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NEW YORK CITY MARATHON

A Wheelchair Rivalry Takes Root in the Desert



Michael Mally for The New York Times

University of Arizona wheelchair athlete Shirley Reilly leading her teammate and boyfriend Sean Eres in a training session for the New York City Marathon.

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Shirley Reilly training with her coach, Peter Hughes. She finished fifth in the 2005 New York City Marathon.



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Shirley Reilly, 21, finished fifth last year in the New York City Marathon after overcoming a flat tire. She says she considered the weather when she committed to Arizona instead of Illinois.

TUCSON — The desert sun had yet to rise over the cactus-covered hills in early October when Shirley Reilly arrived at morning practice.

She slipped gloves over her callused, red knuckles. She stretched her arms and back, muscles rippling beneath her clingy long-sleeve top. Then she sat in her high-performance wheelchair, tucked her legs beneath her and off she went, pounding the wheel rims with her index fingers as she pushed the wheelchair up the foothills of the Tucson Mountains.

A man walking on the sidewalk saw her and said: “That looks pretty hard. You training for something?”

Reilly grunted. “Yep,” she said. “The New York City Marathon.”

He looked dumbfounded. “Wow, really?” he said. She put her head down and rolled past him.

Like the stream of wheelchair athletes at the [University of Arizona](#) that came before her, Reilly, 21, has been training for the New York City Marathon in Tucson, passing tourists, zipping by the saguaro cactuses that can tower up to 50 feet, finishing her workout before the temperature rises too high to bear.

And 1,750 miles away, another group of athletes was training just as hard for the marathon, on different terrain. Wheelchair athletes at the [University of Illinois](#) train on flat country roads, moving past fields of soybean and corn, and past farmers who, over decades, have grown accustomed to seeing wheelchairs zoom down the roadside.

“If you’re a wheelchair racer, you either go to Arizona or you’re going to Illinois,” said Peter Hughes, Reilly’s coach at the University of Arizona. “Illinois is the granddaddy of wheelchair sports, because they were started there, and we are pretty much the only alternative.”

As in years past, within the pack of wheelchair athletes competing tomorrow in the New York City Marathon will be athletes and alumni from Arizona and Illinois, two universities that have driven the sport of

wheelchair racing. They have the nation's premier track and road-racing teams for wheelchair athletes. They give scholarships or tuition waivers and recruit. They are serious about their training, and their results reflect that.

Arizona's Cheri Blauwet won the New York City Marathon wheelchair division twice. Illinois's Jean Driscoll won the Boston Marathon eight times. In tomorrow's race, Arizona will be represented by Reilly, who was fifth last year after overcoming a flat tire, and Tyler Byers, an alumnus and the university's former wheelchair track coach. Competitors with a link to Illinois include Christina Ripp, a two-time runner-up in New York, Amanda McGrory and Miriam Ladner, a Paralympian in track and basketball.

"There's a rivalry between us, just like there would be with any college," said Ladner, 29, a graduate who still trains with the Illinois team. "Arizona is kind of an offshoot of us, so of course we think we're better."

"But it's not a bitter thing," she said. "We have a respectful rivalry. We're both trying to do our part to change the perception of wheelchair sports. It's not a warm, fuzzy kind of thing, not like we are in the Special Olympics, which is sometimes how we are treated. It's far, far beyond, 'Gee, that's a cute human interest story.' "

Ladner broke her back when she was 11, when a cave she was playing in collapsed. She is paralyzed from the waist down. She was recruited by Illinois and Arizona, but she chose Illinois because of its long history of wheelchair athletics.

The Illinois wheelchair sports program began in 1949 after disabled World War II veterans had returned home. The university formed the first collegiate wheelchair basketball team. Soon, it spearheaded the technology for better, faster wheelchairs and the university became synonymous with wheelchair sports.

"We were the very first program of its kind and are still the Mecca for programs like these," said Maureen Gilbert, the coordinator of the adaptive athletics program at Illinois. The university has 35 disabled athletes, including 11 on the track team.

At Arizona, the program grew from a bare-bones adaptive physical education program into one that has 60 athletes in five sports, making it one of the largest such programs in the nation.

The program was given a boost when Derek Brown, an Illinois graduate who competed for the wheelchair track and basketball teams, became Arizona's track coach in 1997. He brought some of the science the Illinois coaches used to train their athletes, then distributed the training manual used for decades by Illinois.

