are lined up for next year to offer prize money. He also said he would be willing to serve as official coordinator of the wheelchair division.

The top wheelchair finishers, after Parsons, were Taylor Carey, 40, of Sacramento (26:13) and Scott Mobley, 25, of Bakersfield (also 26:13). Ball was fourth (27:46) with Deets fifth (28:05), and Peter Brookes, 37, of Santa Barbara sixth (29:15). Hendrix, 32, was seventh, setting the women's course record at 31:29, with Emily Ball, 33, of Corralitos, next (34:00).