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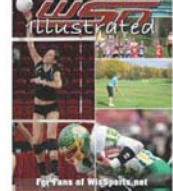
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World Games Athlete Victorious at State Competition

posted by Travis Wilson on 2/11/2010

World Games Athlete Victorious at State Competition
By Christina Harris - Guest Contributor to WisSports.net

Adam Benner, a senior at Tomahawk High School, manages his personal time like an accountant balances his company's budget...very carefully. Like any other busy 18-year-old boy, Benner divides his time between homework, sports practice, and snowmobiling. Adam may blend into the crowd at school, but unlike many of his peers, he was born with a mild case of autism...and a knack for cross-country skiing.



Whether he's in the classroom or on the snow-covered ski trail, his cognitive disability has not hindered his success. Adam started training for cross-country five years ago and has reaped the rewards for the past two years, attending local, state, even international competitions.

On January 30-31, Adam joined more than 300 athletes at the 2010 Special Olympics Wisconsin State Winter Games in Wausau. He was the second athlete out of nearly 50 skiers to cross the finish line in both the Nordic-1-3K Free Cross Country and Nordic-1-5K Freestyle Cross Country races.

"When Adam steps up to the line, he is always raring to go. He always gives 100 percent," said Special Olympics Coach, Bonnie Kahn, who has sculpted Benner into the athlete he is today. According to Kahn, motivation has propelled Benner to climb the mountain of opportunities Special Olympics has to offer.

Last year, he joined nearly 3,000 athletes from 85 different countries and at the age of 16 became the youngest athlete to represent Wisconsin at the 2009 Special Olympics World Games. He returned home with three shiny, gold medals hanging around his neck for wins in the 1K Race Freestyle, 3K Race Classical, and 4X1K Relay Freestyle Cross Country Ski Competitions.

"Special Olympics makes me happy because I compete in events, and when I do well, I am very proud of myself," Benner said, recalling his memories of triumph from these competitions. Benner said he enjoys hearing the crowd chant for him just as much as he likes cheering for his teammates.

According to Benner's mother, Julie, playing sports has not only improved her son's self-confidence, it has increased his scholarly success as well. As a child, Benner did not react well to change, but after he started competing in Special Olympics four years ago, he exerts greater control over his emotions.

"Adam has improved 90 percent since he was young," Julie said. "If you walked into a room, you would not think he was autistic."

While Benner struggles with basic motor skills, like writing, he is very proficient with other skills, like riding a bike. Benner attends mainstream classes, except in subjects like math where he needs additional instruction.



"People used to make fun of him when he was little," said Julie. "But it is different now that he is in sports. Now people cheer for him."

Coach Kahn said Benner practices on roller skis to build his endurance and improve his technique in the off-season. He cross-trains by participating in bowling and athletics. Kahn agrees that Benner's abilities and attitude have greatly evolved since he first started competing and he has earned the respect of his classmates.

"Adam has the backing of the entire student body and for the local Special Olympics athletes that is huge," Kahn says. "He has helped [build] awareness about people with disabilities among the other students. They see him and understand he has the ability to compete like anyone else."

For more information on the Special Olympics Winter Games, visit SpecialOlympicsWisconsin.org.

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