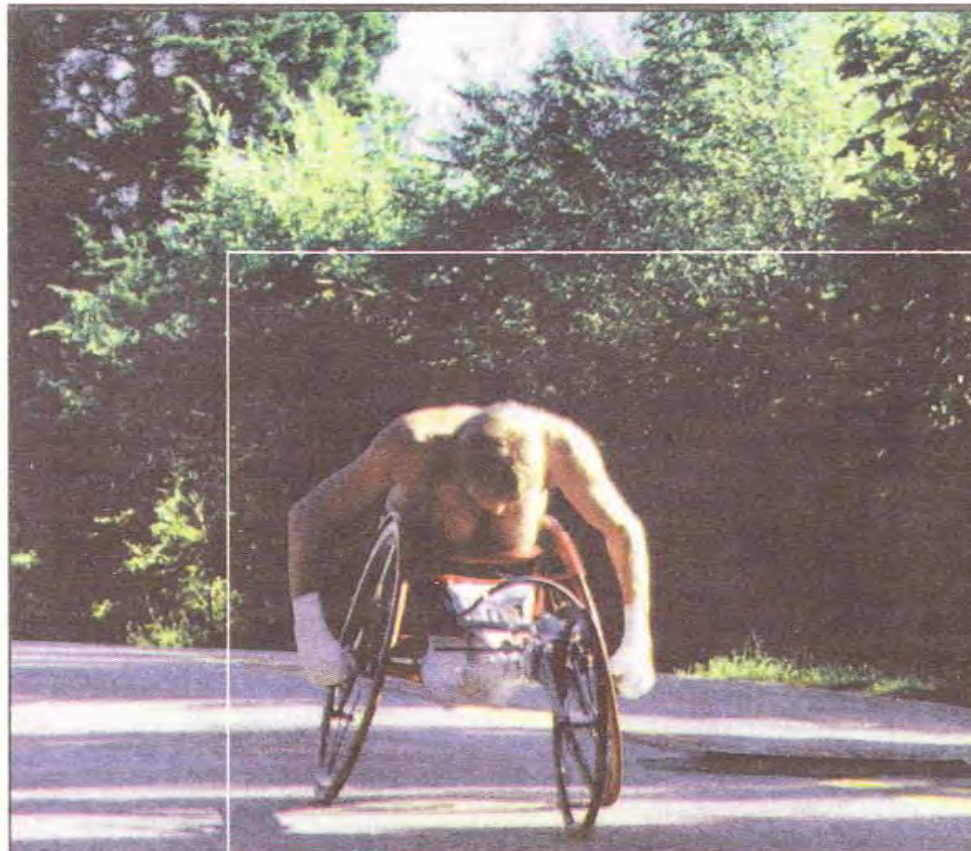


Murfreesboro Sun

Sunshine Media, LLC

Murfreesboro and Rutherford County's Weekly Community Newspaper

October 4, 2000 ■ VOL.3 ■ ISSUE 40



Barton Dodson of Murfreesboro works a daily 20-30 bike course to prepare for the gold "Down Under".
photo by Dean Leonard

GOING FOR GOLD...

Murfreesboro "Mate" Prepares to Go 'Down Under'...But May Come Out on Top.

by Dean Leonard, Guest Writer

Morning sunlight filtered through the trees, scattering deep blue shadow leaves across his bare shoulders as he made his way up Murfreesboro's busy Greenland Avenue.

Arms pumped rapidly, propelling wheels that turned effortlessly; an unusual diversion on our otherwise routine drive. Passing by, I tapped the brake and glanced over, noticing his head down low in anticipation for the incline ahead; his teeth clenched from exertion, but a strong determination showing on his brow. Admiration seeped in and chased away pity as I continued

to observe his relentless effort in the rear view mirror. My children and I had often seen the "wheelchair guy" on our way to school; their sudden silence letting me know they were watching, too. His recurring presence on that uneven stretch of pavement every morning served as a reminder to us that climbing out of bed and walking to the breakfast table is truly a blessing.

After a series of phone calls in search of his identity, I learned that not only was this man a daily inspiration to my family...he was training for Sydney's 2000 Paralympic Games.

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Going For Gold...

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At the age of 42, Murfreesboro's own Barton Dodson will soon head 'Down Under' in yet another quest for gold. With 19 Paralympic medals to his credit - 13 of them gold - it's sure to be a successful one.

