

COMMENTARY

'Wheelers' decision welcome first step

The Freewheelers, UTA's wheelchair athletic squad, finally have been officially recognized as athletes by the Athletic Council in the form of letter awards acclaiming their achievements.

It's about time.

The Athletic Council must be applauded for this unprecedented step. No other school in Texas has recognized wheelchair competitors as athletes. Those of us who have witnessed just one of the 'Wheelers' competitive moments can never doubt that they are athletes.

Unlike their glorified gridiron counterparts, who wallow in the comparative mega-bucks that provide chartered bus or plane transportation, deluxe accommodations and steak dinners, the 'Wheelers' drive lies behind the simple satisfaction of competition.

While the football program has drifted through the doldrums in all but one season in recent memory, the 'Wheelers' have consistently remained competitive in the higher echelons of handicapped athletics. Yet if not for a determined Student Congress and concerned private individuals, the three wheelchair athletes who qualified for the World Wheelchair Games in Stoke-Mandeville, England, last July would have stayed home for lack of funds.

But the real crime in this belated recognition lies in the fact that it took a proposal by Jim Hayes, director of Handicapped Student Services, to initiate the Athletic Council's action.

Ignore the hypocrisy behind the fact that Handicapped Student Services was forced to dip into its already-shallow funds to finance the awards. Concentrate on the fact that in addition to all of the 'Wheelers' previous accomplishments, Randy Snow went to Los Angeles and rolled to a silver medal in dramatic fashion in the first able-bodied Olympics wheelchair event. Mention that the Arlington City Council renamed a road in Snow's honor. And still, the university failed to officially recognize their feats.

Granted, it's unlikely that an agent will ever dangle a professional contract under the nose of a wheelchair athlete, as has been done with several of the university's able-bodied athletic alumni. But then, this is an academic institution where scholastics should always be the primary consideration.

The Athletic Council made history with its recognition of the 'Wheelers'. But we urge that the move not stop here. The council must realize that this is just the first step up a steep hill. And for the 'Wheelers', it's been a long, hard "push."

SO... YOU'VE GONE TO THE OLYMPICS. HAVE A WINNING BASKETBALL TEAM... TELL YOU WHAT IM GOING TO DO... IM GOING TO OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZE THE FREEWHEELERS AS ATHLETES! ... AND IF YOU WANT, YOU CAN EVEN BUY LETTER JACKETS...

