

# Kevin Saunders' generosity to benefit future athletes

It was quite a homecoming for Downs High School alumnus Kevin Saunders last Friday - one that neither he nor the people of Downs will soon forget.

Saunders, a 1974 graduate of DHS, was an all around athlete in high school, and spent part of his college years on a football scholarship at Pratt. He also attended Cloud County Community College, and Kansas State, where he graduated in Agri-Business.

He then moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, where he began a career as a Federal Grain Inspector. But on April 7, 1981, a grain elevator explosion changed Kevin Saunders' life.

He was working in an office near the elevator at the time of the blast. Men and debris were hurled hundreds of feet into the air. Many died from the impact or were burned to death. Due in no small part to excellent physical conditioning, Saunders survived the blast, although he was hurled three hundred feet over a 20 foot fence, and landed on concrete nearly in the channel where ships waited for their cargoes of grain. Doctors were unable to operate on him for a week as he slipped in and out of consciousness, and his injuries were massive and severe. His lungs were collapsed, his back was broken, he had no use of one arm or either of his legs, and was bleeding internally.

After a grueling six months of hospitalization, half of which was spent in a rehabilitation center in Houston, where he regained use of his arm, Saunders was released to readjust to life in a wheelchair. To compound his struggle, he was forced to also spend several months in a plastic body cast.

But the ordeal had done nothing to his competitive spirit. Today, he says he was "luckier than a lot of guys in the explosion," feeling fortunate that at least he wasn't burned. He speaks of his love for athletics, saying that he now "enjoys sports more than he ever did



**KEVIN SAUNDERS** listens to dedication ceremonies for the new Saunders Track in Downs.

before."

And he speaks with authority. Last year, Saunders made the United States Team in the Pentathlon, an honor that placed him among the top 25 wheelchair athletes in the country. The Pentathlon, sponsored by the National Wheelchair Athletic Association, consists of five events: the shotput, discus, javelin, 200 meter and 1500 meter races.

In addition to excelling in these areas, Saunders also competes in swimming, doing the breaststroke, backstroke, and butterfly. He competes in archery, shoots air rifles and pistols

in competition, and is a competitive weight lifter, bench pressing 300 pounds. Not bad for a man who weighs only 140.

Saunders' generosity, while beautifully illustrated by his substantial donation for the new track at Downs High School, is certainly not limited to that project. Prior gifts by him to the school include computers, shop equipment, audio-visual equipment, and typewriters.

At Friday's ceremony, he hardly had time to catch a breath between greeting old friends anxious to stop and chat. He seemed reluctant to talk about his role in the track project, instead asking others if they thought it had turned out well, or if it would be good for the kids. One of Saunders' friends from high school days, Don Koops, said that Saunders wanted to build the track so that those who have the use of their legs would have a facility for developing that use to the fullest potential.

Saunders says that his personal creed is best reflected by the message on his favorite poster, from the Olympic Games for Wheelchair Athletes. "The important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win, but to take part. The important thing in life is not the triumph, but the struggle." Saunders added, "I wanted to do something for someone other than myself, like the community or the up and coming athletes of Downs. With this track, maybe it will make a difference between a second place and a State Championship. Furthermore, I hope it gives that extra, added inspiration, that is so needed today, that you can accomplish or achieve anything of challenge, no matter what the handicap."

Kevin Saunders will almost certainly never run again. But thanks to his spirit and sacrifice, many who do will run a little better.