Growing up in Laager, Tennessee, Dodson possessed a love for sports; particularly basketball, but in one tragic afternoon, a diving accident in a neighbor's swimming pool left him a quadriplegic at sixteen. Soon after complicated surgery to repair his shattered spine, doctors informed his mother that he would be completely reliant on her for the rest of his life. Hearing the grim news for himself, Dodson, a young

man who had not yet lived out his life, set out to prove them wrong. By the time he finished rehabilitation in Louisville, Kentucky three months later, textbooks were being rewritten, and those same doctors were video taping his remarkable progress. Even then, Barton Dodson was competing in a race for independence and successfully gaining speed.

In 1976, Dodson left home to attend Middle Tennessee State University; not knowing his life would again take a major turn just three years later. On the urging of friends who competed in wheelchair track and field events, he went from spectator to fierce competitor in a matter of minutes; coming away with 2 silver medals and a bronze for his effort. "I went there to watch, and ended up winning a few medals," he quipped. "I've been doing it ever since."

True to his word, Dodson has been a contender in 4 Paralympic Games: Stokes Mandeville, Seoul, Barcelona, and Atlanta. In a spectacular show of endurance from Barcelona, he won 8 gold medals and simultaneously set 8 world records in the process - continuing to hold 3 of those records today.

Over 4000 athletes from 125 countries are



Barton Dodson trains for the 2000 Paralympic Games at the track at MTSU.

photo by Dean Leonard

expected to compete in the Sydney Paralympics this year - larger than the 1972 Olympics held in Munich, Germany. Surprisingly, the "para" in Paralympic means that the games run "parallel" or coincide with the Olympics; not in reference to paraplegics as is often assumed. Athletes who are physically disabled, but extremely skilled, must qualify in order to compete in a wide range of events; such as track and field, swimming, wheelchair basketball, and cycling. Dodson will compete in the 200M, 400M, 800M and 1500M races; he also hopes to participate in the wheelchair marathon. Beginning this year, Paralympians will don the same uniforms as their Olympic counterparts. Dodson is relieved that the U.S. has allowed this change; he feels that it gives Paralympic athletes the respect they deserve.

His weekly training schedule has prepared him well, with 4-6 road course workouts of 20-30 miles each, along with lifting weights and a few practice runs on the track at MTSU. Incredibly enough, he broke three fingers a couple of weeks ago when they became caught in the spokes, but he claims it hasn't slowed his pace.

Dodson's wife, Jan, and their three boys, Michael, Ellis, and Casey, will be in Sydney to cheer him on, along with several other family members. Unfortunately, they must pay their own way; the 1996 Games in Atlanta marked the first time expenses were covered for Paralympic athletes.

Dodson counts on his wife's assistance before he competes. "I like for Jan to come and help me get placed in my chair and help get my gloves on," he said. "I hope she'll be able to get a pass and come onto the practice field with me; I tend to be grouchy with others when I'm trying to concentrate on the race ahead...she knows what I want."

He playfully recalled meeting Jan at MTSU. "I had raced for 6 years before I met her. She worked for John Harris over at Disabled Students Services and she kept chasing me around trying to get a date," he said grinning, "but she tells people just the opposite."

Dodson said visiting Australia will be a thrill for them. "I just hope we get to see some of it," he chuckled, "we don't get much time to sight-see...I usually eat, sleep and race, that's about it." Then, he shared a fond memory. "I carried my son Michael up to the podium with me to receive the silver medal in Atlanta four years ago... he was 3 1/2 years old, but he still remembers that moment."

I asked if he thought chances were good for winning a gold medal in Sydney. "I know I'll win one...there's no IF about it" he reprimanded gently, "You can't enter these things thinking you might win."

In what little time he has left in a day, Dodson likes to watch his kids participate in soccer and karate. "I'm a busy man," he offered, "I really don't have a lot of spare time." He owns two businesses, including Music City Medical Supply on Main Street; working hard so that Jan can stay at home with their children.

With unsurpassed self-reliance, a family to call his own, and the will to keep striving for all things possible, it sounds as if Barton Dodson has already won the biggest race of his life.

Bringing home a gold medal from Sydney, Australia would just be icing on the cake.