



## LOCAL SPORTS

# Kerr knows how to put wheels in motion for success

**J**ohn Kerr can remember when his 42-year-old son Gary was only 2.

"He'd stand on the end arm of the sofa and do a flip onto the sofa and land on his feet," Kerr said.

"They told me my aunt was into gymnastics, and she taught me," said Gary Kerr, who doesn't really remember leaping in the air and landing on his feet.

When he was still 2 years old, Kerr, his mother and grandmother were driving to his baby sitter's on a foggy morning. A truck sideswiped their car, causing it to spin into a tree, leaving the toddler with a severed spinal cord that would never allow him to walk or use his legs again.

"It's kind of strange when I look at pictures of me walking," he said from the Audio Gallery, a high-tech audio store he and his wife, Cindy, own in Lake Oswego, Ore.

The injury and more than a half-dozen major operations that left him in full body casts for as long as seven months at a time could not slow Kerr down.

"I've always thought he would have been an athlete," John Kerr said. "Even in the (wheel)chair, he was wild."

Gary Kerr did, in fact, become an athlete and more. He was a pioneer, leader and innovator in wheelchair athletics.

He set more than 100 world records in wheelchair racing, competed in four Paralympics, two Pan American Games, four world championships and was ranked No. 1 in the world in table tennis



## COMMUNITY

By Chuck Dybdal  
Times staff writer

doubles and No. 2 in singles.

Last November, the former Ygnacio Valley High School student was inducted into the Wheelchair Sports USA Hall of Fame in Chicago.

"It was quite an honor," said Kerr, but one that was richly deserved on many levels.

Growing up, Kerr was treated as a normal child by his family. He was expected to do chores and encouraged to participate in sports.

"Some of the stuff really wasn't fun — pulling weeds, pruning the juniper," said Kerr with a laugh even now. But he quickly adds that as he and his brother Kevin, who was a star linebacker at Ygnacio Valley, did things "that made us feel like a pretty tight family."

Kerr credits his father with starting him on the road to athletic success.

"Dad said the only limit is what you believe," Kerr said. "My dad encouraged my brother and me. He's a real encourager. That's his gift. Had I not played ping pong and whiffle ball with him in the back yard and gotten some confidence, who knows if I would have tried to race."

Kerr began playing wheelchair basketball in Danville but said, "I didn't get into it heavy. I was pretty fast on the court, and the guys said

I should check out racing."

In 1971, Kerr saw his first wheelchair track meet. He practiced for a year before entering his first race, but by the time 1972 was over he represented the United States in the Paralympics, winning gold in the 100 meters.

It was at the Paralympics that he discovered table tennis, the game he'd played in his back yard, and led him to develop his talents in that sport through the Concord Table Tennis Club.

Kerr made his biggest mark athletically in racing, winning so many races and setting so many records that they tend to blend together. But some still stand out in his career that spanned 1972-88.

"There was a 1,500-meter race in 1984," he said of one record-setting performance. "Hawaii was hosting the nationals, but the fastest man in the world from Canada was also there. I remember going around the field on the final turn and pulling by them."

In 1981, Kerr was involved in a series of four track meets in Europe with the 10 top wheelchair athletes in the world. He won two races, setting records each time.

"One of the races was in Belgium, and there were 60,000 people there. When I took a victory lap, the people stood and applauded," he said.

"There was the Lilac Bloom race in Spokane I won in 1985. It's the toughest 12k I know. There's a half-mile hill climb one mile from the finish. In '83, I was third, and in '84 I was second."

The use of sport in the rehabili-

tation process for paraplegics began after World War II. When Kerr first began competing, distances in events were usually no more than 100 meters. And road racing was unheard of.

But Kerr was in the vanguard of wheelchair athletes who believed and proved a wheelchair did not have to limit distance or achievement.

"Cindy (his wife) and I worked hard. We wrote letters to Bay Area races pushing for a wheelchair division," Kerr said. "One of the neatest things was getting awareness up. We can get around. We should be part of footraces."

But for all his athletic accomplishments and his role as a pioneer, Kerr's biggest contribution

has come as an innovator in modeling chairs for racing and other sports. His changes are reflected today in general-use wheelchairs.

He is modest about his innovations that have made life easier for people confined to wheelchairs.

"If I didn't do it, someone else would," he said. "The things I came up with came from bicycle parts. I saw parallel truths. Things that work in one area should work in another."

In 1972, Kerr raced in a standard wheelchair. By 1973, he had made modifications cutting the weight of the chair in half.

In 1974, inspired by the idea of a smaller push ring on children's wheelchairs, he experimented with different gear ratios and smaller

wheels. By 1976, he was making his own forms for chairs.

In the early 1980s, components designed for better performance for athletes (such as sealed bearings)

were being used in everyday chairs to provide high performance and low maintenance. He also developed a way to adjust the center of gravity to make chairs more maneuverable.

Though he has retired from racing and is as involved in his audio business as he was in developing and adapting racing wheelchairs, Kerr says, "At times I do think about racing. There are lots of cool races, but it's like I've already done that."

But a few years from now, who knows? There just might be a Hall of Famer in some masters races.

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