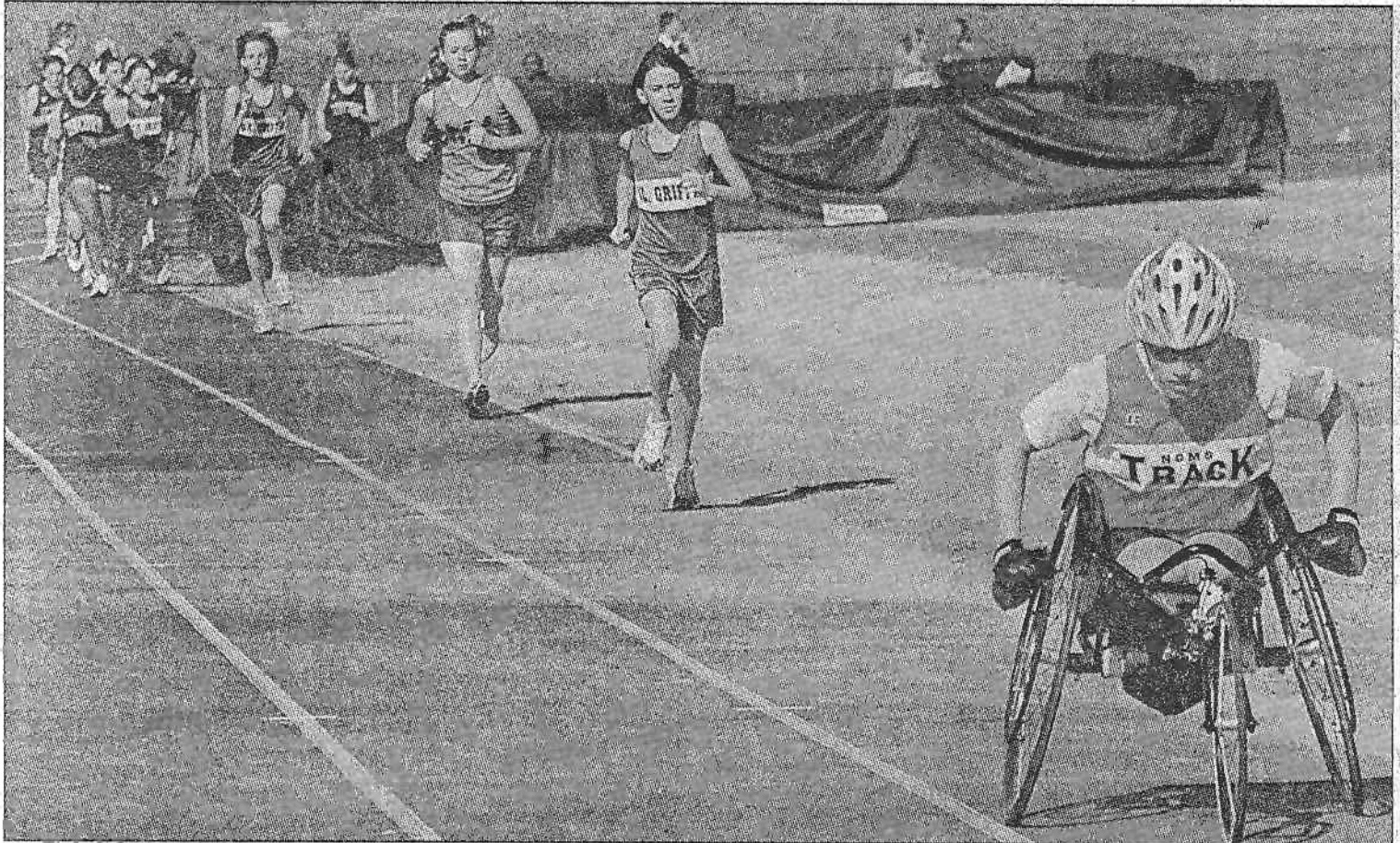


MEET AN EXTRAORDINARY ATHLETE



MARTY PRICE - SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER

Jill Moore, an eighth-grader at Northwest Cabarrus Middle School, leads the other athletes during the second lap of the 1600-meter run.

RACING WITH THE REST

At Northwest Middle, Jill Moore runs track in her wheelchair

BY JOE HABINA
Special Correspondent

The first time Kamesha Atwell saw schoolmate Jill Moore at track and field practice at Northwest Middle School, she never thought they would be teammates.

Atwell assumed that Moore, who uses a wheelchair, probably was there to serve as a team manager.

Then she saw her race.

After that, it didn't take long for Moore to earn the respect of Atwell and the rest of her teammates.

Moore has competed in sports since she was 9, but until middle school, almost exclusively with other people with disabilities. As she wheels through races that everyone else runs in, participating in middle school track and field is one of her two mainstreamed athletic endeavors (summer league swimming is the other).

But no one considers her a fifth wheel.

Born with a birth defect called spina bifida, Moore lacks strength and mobility in her legs. She has had four surgeries to correct a tethering in her spinal

cord, the first one occurring when she was 8 months old.

Love of competition

Moore said she "had no interest in sports whatsoever" when she saw her first wheelchair event, a game of rugby being played by adults.

"I saw how violent it was," she says. "Grown men were falling out of their wheelchairs."

Still, a couple of weeks later — at the encouragement of her parents, Gary and Patty Moore



Moore

— Jill was playing in her first wheelchair basketball tournament in Baltimore. Her team played in two games, then got stuck in a blizzard of 3 feet of snow.

Nothing has slowed her down since. Moore fell in love with the competition and has gone on to compete in wheelchair sports such as track and field, swimming, skiing, water skiing and tennis. She also bicycles and scuba-dives.

She plays many of her sports through an organization called Abilities Unlimited, which was founded by Gary and Patty and other parents of disabled children interested in competing.

Most of its athletes are from within a 25-mile radius of Con-

cord, but they compete all around the country.

Not whether, but how

Moore first got the bug last spring to compete in track and field for her middle school. She talked about it with school administrators, who were very supportive, but she never got on the track. Her fourth tethered cord surgery, and another surgery to correct scoliosis, occurred within a couple of weeks of one another.

She expressed an interest again this year. Scott Barringer, director of athletics and sports medicine for the Cabarrus County Schools, set up a meeting with the athletic directors from the South Piedmont Middle School Conference, in which Northwest competes, to discuss her participation.

At the meeting, there was never a question whether Moore would participate, only one about how her participation would be scored during a meet. In fairness to the other ambulatory athletes, it was decided that she would receive one point every time she beats a national standard time for wheelchair athletes in a certain event.

'It's crazy!'

Every day, for practices and meets, Patty drives her from the school down the gravel road to the track, because access is not

wheelchair-friendly. Using a wheelchair designed for racing, Moore competes in the one-mile, 800-meter and 400-meter events. In three official meets so far, she has earned a point in each event every single time.

Moore does not distinguish herself in the 400-meter race, which is more of a sprint. But in the endurance-driven 800-meter and one-mile races, Moore often finishes well ahead of the competition.

"That girl can run!" seventh-grade teammate Will England said. "She will wheel, run, whatever. She will lap some people two times. I've seen her do it. It's crazy!"

A first for everything

Moore and her parents have already been in discussion with Barringer about her participating in high school track and field next year. As far as they all know, only one wheelchair athlete has competed for her high school in state history, but she was not permitted to earn points for her team.

The state high school athletic association does not have a system in place for scoring wheelchair athletes. The Moores and Barringer hope that will change.

There's a first for everything — a phrase that has always described Jill Moore.

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