

# 'Wheelers officially recognized

by Brett Voss

Shorthorn Staff

The Athletic Council officially recognized the Freewheelers as athletes, voting unanimously in a Sept. 21 meeting to give letter awards to wheelchair athletes in basketball, track and field.

"It may be a little late in coming considering their athletic accomplishments to date, but this is certainly a nice thing for them," Athletic Director Bill Reeves said Tuesday.

Although the honor seems belated, Jim Hayes, director of handicapped services, was ecstatic.

"This is a major step," Hayes said. "This is history. UTA is the first school in Texas to do this."

During the meeting, the council drew

up four conditions the wheelchair athletes must fulfill to letter. They must meet all NCAA regulations, meet specific criteria drawn up by handicapped services, pay the cost of the award from the handicapped services budget, and adhere to the awards policy of the athletic department.

To meet NCAA track and field regulations, an individual must meet national qualifying standards in two National Wheelchair Athletic Association sanctioned events, or place in the top three in two events. Basketball players must appear in 80 percent of the scheduled games.

The council also asked Hayes to draw up specific criteria for qualification in wheelchair sports, as asked of all

coaches of each sport in the athletic department. Hayes stressed academic achievement in his criteria.

"We aren't training our athletes to be professionals," Hayes said. "Once they leave this institution, they must be able to make a living in the real world."

Although most sports in the athletic department ask that a student with less than 45 credit hours maintain a 1.6 grade point average to remain athletically eligible, 1.8 with under 60 hours, Hayes demands a 2.0 across the board from his athletes.

"That is certainly a reasonable expectation," said Reeves. "In fact, I plan to propose that we request the same of our athletes in the future."

Handicapped services must budget

the price of the letter award for its recipients this year, but the athletic department may absorb the cost in the future, according to Reeves.

The athletic awards policy states that a first-year letterman receives a letter jacket, second- and third-year lettermen receive certificates, and four-year lettermen receive a ring or a watch.

"This gives us creditability," said Hayes. "They are finally making room for the wheelchair athlete. This says that we are capable of bringing just as much notoriety to the university as any other sport, and recognizes the achievement."

Reeves contends that he hopes this first step opens the doors to a good and supportive relationship between the two departments.