

The Winner's Circle

By David Block

Penn Relays is an Eye-Opening Experience for Able-Bodied Athletes and Spectators

Classic track events and superb athletes have dominated the Penn Relays' 115-year history. The world's best track stars come to Franklin Field at the University of Pennsylvania the last weekend in April to compete before more than 40,000 aficionados, including comedian Bill Cosby.

When asked why he comes to the Penn Relays every year, Cosby answered thoughtfully: "You go to a restaurant that you love. You go there because you love the taste of the food. You're going because you want to have that special dish. Well, you get to the restaurant, and sit down, you order the dish and it tastes exactly the way you remember it. And you're happy. This is the Penn Relays."

For over 15 years, athletes with disabilities have been part of the Penn Relays' "menu." Blind runners, athletes in wheelchairs, amputees and Special Olympians have demonstrated to Penn Relay fans that disability does not mean inability. The fully able-bodied competitors and the media are now more aware of disabled athletes' presence than 10 years ago.

Acknowledging Athletes' Achievements

Paul Reid, a freelance reporter and photographer from Jamaica, travels to Philadelphia almost every year to cover the Jamaicans at the Penn Relays. Reid said: "I have respect for these (disabled) athletes. They put out a lot more than I could possibly imagine."

Reid then enthusiastically talked about Jamaican Paralympian Tanto Campbell. Last September at the Paralympic Games in Beijing, Campbell threw the discus 39.31 meters to win the bronze. Paralympians and the media were not the only ones to shower Campbell with kudos. Jamaica's Prime Minister Bruce Golding did as well.

The Jamaica Information Service quoted Golding as saying that Campbell's achievement was made even more outstanding by the fact that Campbell not only had to contend with physical challenges, he had to overcome two failed attempts. (For more information, go to the link http://www.jis.gov.jm/officePM/html/20080911T100000-0500_16617_JIS_PM_PRAISES_PARALYMPIAN__TAN_TO_CAMPBELL.asp.)

Olympian Sanya Richards

Sanya Richards won bronze in the 400-meter run and gold in the 4x400 meter relay last summer at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. She was one of the Team USA members running in the U.S.A. vs. the World 4x400 Meter Relay at the Penn Relays

Richards was not shy about giving kudos to disabled athletes: "They're an inspiration to the world. We (elite able-bodied athletes) see disabled athletes more in the same light as us. I've been inspired to work as hard as I can. We don't have the same difficulties to overcome."

PARALYMPIANS

Josiah Jamison

Blind runner, Josiah Jamison finished second in the 100 meter dash at the Penn Relays, clocking 11.60 seconds. Last September at Beijing, Jamison won Paralympic gold in the 100 in 10.89 seconds.

"I had a pulled hamstring today (at the Penn Relays)," said Jamison.

"It was a little windy, so I'm glad that Josiah got through it without further damage," said his guide runner, Jerome Avery.

A talented athlete in his own right, Avery fell below the cut-off while qualifying for the 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. Avery said he became a guide runner for blind sprinters because "it was a great chance to go to Athens."

One of the first things he learned about athletes with disabilities was that he did not need to chaperone them. "I never worked with them before, so I didn't know that they were independent like everyone else."

Tatyana McFadden

At the Penn Relays, Tatyana McFadden came in first in the women's 400-meter wheelchair race clocking 55.66.

"I do wheelchair basketball and wheelchair track for the University of Illinois," said McFadden, who competed at the Paralympics last September. "It's my second time at the Penn Relays. The Penn Relays is a great opportunity for people to see how we compete and how fast we can go. The crowd is real positive."

Jessie Galli

"This was my first time at the Penn Relays," said Jessie Galli, who finished second in the women's 400-meter wheelchair race at 57.36.

At the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing, she won gold in the 400, posting 54.99 seconds.

Galli said, "To be at the Penn Relays, to be included with our able-bodied peers is a great feeling."