

A Winning Nature

This summer, North Carolina welcomes 7,000 athletes from 150 countries to the Special Olympics World Games. Meet one of our own—Marty Sheets—whose power to lift weights is equaled only by his power to uplift hearts.



PHOTOGRAPH BY LAVAGE GIBSON

Tiny” best describes Marty Sheets’ neat-as-a-pin room in the Greensboro home he shares with his parents, Iris and Dave. But even a casual glance at this small personal space tells volumes about



the athlete. In his three decades of competing in Special Olympics, Marty has saved countless keepsakes, especially the medal he won at the very first World Games in 1968 at Chicago’s Soldier Field. Since then, the Special Olympics has provided sports opportunities for Marty and multitudes of other people with special needs.

Marty treasures the memorabilia he’s collected, including this medal from the very first World Games in 1968.

He’ll aim for more awards—this time for powerlifting—in the 1999 Special Olympics World Summer Games in the Triangle area June 26–July 4. Already in his room gleam more than 100 medals for powerlifting, golf, swimming, snow skiing, tennis skills, and bowling. Dozens of

autographed golf balls line up neatly in a case like dimpled hard-boiled eggs in a crate. One framed picture captures Marty as he bears the Olympic torch for the Atlanta games through Greensboro streets. Other photographs show Marty with sports figures, actors, and politicians, including President Bill Clinton.

Short with a weightlifter’s build, the athlete’s youthful face belies his 46 years. His voice is soft and his face often changes, offering a shy smile one minute, an earnest look the next. When asked to comment on his medals, he replies, “I like winning. But if I don’t win, that’s fine.” His words echo the Special Olympics athletes’ oath: “Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.” (To page 8 CL)

Marty Sheets receives unqualified support from his parents, Dave and Iris. The family delights in the opportunities Marty has been given.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MARTY SHEETS



OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTOGRAPH

Far left: Golf remains Marty's favorite sport, and he often plays in fund-raising tournaments.

Left: At the 1995 World Games, Marty and President Clinton shared golf tips.

"It does not upset him not to win," his Dad says later. Dave is a retired retail executive and Iris is a homemaker. The Sheetses have two other children, Nancy Grantham and Jamie Gullidge, who both live nearby. "It *does* bother him if he doesn't do as well as he could."

When Marty was born, the doctor only told the first-time parents that the baby would need "tender loving

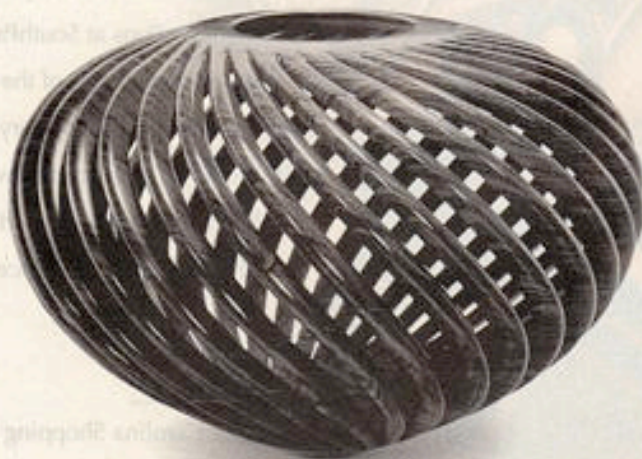
care." The Sheetses first learned their son had Down Syndrome when Marty was 3.

"I just thought it would be hopeless when we first heard of it," recalls Iris. "I didn't think he'd be able to learn anything because we didn't know back then. I thought, 'If we can make him a nice person, he can get by in this world.'"

Marty far surpassed that original

goal. He now serves as a global messenger for Special Olympics, soliciting volunteers and participants: "I tell them, 'Don't be scared. All it is is Special Olympics. Come be with your friends and family. Your parents will be there to cheer you on.'"

For Marty, the cheering starts at home. When he's surrounded by his parents and sisters, even someone who has just met him can see his po-



