

Chair no overwhelming barrier to '300 Club'

By Sherri Israel

Robert Ross wants to lift 300 pounds.

What would be a difficult goal at best for most people might seem impossible for Robert, who spends each day in a wheelchair.

"I'm gonna do it, too!" Robert shouted with a laugh. He plans to be the first person in a wheelchair to be admitted to the football team's elite "300 Club," for which he must lift 300 pounds. As a member of UTA's wheelchair basketball team, Ross and others have turned weight-lifting from a friendly competition to a personal challenge.

Heads turned in the lobby of the Fine Arts Building to look at the hand-

some 22-year-old with long blond hair. He popped a wheelie in his chair and waved to a girl in the hall.

"I met her at my last party. Man, I get some strange reactions to my chair at some of these parties. One guy stared at me for a long time, then said 'man, are you really in that chair?' Well, I just lifted myself up on the arms of my chair and said 'no, man. I just do this to get girls!'"

Ross' room is cluttered with gold medals and trophies he won running track in high school. He was voted "Most Athletic Boy" his senior year at Haltom, and received a football scholarship to Eastern New Mexico University.

What seemed an excellent chance for

a career in motocross racing presented itself when Ross entered in two races and won first and second place. Before the third race, however, he had an accident on his motorcycle and lost the use of both his legs.

"Bob really didn't want to ride that day," said Ross' friend Rhonda Fischer, "but his friend had a new cycle and he wanted Bob to go with him to try it out. They were riding on some trails near his house, trails that he had ridden a lot before. Bob hit a water meter and . . . that was it."

"I can remember the first time I woke up and I wasn't under any of the anesthetic," Ross said slowly. "I looked at my dad and said 'my legs are my life, Dad. I just blew my life.'"

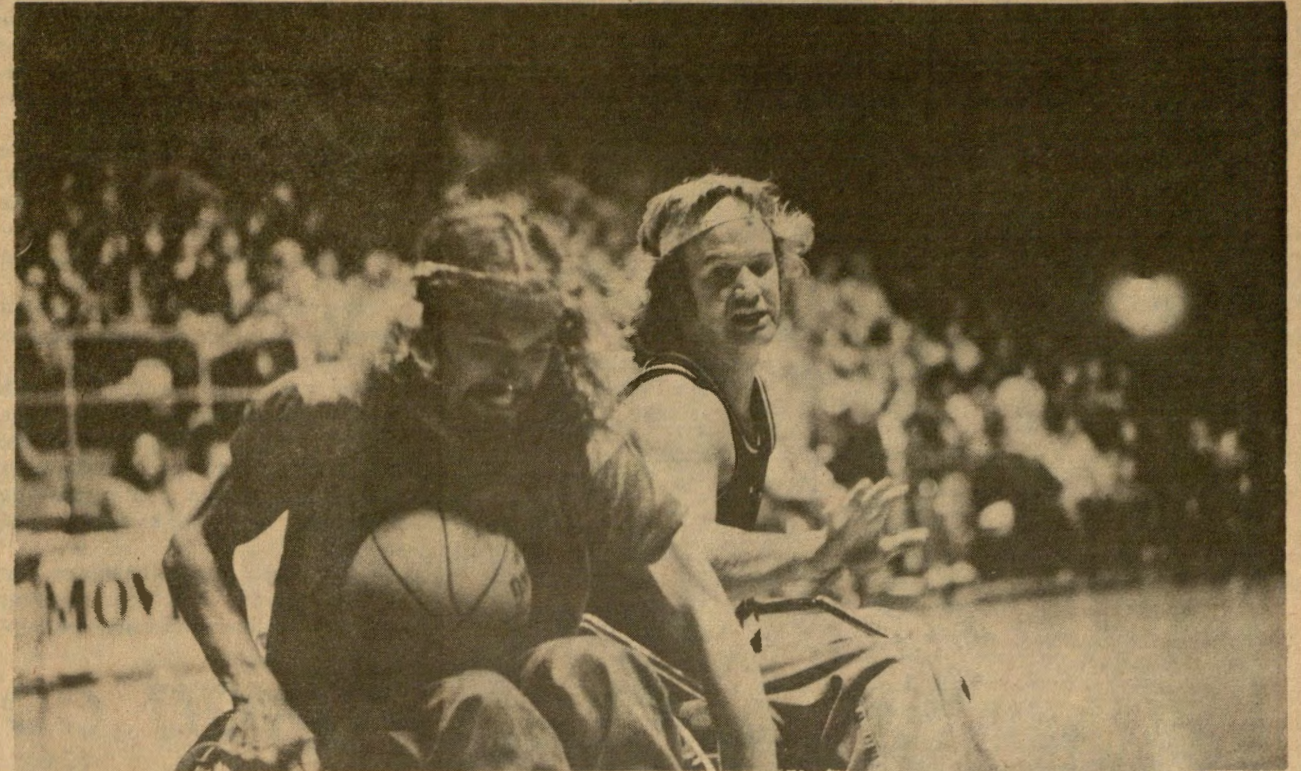
He paused. "My dad called my coach, and they along with my mother were the ones who kept me going those first few weeks. My coach, Joe Bob Tyler, kept telling me, 'you gotta go for those two extra yards, Ross.' I couldn't have made it without them."

Ross was sent to a rehabilitation center on the Gulf Coast for four months of therapy. It was there his outlook on his handicap changed.

"There was a little kid at the rehab center who was dying from some blood disease. He had to walk around and carry his plasma bag to stay alive. Doctors had predicted he would die within a certain time."

Ross cleared his throat. "Well, this little kid — I guess he was about 10 years old — he came up to me in this little park at the center and said 'hey man, did you play football?'"

"I told him yeah, and then he said 'were you any good?' I thought about it a minute and said 'yeah, I guess I was since I played in college.' Then this kid looked in my eyes and said 'what's it like?'"



TRAVELING . . . Robert Ross, right, goes for the ball

Shorthorn: Reba Owen

A silent minute passed before Ross continued. "It dawned on me that he would never have the chance to play football or any other game like normal kids. So I tried to explain how you line up the ball and try to move it to the other end without letting the other team get it away from you."

"But I was shaking all over because it hit me that I was pretty damned lucky to have had the chance to play before my accident. You know, I'm not a Jesus freak or anything like that, but now I realize that I was given a chance, and this little kid was the one

who made me realize that."

When Ross returned to school, he changed his major from wildlife conservation to architecture.

"Seems like being a forest ranger would be about the best job in the world. They give you a home up on a mountain all by yourself. I'd love that."

Playing on the wheelchair basketball team and lifting weights are not the only sports in which Ross excels. He is the quarterback on a neighborhood touch football team. His passing game is better than most because "I work

out so much with my arms to keep in shape." He's picked up some pointers from the varsity who work out down the block from where he lives.

"It doesn't bother me to watch them work out — not a bit," he said.

That leads one to wonder what does bother Ross.

"It makes me mad when people think I can't do as good a job as someone else just because I'm in a wheelchair. I'm going to be an architect and a damned good one, too."

"But first I'm gonna get in the 300 Club."