



— Staff photos by Randall Roberts

UTA student Randy Snow, the top wheelchair tennis player in the country, shows his racket form

DTH--MC 5-9-82

Champ on wheels

For UTA tennis ace Randy Snow, competition equals independence

By CLIFF FOSTER
Staff Writer

In his own league, Randy Snow is the equivalent of Jimmy Connors: a world-class tennis player with a competitive drive as powerful as the serve that burns the fuzz off the ball.

Snow's brand of tennis is like that of any dedicated player — strong, precise, intelligent — with one important exception.

He plays it from a wheelchair.

"It (the chair) is a tool, just like a racket," Snow says, pushing his way down a sidewalk at the University of Texas at Arlington where he is a student. "The more you use it, the more you know it."

And Snow knows well the tools of his sport.

"He's the most natural athlete I've ever seen in my life, able-bodied or not," says Jim Hayes, director of programs for handicapped students at UTA.

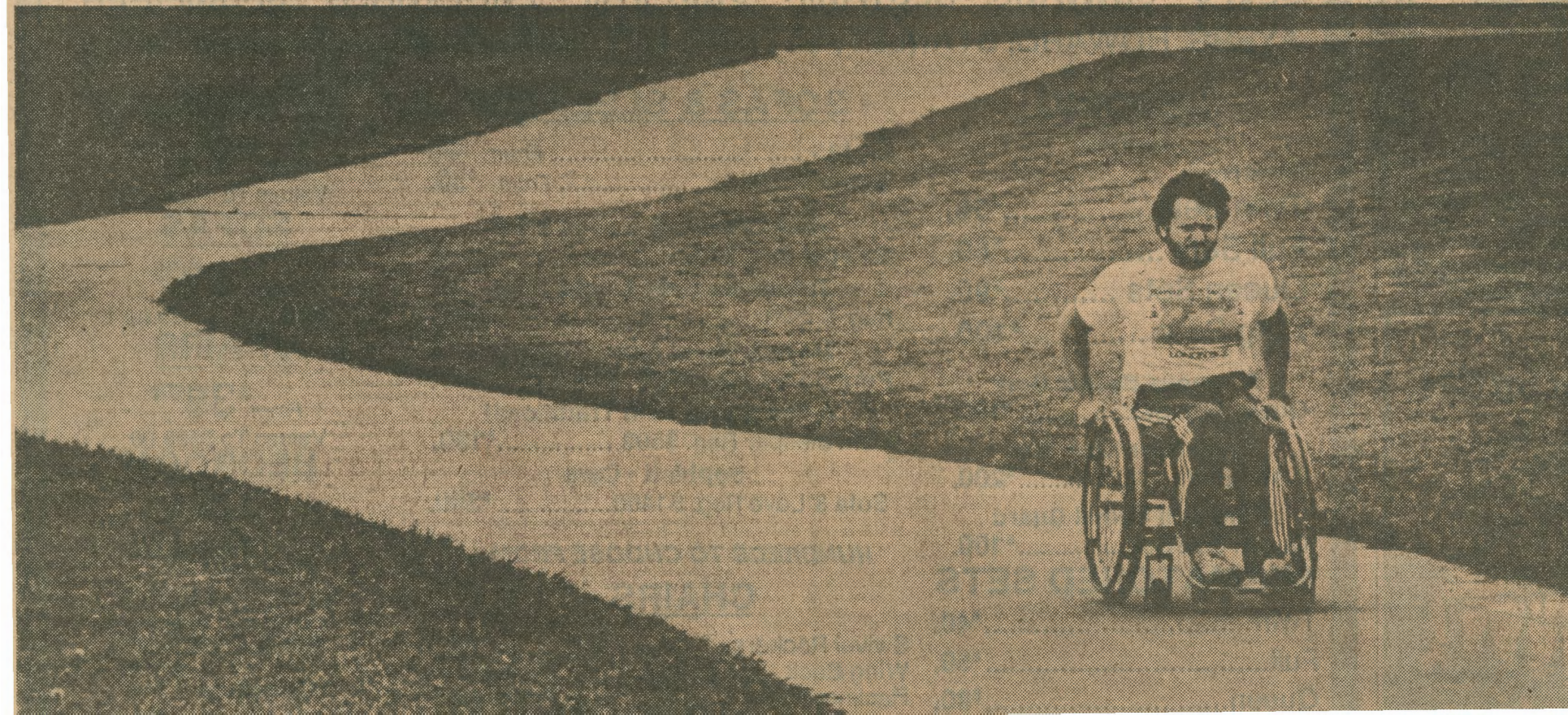
"It may take a him awhile to get his technique down, but once you get him involved, he'll work to be on top."