“Let me put it this way: I went from a school that is kind of like [Duke](#) in basketball or Notre Dame in football to this newer program, so it was a challenge,” said Brown, who coached track until 2004. “But I think we have two powerhouses now.”

Besides the track team, the privately funded adaptive athletics program at Arizona includes a men's and a women's basketball team, both of which Brown now coaches, and a rugby team for quadriplegics.

Coaches here have an advantage in luring athletes to Arizona, and away from Illinois, according to Hughes, the track coach.

“We have the good weather, but Illinois? They have snow,” Hughes said, smiling. “We all know that snow and wheelchairs don't mix. So they promote their tradition and we promote our weather.”

Reilly, who was born in Alaska, was thinking about the weather when she committed to Arizona. Her family had moved to Los Gatos, Calif., when she was a child, so she could be closer to medical facilities. Born prematurely, she was paralyzed from the waist down because her spine did not form correctly. She also lost about 50 percent of her hearing.

After living in California, she said, she did not want to endure the long winters of Illinois. But she had another reason to go to Arizona: Her longtime boyfriend, Sean Eres, was there.

Eres, who was born with spina bifida, is also on Arizona's track team.

“You look around here, and it’s not weird to see people in wheelchairs, because they’re everywhere,” Eres said. “I really feel like people here maybe pity you less, which is good, because we’re just athletes like everyone else.”

On any given day, it is common to see disabled athletes among the nonathletes around the wheelchair-accessible Arizona campus. In wheelchairs, they roll up ramps and into buildings, or easily fit through the wide doors inside those buildings. The disabled sports teams are represented on campus side by side with the able-bodied teams.

On banners posted around the grounds, wheelchair sports like track and basketball fly next to banners of the university’s varsity basketball and track teams. The wheelchair sports teams practice in the main gym. Two weeks ago, wheelchair rugby players slammed into one another’s wheelchairs at full speed while sophomore students ran up and down the adjacent basketball court.

The community is used to seeing the disabled athletes, too. In mid-October, the men’s basketball team made an appearance at a local Wal-Mart to sign autographs.

The sports program here, and the entire disabled community, is nothing like it was in 1979, when Dave Herr-Cardillo, the assistant director of the university’s adaptive athletics program, arrived. It was just a physical education program.

“What we had then was a bunch of guys in wheelchairs hitting a beach ball to each other in a basement,” he said. “That was unacceptable. So we changed that, and I’m not sure why other universities haven’t been more aggressive in doing the same thing. Well, I kind of know. It’s hard to establish this kind of program because it takes a lot of commitment and money.”

For Reilly, a 2004 Paralympian, Arizona turned out to be the perfect place.

This semester, Reilly took only a few classes so that she could train for the marathon. She practices six days a week, including three times with a

personal trainer, off-campus. There, she and Eres maneuver around the gym in their wheelchairs, sliding with ease from their chairs to the workout benches or weight machines.

“She’s easily my strongest female, and as far as men go, she’s right up there, too,” Reilly’s trainer, Stephen Gose, said. “She’s got shoulders as big as bowling balls.”

To that, Reilly blushed, then shot back: “Bowling balls? Hey, I have to be strong if I’m going to win races.”

Reilly’s competition tomorrow will come from Illinois athletes, but also from Europeans like Sandra Graf of Switzerland. But Reilly says she has prepared herself to take on anyone.

In the one-bedroom apartment she shares with Eres, they store their racing wheelchairs on the porch. Stacked just inside the door are prizes from some of Reilly’s marathons, including a crystal trophy from her victory this year in the Los Angeles Marathon. She finished in 1 hour 55 minutes 23 seconds.

In the living room sits a huge contraption that lets Reilly train indoors. It is a roller, kind of like a stationary bicycle, that allows her to push her wheelchair without it actually moving.

At Illinois, athletes train on a roller from November to March because of the cold weather, but Reilly uses the roller to squeeze in an additional workout at the end of the day.

When she looks at the roller, she said, it reminds her that she would rather be at Arizona.

“I would really, really hate to have to train on this thing all the time,” she said, frowning and gesturing at the machine, which nearly swallows the room. “For me, I’d rather be outside. I don’t care if it’s 120 degrees, or the coyotes are chasing me. I love the freedom.”

* Original Article can be viewed online at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/04/sports/sportsspecial/04wheelchair.html?ref=sportsspecial>