

In Loving Memory of Mike Dempsey

by Pam Ramsey

To know Mike was a blessing to everyone who crossed his path. To be in Mike's company was to be humbled by his larger than life presence. Hearing Mike's deep resonating voice (one that any radio personality would envy) and hearing his contagious laughter, accompanied by the twinkle in his eye, touched your heart. Mike's friendship, whether it was through table tennis, the paralympics, his business(es) or everyday life, was heartfelt and sincere. He was not only your friend ... you were his.

Born Sept. 8, 1956 in Columbus, Ohio, Michael distinguished himself throughout his life. At 6 months, his doctor gave him a normal virus shot, but something abnormal happened and Mike lost the use of his legs. "With me," he says, "being in a wheelchair wasn't a matter of adapting. You might have a period of bitterness when you have something and lose it, but this being the only thing I ever knew, I'm not bitter. I was always a pretty happy kid."

At the young age of 13, Michael attended his first National Wheelchair Games and, although an unseeded table tennis newcomer, he beat a veteran for the first of what was to become 30 gold medals. In July of 1971, Michael started a long career of international competition and championships with a gold medal at the Pan-Am Wheelchair Games. The next year started his Paralympic career with the first of many medals at Heidelberg and, in 1973, the World Championships in England. All of this while still a student at Gahanna Lincoln High School. At his graduation, Michael was acknowledged for his scholarship, character, leadership and service. These were attributes he personified throughout his life.

Over the course of Mike's table tennis career, he was a competitive athlete in eight consecutive Paralympic Games (1972 to 2000), he won ten Paralympic medals, two of which were gold. Mike also competed in nine World Championships, bringing home a total of twelve medals, seven of these were gold. And to top hat off, Mike has been described by table tennis coach and former International Paralympic Table Tennis Chairman, Christian Lillieroos as the greatest table tennis player that ever lived. This is no doubt a feat that even Waldner has not accomplished.

In Sydney, Australia for the 2000 Paralympic Games, Mike was selected by the U.S. Delegation Sport Team Captains to be the U.S. flag bearer, representing all of America and all the sports of America. The picture of him leading the team was broadcast across the country and he was quoted saying, "For me, there's nothing more gratifying at the games than seeing the flag on the podium or walking behind it into the stadium." Later that year, culminating an astounding 30-year table tennis career, Mike was inducted into the National Wheelchair Athletic Association Hall of Fame and as Male Athlete of the Year. He was also inducted into the Ohio Wheelchair Athletic Association in 1981, the California Table Tennis Hall of Fame in 2001 and the USATT Hall of Fame in 2002. Mike also was a long time member of the San Diego Table Tennis Association, had previously served on the SDTTA Board of Directors and was awarded the prestigious SDTTA Hall of Fame / Lifetime Membership Award.

In 1972, Michael met Rainer Kuschall at a table tennis tournament in Europe. The friendship developed into a business relationship and with him Michael founded, and was president of, Kuschall of America, which designed, manufactured, and marketed ultra-light wheelchairs. Subsequent to the sale of Kuschall, he served as a medical industry consultant. In 1996, Michael became a director of Greif Inc. Michael Gasser, chairman and CEO of Greif Inc., stated, "Mike Dempsey was an inspiration to all of us through his energy, passion and commitment [...] We will miss his wisdom and counsel."

Mike Met Shannon Kirk back in 1978 while she worked as a bank teller. Shannon eventually worked along side Mike in his interest with Kuschall from and they were married August 3, 1991. Together they built an amazing life and traveled often to places such as Hawaii, New Zealand and Australia. They adopted their infant son Henry from Kazakhstan in December 2003, after a lengthy and at-times heartbreaking process. Since the adoption, Henry and Mike were not only father and son, they were in all senses of the words, best friends. They were inseparable. They played with legos or cards and enjoyed football, baseball, basketball, and, of course, table tennis together. To see Henry riding on Mike's lap, hanging on the back of Mike's wheelchair or playing under the ping pong table was a wonderful delight.

From his 2000 Olympic and Paralympic players party in Olivenhain, CA to his current orange orchard ranch house in Rancho Sante Fe. Mike welcomed everyone into his home with an open heart and open arms... and fresh squeezed orange juice. Mike was truly one of a kind.

During the weekend of April 25-26, Mike participated in the North American Table Tennis Championships in San Diego. There he competed as fiercely as ever and visited with former Paralympic team member and doubles partner Andre Scott, who stated Mike had been training and might be interested in competing once again in the upcoming PanAm Games. With little Henry in tow, wife Shannon by his side, and in overall good health, Mike greeted old friends and acquaintances and shook hands with friends as he left the building.

The following morning, Mike flew to Ohio to attend a Board of Directors meeting with Greif Inc. It was after the board meeting that Mike left us, literally in the middle of laughing-- laughing with that big booming laugh of his-- as he talked with other Greif directors outside the meeting room. In the middle of this laugh, Mike suffered a massive brain aneurism and was rushed to the hospital where he died shortly afterward. Mike, at 52 years of age, was gone. Gone from this thing we call life. Mike was bigger than life and he lived it that way. He was humble, he was loving, and he was thoughtful. He was a son, brother, grandson, uncle, husband, father, and everybody's friend. He was a very successful businessman. Mike enjoyed life to the fullest, never letting obstacles stand in his way. Because of all this, though Mike is gone, he will not be forgotten.

Michael was preceded in death by his parents, John and Naomi Dempsey and one sister. Surviving Michael are his wife, Shannon Kirk Dempsey; one son, Henry Coyle Dempsey; and four sisters.

The United States Table Tennis Foundation, a charitable non-profit organization, has set up a Mike Dempsey Memorial area on their website where friends and family can share and post condolences or learn more about Mike's accomplishments and titles. The foundation will earmark contributions in the name of Mike Dempsey for a long lasting memorial tribute. For more information or to make your contribution, please go to www.USTTF.org



Michael Henry Dempsey (1956-2009)

Please visit the Foundation's website at www.USTTF.org to find out more about Mike, to give your condolences or to make contributions to the Mike Dempsey Memorial Fund.

REMEMBERING MIKE DEMPSEY

Mike Dempsey

Member of the following Halls of Fame

- Ohio Wheelchair Sports
- USA Wheelchair Sports
- California Table Tennis
- USA Table Tennis
- San Diego Table Tennis Association

Paralympian 1972-2000

- 10 Medals (Two Gold Medals)

World Championships

- 12 Medals (Seven Gold Medals)