As 22, Snow is the second-ranked wheelchair tennis player in the world, an athlete who has perfected a game that didn't even exist until 1976 — the year he was pinned under a bale of hay that tipped from a tractor scoop.

See WHEELCHAIR on Page 3



Randy Snow: "It's not like I'm out to beat able-bodied people at whatever I do. It's more like earning their respect."



Wheelchair athletes serious about sports

WHEELCHAIR — From Page One

"I knew I was hurt and I couldn't move my legs," Snow says, recalling the accident. "I didn't know that much about spinal cords and paralysis, and of course I thought it was temporary."

It wasn't.

Snow was taken to St. Paul Hospital in Dallas and later to the Craig Hospital in Denver for physical rehabilitation. "It was tough to deal with," he says. "I had just turned 16. I was becoming a man and changing, and I wasn't ready to deal with stuff like this."

For Snow, and most other active people who are suddenly disabled, the acceptance of an injury is an evolving process accompanied by highs and lows, hope and depression. Snow selectively listened to what the doctors told him, dismissed what he didn't want to hear, and held onto fantasies of again playing tennis, a sport he was raised on and played competitively in high school.

"I listened to them (the doctors) but I took what I wanted of it," Snow says. "It took a year or two to really accept it. You keep thinking about walking again, thinking it will come back."

"But the sooner you realize it, the sooner you can pick up the rest of your life and go on."

It was through sports that Snow began living again, gaining confidence and independence with every contest. At the University of Texas at Austin, where he went to school for two years, he founded a wheelchair basketball team and regularly played tennis with an "AB" — able-bodied — friend.

After transferring to UTA, Snow clicked into high gear. As a member of the Dallas Mavericks wheelchair basketball team, he averages 16 points a game. He pushes his chair seven miles a day and has finished a 26-mile marathon race in a respectable three hours. He has played in tennis tournaments in the United States, Europe and Japan, and beats 80 percent of his partners, including non-handicapped players, Hayes says.

As a wheelchair athlete, Snow is a practitioner of a what promoters call "the movement."

It began with wheelchair basketball, a sport that grew out of the University of Illinois after World War II and was promoted by hospitals which organized teams for disabled veterans. Today, there are 166 basketball teams and 34 national tournaments. There are organized wheelchair teams in track and field, table tennis, swimming, archery and weightlifting. Disabled persons ski, scuba dive and, according to Snow, parachute.

In Texas, the growth of wheelchair sports is reflected in numbers. Four years ago, Hayes says, four Texans went to the national wheelchair track meet; this year, 20 will compete. In 1977, the state had four wheelchair basketball teams. Now there are five times that many. About 75 people attended the first wheelchair basketball game at UTA five years; a recent homecoming contest there attracted more than 1,500.

Wheelchair tennis, one of the newest wheelchair sports, was created by the Los Angeles Parks and Recreation Department in the mid-'70s. It is played like regular tennis except the player returns the shot after two bounces rather than one.

Various associations, like those in the Olym-

pic network, sponsor wheelchair sports tournaments and demonstrations. Snow, for instance, is in Denver this weekend for the Rocky Mountain regional games, a step toward the the Olympic wheelchair games, and will go to California for another regional meet next week.

To Hayes and other pioneers of wheelchair sports, competition is more than the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. For the disabled, wheelchair sports are a declaration of independence, a confirmation that limitations are simply in the eye of the beholder, Hayes says.

"What we're talking about is capabilities not limitations," says Hayes, who broke his neck in a diving accident 13 years ago. "What Randy does is change the attitudes of the able-bodied community toward the handicapped community. They're looking at Randy Snow superstar, not Randy Snow the guy in the chair."

Snow is not comfortable with the superstar label. But below his genuine modesty, he seems to take a secret pleasure in showing off his skill, in affirming his value.

"Some people don't think you can do anything," he says. "When I play tennis, it makes people look past the disability . . ."

"It's not like I'm out to beat able-bodied people at whatever I do. It's more like earning their respect."