



Make it Happen: Dare to Win

Wheelchair racer André Viger challenged himself both as a fierce competitor and as a tireless advocate for the disabled.

BY SUE DE PASQUALE

Grueling can't begin to describe the 600-kilometer Midnight Sun Wheelchair Marathon in Alaska. During the first day of the event in 1993, the Canadian-born André Viger and 12 competitors from around the world first climbed 35 kilometers (21.7 miles) into the Alaska Range foothills, then faced 100 kilometers (62 miles) of fierce headwinds. Hunched over in his three-wheeled, all-aluminum aerodynamic race chair, Viger flew over the course—that day and during the eight days that followed—in a gritty display of physical and mental fortitude. The final stretch on Day 9, an 18-kilometer downhill sprint (11 miles), was, he said

afterward, “like the cherry on the cake.” Viger sailed across the finish line, capturing the first prize of \$5,000 with an elapsed time of 23 hours, 50 minutes and 25 seconds.

For Viger, once described by his protégé Jeff Adams as “the toughest man alive,” the victory in Alaska capped a remarkable athletic career that included wins in the wheelchair event of Japan's Oita Marathon (four straight years, from 1984-87), the Montreal Marathon (five times), the Boston Marathon (1984 and 1986) and appearances in five Paralympic Games. Viger's haul from the Games: three gold medals, four silver and three bronze.

Perhaps as notable as Viger's athletic accomplishments is the role he played as a tireless promoter of the Paralympic movement—a movement in its infancy when he came on the sports scene in the late 1970s. “André opened a lot of doors and eyes to wheelchair athletics, he had a resiliency to succeed like no other I've seen before,” says Jean Laroche, head coach of Athletics Canada Paralympic, who began working with Viger in 1981. “André saw obstacles as another reason to persevere and used them to motivate himself.”

Viger lost a battle to cancer in October 2006 at the age of 54, but his legacy lives on. He established the Fondation André Viger, to encourage the disabled to overcome their handicaps through sports, and founded the successful medical supply company La Maison André Viger, which became

a meeting point for athletes all over Canada. It continues to support the efforts of the disabled by producing wheelchairs and other adaptive equipment.

Growing up in Sherbrooke, Quebec, Viger did not set out to be a standard-bearer for the disabled. He was employed as a steelworker, a few months shy of his 21st birthday, when his life changed in an instant, on June 3, 1973. The car he was riding in missed a curve and flew off the road. Though Viger survived the crash, doctors delivered grave news: Damage to his spinal cord meant he would never again use his legs.

Viger refused to accept the crushing verdict. Displaying the fierce determination that would become his trademark, he spent months mastering the use of crutches and leg braces—and when he finally left the hospital for home he was on foot. But post-hospital life proved vexing. Balance problems led to repeated falls and Viger reluctantly turned to using a wheelchair. When a friend suggested he try sports, he first tried swimming, shot put, discus and weight lifting, before ultimately settling on wheelchair racing.

At the University of Sherbrooke, during the winter months when bad weather interrupted his outdoor training, Viger was a familiar sight in the tunnels beneath campus, where he rolled mile after mile to build his upper body strength. He entered his first local event in 1979 and in 1981 competed in his first Montreal Marathon, finishing third. Viger achieved celebrity status in Canada in 1984,

when he participated in the 1,500-meter wheelchair event at the Los Angeles Summer Olympics (a demonstration event), capturing a bronze and effectively putting Paralympic sports on the map. Before long he was competing in events all over the world.

Despite a grueling training and competition schedule, Viger frequently made public appearances, intent on getting out the message that disabled people can make important contributions to society. His motto: "Make it happen: dare to win."

Internationally recognized for his achievements (he was inducted into the Paralympic Hall of Fame in November 2005), Viger was especially beloved in his home country. He was voted Quebec's Athlete of the Year in 1985 and in 1989 he was appointed to the Order of Canada.

Four years later, the University of Ottawa awarded him an honorary doctorate, with a citation that aptly summed up his lasting contribution to society: "All of André Viger's achievements are guided by the same beacon: his set of values. Love and faith in life; self-esteem and self-confidence; compassion for oneself and for others; combined with determination, tenacity, discipline and courage. These values are dear when mind and body are sound; they are cherished all the more when life leaves its mark. When young André Viger was subjected to a formidable test, he held fast to these values and made them his very own. They are the pillars on which he built his life." ♦

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