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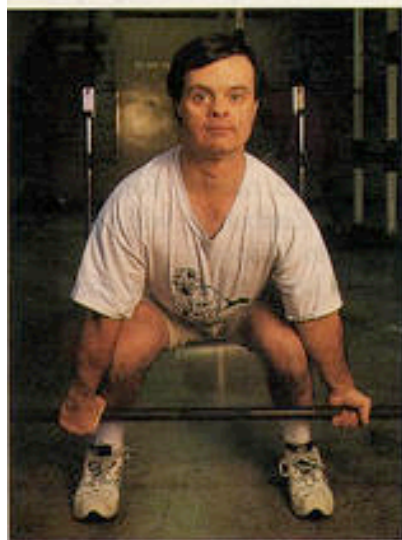
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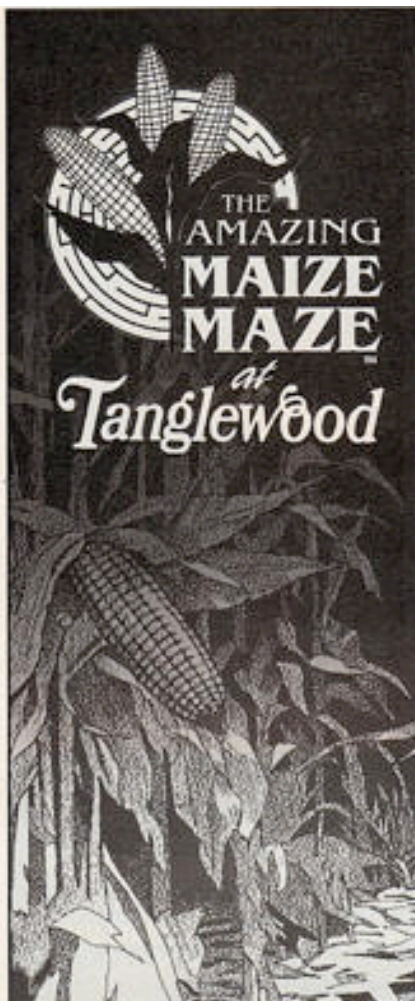
lite, pleasant personality take on wattage, as if he's tapped into an invisible force field. He beams as someone tells of the time a pint-size Jamie punted the ball into the back-side of a fellow flag football player. He chuckles when Dave is teased for unwittingly describing Marty's dancing as the "macaroni." And he keeps grinning when the ribbing turns to his own misadventure with the Secret Service.

Marty's name was on a seat directly behind President Clinton's chair at the opening ceremonies of the 1995 Special Olympics World Games. The President's protectors were concerned for Marty's safety, should an assassination attempt occur, so they asked him to move. But Marty's name was right there in black and white and he wasn't budging. Finally, the Secret Service resorted to a power more convincing than their own—Iris.

Along with the good-natured bantering, the family's esteem for Marty clearly shines through. He never complains and never says a bad word about another living soul, they say. "Marty is an example to me and my family and to Jamie and



Marty will compete in powerlifting this summer. He received a nomination in golf as well but qualified for powerlifting first. Athletes can compete in only one sport at the World Games.



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her family in bringing up our sons," says sister Nancy. Her 13-year-old son, David, and Jamie's 9-year-old boy, Michael, love to spend time with their Uncle Marty, who gives them pointers on wrestling. "Because of his determination and his positive attitude, he can achieve anything," Nancy says.

The people Marty works with at Hecht's Department Store also compliment him. "You can ask anybody—everybody loves him," says Wilbur Wright, who's worked alongside Marty for nearly 30 years in the store's stock room.

"There's nothing that he hasn't conquered," praises operations manager David Kemp. Marty has earned the company's highest employee honor, the diamond star.

In addition to his weekly 40-hour or more job, Marty's schedule includes Monday-night golf practice, Tuesday- and Thursday-night powerlifting practice, Wednesday-night Inner Rhythm Choir practice, and Friday-night Sunshine Club activ-

**MAKE FRIENDS AT
THE WORLD GAMES**

The 10th Special Olympics World Summer Games will be held at venues throughout Raleigh, Durham, Cary, and Chapel Hill June 26-July 4. Some 7,000 athletes from 150 countries, ranging from Albania to Zimbabwe, will participate in 19 sports.

"I know a lot of my friends are very excited [about the World Games being held in North Carolina]," says Special Olympics global messenger Marty Sheets.

"It's going to be an opportunity for the entire state to shine," says director of media relations Tina Wilson. "The eyes of the world will be on this area."

For details call 1-888-767-1999. Or check the Web site at www.99games.com.



Marty has worked at Hecht's Department Store in Greensboro for 27 years. "He's our superstar," says operations manager David Kemp.

ities at the YMCA. On Saturday, Marty indulges in a Kentucky Fried Chicken dinner—the only time, besides birthdays, the disciplined athlete deviates from his sports-minded diet. Sunday includes Happy Hearts Sunday School class at the First Baptist Church, followed by services at his family's church, the Presbyterian Church of the Covenant. There, he ushers, takes up collections, greets, and may be called on for a prayer.

Dave frequently updates the multi-page document of Marty's accomplishments. The father ends the list with this: "Marty's greatest happiness comes from helping others."

"Marty is the kindest person you'll ever meet," agrees Iris. She tells a story of a friend with brain cancer who asked Marty to pray for him. "He said he thought Marty had a direct line to God," the mother says. Could be. The friend's surgery went well and he fully recovered.

Divine intercession probably isn't at work when Marty practices powerlifting at the Greensboro Boxing Club and Gym. But something close to a miracle occurs when the 120-pound athlete dedicates himself to deadlifting weights much heavier than his own. At the last World Games, the then 110-pound Marty

Marty's greatest happiness comes from helping others.

Dave Sheets

deadlifted 220 pounds. Outside of competition, he has lifted as much as 240 pounds.

"I've never heard him say, 'I can't do that,'" says Al Lowe from the gym. "He will try."

Chances are, Marty will win more medals at this year's competition. But

perhaps as important, the '99 World Games will give the athlete—who truly considers strangers as friends he has yet to meet—a golden opportunity to win new chums.

After all, as Marty puts it, "Everybody in the whole world is my friend." *Nancy Dorman-Hickson*

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