

Pushing towards greater heights

□ Rick Reelie helps wheelchair athletes get the most out of sport

By Kathryn Willms
for The Sunday Sun

At the Beijing Paralympics last fall, Allana Duff blew across the finish line of the 100 metres and onto the international stage of wheelchair athletics. Not only did the 22-year-old Bradwell native pick up a bronze medal at her very first Olympic outing, but, in the process, she brought to light a little-known Canadian sporting factoid.

Saskatchewan is a hotbed of wheelchair athletics.

— In fact, the province is home to the core of elite developmental athletes in the country, including Duff, who holds Canadian records in the 100m, 200m and 400m.

The man responsible for Saskatchewan's prominence is Rick Reelie of Saskatoon.

Reelie raced competitively around the world for 20 years, from Barcelona in 1992 to Athens in 2004. He competed in the 800m, the 1,500m and the 5,000m.

In 2005, when it came time to retire, Reelie was ready to give back to the sport. He turned his attention full-time to coaching and the results have been electrifying.

— Duff's victory, she has happily attested in past interviews, was as much the result of Reelie's foray into coaching as it was of her skill and hard work.

So, when Duff was honoured as female athlete of the year at the Saskatchewan Sport Awards in March, it came as no surprise that Reelie, a former national team coach, picked

up the inaugural coach of the year title.

What makes the feat even more remarkable is that Reelie never had any intention of becoming a coach.

"I just kind of fell into it," he says. "I had a very good grasp of the technical aspects of our sport."

It was a precipitous and propitious fall.

In 1997, Reelie was offered his first coaching gig while training in Australia. For three days a week, he played the part of a junior national developmental coach, ironically helping to build the sport for another nation.

When he moved back to Saskatoon after three years abroad, he decided it was time to put his skills, experience and passion to work coaching Canada's future parathletes.

The first step was building the Cyclone road and track club. Originally a venue for one of Saskatchewan's Canada Games teams, Reelie and the club members weren't ready to give it up when the competition ended.

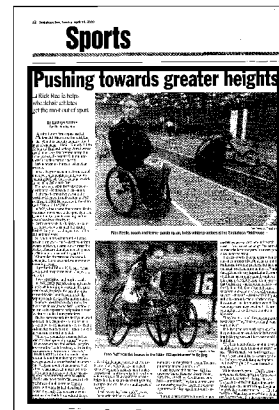
"There was demand for someone to take hold of a developmental program," he says.

"There were athletes that needed a program.

It was not like I built it and they came, or they were here and I showed up. It was both."

Reelie knew how important mentorship and community could be in developing new athletes. He knew the former because his mentor, Peter Erickson, now the head coach at U.K. Athletics, had made such a profound impact on his career and he knew the latter because there was no community when he started.

Reelie was introduced to the sport in 1986 by a future national teammate, Clayton Gerein, with whom he had played rugby. He was in his early 20s, recovering from a recent accident that left him without the use of his legs, and trying to learn a sport with



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only minimal contact with a coach. Left to his own devices, Reelie says he made his share of beginner's mistakes but ultimately crafted a self-taught expertise in the technical side of the sport. That experience not only helped him be a better coach but it gave him an appreciation for the communal aspects of learning.

"I see it every day in our club," he says. "The benefits and the growth kids have, becoming more independent, becoming more confident, and the physical aspects. You can't put a price on that. And it's fun."

These days, the club has seven full-time members: *Tannis Hancock, Becky Richter, Keira Frie, Kyle Shaw, Alex Dupont, Dale Schlissler and Duff*. They train, compete and do fundraising together, and Reelie says that togetherness is a key ingredient to their success.

"For me to have everyday immediate interaction with my athletes is one of the biggest reasons we have success here in Saskatchewan — because we can adapt. I've learned so much the last three years. It's a very good, close, cohesive group."

The costs involved are staggering. Not only does the club spend \$7,000 a year to rent the Fieldhouse for winter practices, but there are the usual travel and equipment costs. Finding the right chair is very important and a couple of athletes have already gone through two this season. At \$6,500 a pop, it's no surprise that fundraising is an important activity for the Cyclone club. One of the club's most

successful endeavours is its weekly manure sale (or "shit sale," as Reelie calls it happily) at the Saskatoon Farmers' Market during the summer. His club members were thrilled when they were interviewed by CBC last year and got to say the word on national television.

"They're not so much the consoling group," Reelie says. "They'll make you laugh when you're down."

But clearly the hard work is paying off and the payoffs can be sweet. Reelie calls traveling to Beijing with Duff last year one of the highlights.

"I've been there before as an athlete but, as an athlete, you really focus on yourself," he says. "Unfortunately, you don't soak up as much as you should. But as a coach, you're soaking up every little thing that happens. I will never forget it. It was an incredible experience."

While obviously proud of Duff's accomplishments, Reelie is quick to offer a caveat.

"That's Ilana going to the top," he says. "I've got kids at the club that will never be paralympians but the little things they do and the goals they set (are important). . . . It's hard to explain. When they come off the track and they've gone faster than they've ever gone before, that's a huge thing."



—Getty Images File Photo

Ilana Duff won the bronze in the 100m T53 sprint event in Beijing



—Sun Photo by Greg Pender

Rick Reelie, coach and former paralympian, holds winter practices at the Saskatoon Fieldhouse