



DIANE GASPER-O'BRIEN / The Hays Daily News

Kevin Saunders, sitting on the track he donated to his alma mater, Downs High School, has turned personal tragedy into success.

Saunders: There's always a way

By DIANE GASPER-O'BRIEN
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DOWNES — Kevin Saunders wheeled himself beside the track adjacent to Downs High School just Tuesday afternoon, snuffing Hellos and waving to folks along the way.

He situated himself at the west end of the track, just out of the way of the runners, and watched.

"Who's the guy in the wheelchair over there?" someone asked at the concessions stand nearby.

"I think that's the guy who donated this track to Downs," came the reply.

"He got a lot of money from an insurance settlement when he was hurt in an explosion several years ago. So he's given a lot of things back to his school."

"Oh, yeah, I remember. He's really good in wheelchair racing or something, isn't he? I've heard he's supposed to do real well in the Olympics."

"The Olympics? What do you think he could do in the Olympics?"

Oh, the things we take for granted. Things that maybe we shouldn't.

For the record, Saunders does excel in wheelchair athletics. He is being touted as a probable medalist in the Paralympics pentathlon, to be run in conjunction with this summer's Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain.

Saunders will tell you it's the gold medal he plans to bring home.

After being paralyzed from the chest down because of injuries suffered in a grain elevator explosion in April 1981, Saunders — who was a multi-sport competitor as a Downs High School student — decided to give wheelchair racing a try.

That led to competing in more events, including the pentathlon, which consists of the shot put, discus, javelin, 200 meters and 1,500 meters.

A 1978 graduate of Kansas State University, Saunders plans to use a special wheelchair to be built by the KSU mechanical engineering department for his field events at the Olympics.

"At first you go through denial and depression when you hear you're never going to walk again," said Saunders, a 1974 graduate of Downs High.

"You say you are going to get up and walk, then you realize you're not, and you get de-

Downs native Kevin Saunders is shooting for the gold in the Paralympics pentathlon at this summer's Olympic Games in Barcelona.

pressed.

"But then I decided I could either sit around and feel sorry for myself or do something with the rest of my life."

He chose to do something.

Saunders not only lives a full life, but helps others along the way.

In addition to the track, which now bears his name, Saunders also has donated money for computers and other school equipment to the Downs school system.

He speaks to school children all over south Texas — he now makes his home in Corpus Christi — about the importance of staying in school.

He is active in civic and athletic organizations. He founded The Wheelchair Success Fund, a program designed to provide support and motivation for physically challenged people to get involved in their communities.

And he is an advocate for physical fitness. Saunders' athletic achievements speak for themselves.

He earned the bronze medal in the Paralympics pentathlon in the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea.

Two years later, he won four golds at the Pan American Games. He also set a world record in the pentathlon in winning the gold medal at the 1990 World Track and Field Championships. That earned him the title of best all-around wheelchair athlete.

Athletes aren't his only passion.

Saunders played a part in Oliver Stone's movie about a disabled veteran of the Vietnam War, "Born on the Fourth of July."

He does several commercials in Texas.

And he recently signed a deal with a publishing company to write his biography. The foreword for the book is to be written by Arnold Schwarzenegger.

It's obvious Saunders enjoys the fame that his success has brought him.

But he says he always tries to keep one thing in mind.

He remembers where he came from.

"Opportunities have presented themselves, and I've been able to take advantage of them," he said.

"But it's always nice to come back home. Old friends are the best."

The things we take for granted ...

If it weren't for the wheelchair, one would hardly notice much difference in Saunders from his high school days.

Sure, the muscles in his legs have atrophied, and he's bulked up some in his upper body.

But the boyish grin and friendly chuckle are the same.

"He is so likeable," said Steve Heide, the principal at Downs High. "He's just a real appealing person. He's always been a talker, so he makes a really good speaker."

One of his messages to groups young and old alike is to stay physically fit.

"If I'd have really worked hard like this when I was in high school, I'd have been a totally different athlete," Saunders said. "But I just took things for granted."

Saunders says he plans to practice what he preaches about staying fit, even after the Olympics.

"I've got to keep eating right and stay in shape," he said. "I like to work hard, train hard and feel good. And, you can't go out and talk to people about staying fit if you're a couch potato."

Saunders hopes to get appointed to the President's Council for Physical Fitness. One of his biggest supporters is Kansas Sen. Bob Dole, an idol of Saunders'.

"Here is Senator Dole, out shaking hands with people when he can't even use his right hand," Saunders said of Dole, who has no use of his right hand because of injuries suffered in World War II.

"Stuff like that inspires me to take on life, no matter how hard it might seem. I like to live by the motto, 'There's always a way.'"

Just then, Saunders turned and headed toward the other end of the field to watch the conclusion of the Downs Invitational track meet.

The wheels on his chair sank into the grass of the football field, soft from a morning rain.

But Saunders, the muscles in his arms bulging, churned on without hesitation. In the same instant, he was looking for a shortcut to get to the harder surface of the track to make the going a little easier.

There's always a way, indeed.

... The things we take for granted. Things that maybe we shouldn't.