



# Catching My Breath

## The Life and Races of Athlete Ken Thomas

### Profile of Ken Thomas

Ken Thomas, who is 53 years old, has cerebral palsy—the result of not breathing for the first 20 minutes after he was born. This left him with irreparable brain damage that has affected his speech and coordination, and limited his ability to walk. Yet Ken lives a remarkably independent life. He has his own apartment in a housing co-op, and cooks his own meals with the help of an assistant. He participates in wheelchair square dancing once a week, and regularly attends live theatre and sporting events.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Ken traveled to countries such as Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Denmark and Belgium to compete in international track events. He also participated in the Paralympics in Seoul, Korea in 1988, where he won a bronze medal in the 800-meter track event.

Ken's style of racing is quite different from that of most of his peers. He uses a specially-designed three-wheeled racing wheelchair which he propels backwards. This had never interfered with his eligibility to compete in any event—until 2005. Ken really wanted to participate in the 50+ category of the 10 km road race at the 2005 World Games in Edmonton in July. However, the organizing committee repeatedly refused to allow him to enter due to a concern that he might run into and injure other participants. Ken persisted, however, citing his impressive “track record” at previous events, where he had never injured another competitor. The organizers finally agreed to his request, as long as an able-bodied competitor ran beside him. Ken took the gold medal in the race.

Ken continues to place a high priority on staying in shape. He visits a local fitness and training centre for athletes with disabilities several times a week to work out and goes swimming on a regular basis.

After he graduated from high school in 1975, Ken took several college courses in psychology and personal development. Then, in 1984, he took a computer accounting course. This sparked his interest in computers as a means for improving his ability to communicate with other people, who often find it difficult to understand his speech. A few years later, he bought his own machine and began teaching himself new programs, including website design.

Ken now does most of his communicating by e-mail and has developed a website where he posts information and pictures about his life. He has also developed a database program to document sports training results, which he is trying to market to sports administrators and coaches.

In addition to all his other activities, Ken has been engaged in a life-long crusade to promote inclusion and independence for people with disabilities.

He has worked as a volunteer for a number of organizations that lobby for equal rights for people with disabilities, including:

- The Alberta Committee of Persons with Disabilities;
- The Alberta Cerebral Palsy Sports Association;
- The Cerebral Palsy Association of Alberta, where he served on the Board of Directors;
- The City of Edmonton Disabled Adult Transportation Advisory Board. Ken is currently a member of the City of Edmonton Advisory Board on Services for Persons with Disabilities. He is also actively involved on the board's accessibility, transportation and communication subcommittees.

In Ken's words, "I get involved with causes that promote independent living and lifestyles of differently abled persons in the community. Basically I try and keep myself fit, active and live life to the fullest. But living with cerebral palsy is a real struggle at times."

*—Prepared by Audrey Stechynsky*

To learn more about Ken and his activities visit his website at:  
[www.backwheeler.ca](http://www.backwheeler.ca)