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The wheels get turning

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Claire Braun first discovered her son, Mark, in an orphanage during a mission trip to Jamaica. A birth defect called spina bifida took away the use of his legs, so he dragged them as he crawled.

On her second visit, Claire gave Mark, then 5 years old, the first thing he ever owned: a wheelchair. She later brought him to the United States for medical care and adopted him.

Last week, Claire helped strap her son's legs into his racing wheelchair as he prepared to take part in Minnesota high school sports history. Braun, a junior at Irondale, is one of six athletes statewide competing in the first track and field wheelchair division ever.

He joins fellow pioneers Stacy Bates (Andover), Abby Donkers (Kenyon-Wanamingo), Rose Hollerman (Waterville-Elysian-Morristown), Kathryn Lubahn (Pine Island) and JoLynn Super (Spring Lake Park/St. Anthony Village). Minnesota is one

of 11 states offering wheelchair track and field at the high school level.

Competing last week in the three events offered to wheelchair athletes, Braun set personal bests in the 800- and 1,600-meter races (finishing in 2 minutes, 12.4 seconds and 4:38.5, respectively) and the shot put (16 feet, 6 inches).

Minnesota State High School League rules prohibit wheelchair athletes from competing against able-bodied athletes or scoring team points at any meet. The Hollerman family and their attorney -- Justin Page of the Minnesota Disability Law Center -- could petition to change those stipulations, which also have drawn criticism from other advocates.

Regardless, the impact of the wheelchair division already is being felt.

"I think I've opened a lot of eyes," Braun said. "I'm showing there is a chance for people who are differently abled to do something."

Competitive and courageous

He's won international wheelchair basketball championships with teams from Courage Center in Golden Valley, and he stood out in

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adapted soccer, floor hockey and softball. But Braun longed to compete for his school and among his able-bodied peers.

At his first meet this season, Braun wheeled around Irondale's track, his gloved hands punching at the inner rims of his chair and his chiseled arms pumping like pistons.

An athlete from Cooper exclaimed, "He's the Chuck Norris of wheelchair racing!" But it was Irondale coach Tom Rodefled who paid him the ultimate compliment after the 1,600 when he said, "Unlike some of our other guys, you competed."

Braun, Donkers and Hollerman have previous track and field experience. Bates, Lubahn and Super are novices still learning how to control -- and not tip over -- their three-wheel racing chairs.

Sabrina Bates, Stacy's older sister and Andover track and field teammate, lauded her younger sibling's courage.

"I wouldn't be able to do this, to run a race all by myself," Sabrina said. "It's cool that she is OK with having everyone watch her."

Challenge for coaches

When it comes to training their new wheelchair athletes, coaches admitted they are making it up as they go. They have searched the Internet for tips and networked with other coaches for support.

"None of us have really watched a wheelchair race on a track," Spring Lake Park/St. Anthony Village coach Don Fineran said. "I had no clue what to do. There was no guidance on what to do."

But coaches roundly agreed that the growing pains are worth the long-term gain.

"I hope that more kids will participate in it," Andover coach Gretchen Wahl said. "I hope the high school league and our district and our schools will give us some resources to work with these kids because it's so important."

Legal battle looming?

Claire Braun called the mainstreaming of wheelchair athletes like her son, Mark, into track and field "a chance for integration."

But when it comes to the MSHSL's rules preventing wheelchair athletes from competing against able-bodied athletes or scoring team points, "separate but equal is

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still alive," said Page, the son of Minnesota Supreme Court Associate Justice and pro football Hall of Famer Alan Page.

Page worked with the Hollerman family to allow Rose the chance to compete in high school. Their conversations with the MSHSL led to the creation of the wheelchair division, though the current format isn't what they desired.

"It was a take-it-or-leave-it position," Page said. "We're still looking at the legal angle. There are ways to do a point system, but the [MSHSL] is unwilling to do so. We want to have the same equal opportunity as everyone else."

Mike Bauler, the sports and recreation coordinator at Courage Center, offered a mixed opinion.

"I think doing it this way for the first year is OK," Bauler said. "In the future, to help make it a more legitimate sport, you'd want to think about counting the scoring."

MSHSL executive director Dave Stead said: "We always take a look at things at the end of each season, whether it's a new activity or an existing activity. So we'll be looking at this."

While Donkers, Hollerman and Lubahn are among the few -- or the only -- wheelchair athletes in their small communities, Bauler predicts numbers "will explode" in coming years. He said the Courage Center has "a slew" of athletes 12 and younger excited to compete in track and field.

Mark Braun will miss the state meet in June because he will be back in Jamaica meeting with the country's prime minister about putting more resources into adoption in the hopes of more quickly uniting families and children.

But he is only a junior, so there is always next season. His mother, Claire, is pleased other athletes also have a future in the sport.

"Even if it's not perfect, you've got to start somewhere," she said, "or you're never going to have anything."

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