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HIGH SCHOOLS OPEN DOOR FOR WHEELCHAIR ATHLETES



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HELEN NEWMAN, left, a freshman at Granby High, and Stephanie Marquez, a junior at Sport and Medical Sciences Academy in Hartford, head into the first turn of the 400-meter race at Canton High School Tuesday afternoon. Visit courant.com/track0412 for more photos.

TEAM INCLUSION

CANTON — Connecticut ran a little faster Tuesday. As the spring rain surrendered to a brisk, sunny late afternoon, yes, Connecticut threw a little farther and jumped a little higher.

"We made history in our state," said Stephanie Marquez.

"Definitely, I think we did," said Helen Newman.

At a track and field meet hosted by Canton High School, Marquez and Newman became the first wheelchair athletes in state history to compete alongside their able-bodied high school peers as full members of their teams.

Marquez, a 16-year-old junior at Sport and Medical Sciences Academy in Hartford, competed in the discus, the 100,

JEFF JACOBS
COLUMN



HELEN NEWMAN, left, and Stephanie Marquez became the state's first wheelchair athletes to compete on their high school track teams. Marquez placed third in the discus in dual meets against Canton and Granby.

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"It is cool competing with the able-bodied. I'm in the chair, but I can do what they do."

Stephanie Marquez, a junior at Sport and Medical Sciences Academy in Hartford



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HELEN NEWMAN, left, of Granby High, and Stephanie Marquez of SMSA wait to be called to the starting line for the 100-meter race at Canton High School. They competed in a separate heat, but their times counted with their teammates' in the meet scoring.

JACOBS

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200 and 400.

Newman, a 14-year-old freshman at Granby, did all those events except the discus.

The two have known each other for nearly a decade. As accomplished disabled athletes, they have competed against each other and they have competed with each other in regional and national competitions. Marquez has competed internationally. They hold records.

This day was not about records. This day really wasn't about how good the two are — although they are plenty good. This day was about how good we can be.

"As a parent, you see the different struggles the disabled have, so for me this day is beyond Stephanie and beyond Helen," Marquez's mom, Irma Carrillo, said. "A door opens today."

"I'm hoping this event brings awareness to coaches, to schools to be more inclusive. This is beyond the track. I hope they are an inspiration for others: Look at them. They had a goal. They went for it. I can do the same."

Yes, this day was about state history. This day was about inclusion.

"It is something that had to be done," said Marquez, born with spina bifida. "It is a very important day. This is paving the way for different athletes coming after me."

"The other students at my school were very excited for me. They came up today and were like, 'You're on the news!' I have a very good support system at the school."

The two have represented Connecticut at cruiser wheelchair races for Hospital For Special Care Adaptive Sports in New Britain.

Marquez, from Middletown, is an internationally ranked athlete in shot put, discus and javelin. She competed in the Junior World Championships for Team USA in England, Netherlands and Puerto Rico. She plans to compete in the Paralympic trials in Charlotte, N.C., June 30-July 2.

The girls know elite competition. On this day, they revealed in a local high school track meet. On this day, one was a Granby Bear. The other was an SMSA Tiger.

"This is fun, definitely," Newman said. "The competition is the same in a lot of ways. The environment is different. It was great to have a lot of the kids cheer me on."

"It is cool competing with the able-bodied," Marquez said. "I'm in the chair, but I can do what they do. It's funny. Helen and I were talking about how we were nervous today. That's why it was good for both of us to be out here together, not just one of us. We were excited."

They will train with their high school teams this spring. They will compete in meets, albeit separately from this point. And after the season, they will resume out-of-school competition and training.

"I think it's pretty amazing that Canton is the first high school to do so," said Janet Connolly, program manager for Hospital For Special Care Adaptive Sports. "We couldn't be happier or prouder of them. For both of them, I'm sure it's a dream they've had for many years. Training with us throughout the year, to finally have an equal place in their high school, this is a big deal. The CIAC [which became the 25th state to do so] has made a big step into full inclusion."

Marquez, older, stronger, is more advanced, but Newman is a gutsy competitor. The two were the only ones in their heats racing against each other, but their performances

counted against their able-bodied competitors. Marquez finished seventh overall of 13 competitors in the discus (48 feet). Because it was a series of dual meets and not a quad meet, Marquez did score by finishing third against Canton and third against Granby. She also finished fifth against Avon.

The two are always talking, Carrillo said. When Helen started high school in the fall, she expressed to Stephanie an interest in competing in high school track. At that point, Stephanie was attending a performing arts school. She applied and got into SMSA.

The families asked if the girls could compete on their high school teams. The schools reached out to the CIAC. Can it be done? The CIAC cleared it with the National Federation of State High School Associations. As far as the meet Tuesday, Connolly said Canton coach Tim O'Donnell made it happen. Carrillo got an email from Connolly about a week ago.

"My reaction was, 'Oh my God, this is great,'" Carrillo said. "I had been a little hesitant at first. But the school has been so supportive, the coaches been supportive."

Connolly, who has worked with disabled athletes for two decades, gave some general guidelines from other states. There's nothing set in stone right now, she said. Each state has been deciding what events wheelchair athletes can compete in.

"For the most part [with the CIAC], it's any event they choose," Connolly said. "Although this is groundbreaking, because there are no standards for wheelchair athletes in Connecticut, the girls are held to standards for ambulatory athletes. That is something every state is addressing in their own way. There isn't a national standard."

"No one has ever done this in Connecticut as a full

member of the team before, competing for points. You're not just showing up, warming up and cheering from the sidelines. You are a part of the program. The way it works out, this might be the only time [all spring] they race against each other. This is a great kickoff. This is a big day."

Granby girls coach Kim Spellacy was all in from the moment she heard about it.

"I thought it was awesome," she said.

Spellacy said the team does, too. "Oh my gosh, they love Helen," she said. "They've been amazing with her. She's just another teammate."

As a special education teacher for Hartford schools, Spellacy says she holds a particular interest in these girls. She also can identify with overcoming significant adversity. Spellacy was in training to qualify for the Boston Marathon when she woke up one morning about a year ago suffering a stroke. Devastated she couldn't qualify, she was delighted to find out she could become part of Tedy's Team of Tedy Bruschi. Cleared to run, she'll be in the marathon Monday to raise awareness and try to raise \$4,000 to fight stroke.

"This is a great day for Helen and Stephanie, but I think it's really great for their teammates, too, even down to them seeing how the chair's loaded on the bus," Spellacy said. "There are kids who had never seen that before. This gives us a chance to grow together."

"Look, an athlete is an athlete," Connolly said. "Whether you use a wheelchair or you walk, you are equal."

The CIAC recognized this. History. Inclusion. On Tuesday, thanks to Stephanie Marquez and Helen Newman, all of us in Connecticut ran a little faster, threw a little farther, jumped a little higher.