

# Water-skiing champion featured on Undercover Boss

Joelle Tomlinson  
Saskatoon Express

Ryan Riehl walks with confidence around the tables, corners and chairs at Eastside Mario's. It's hard not to marvel as he grabs a stool, sitting upside-down on a chair, and puts it on the ground so he can sit down before his shift begins.

"Eastside Mario's was the only restaurant that would hire me. I just needed somebody to take a chance, let me show that I can do the job," said Riehl, who started losing his sight at nine years old due to a tumour on his optic nerve. "One or two places up and down Eighth Street gave me a shot, but it was the way the kitchen was set up that was tough. Here, I've got my own dish-pit area, and it's two steps one way, two steps the other. People respect that space."

Recently featured on W Network's show Undercover Boss Canada, Riel said he wondered why he was teaching the new employee how to wash dishes. The "new employee" was actually John Rothschild, the CEO of Prime Restaurants Inc.

"I thought, 'Well this is weird,'" said Riehl with a laugh. "But it's my job, and if that's what they want me to do, why not?"

Riehl was asked by Rothschild what would help him in the dish-pit area. His answer was simple: New lighting.

"I see shapes and shadows. So it's like driving your car and looking into the sun. Now imagine looking into the sun every single day while you're working," explained Riehl. "I've tried wearing sunglasses; it doesn't work. They said they were going to put in a dimmer switch. It hasn't been done just yet, but I hope it's still in the process."

But dim lighting at his workplace is not the only barrier Riehl has to face with impaired vision. The 28-year-old faces a completely different type of challenge as well: Jumping, carving and doing tricks while being pulled behind a boat on water skis.

Just because Riehl can't see, doesn't

mean he can't ski.

"I got a phone call from a coach who had heard about me in 2008. They were looking for someone with a visual impairment, to see if they could teach them water-skiing," said Riehl. "I had downhill skied when I was a kid, which was a great background. The coaches knew there were blind people out there in the world doing this, so why couldn't Canada get somebody out there, too."

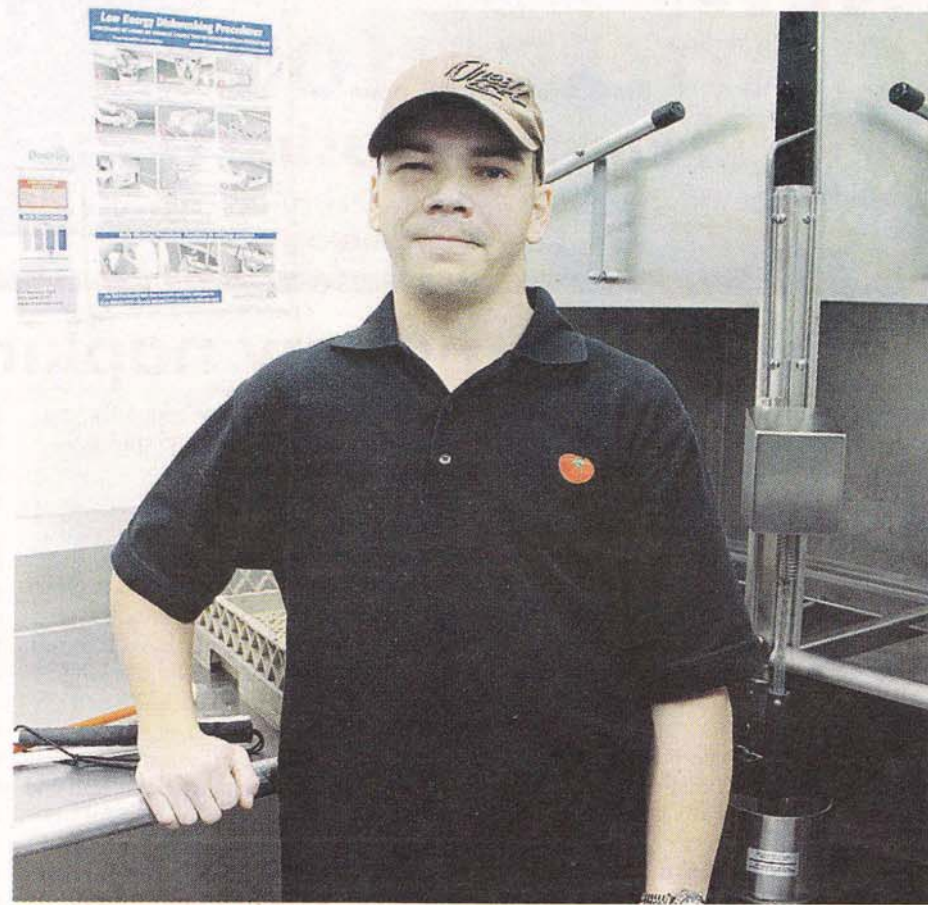
"I got up right off the bat. I went three times around the lake. Within two weeks, I was at Winnipeg Disabled Nationals and I got into the record books of Water Ski and Wakeboard Canada."

Riehl's immediate success was not lost on coaches LeRoss Calnek and Dave Wassill. Together, the three train at the Saskatoon Water Ski Club, working on body-positioning techniques and side-by-side skiing.

"I guess we're one, or three-of-kind, in Canada right now," said Riehl. "There are no other competitive blind water-skiers in Canada to my knowledge at this level. They've really got to come up with more coaches. Especially with blind skiing, you have to be able to trust your coach. I'm one of the only blind water-skiers that jumps."

"It's the most exciting event that I do. My coach will ski beside me and start a countdown when I'm getting close from the 600-foot buoy, right up to ready-set-jump. They veer off at the last minute. It's a split second, and the countdown is so important; it's all body position and that's why we train so hard, because I'm relying completely on that position and on my coach's timing."

At this point in his life, Riehl is breaking his own records year after year. This year, he broke the 2012 Canadian Adapted Championships distance after landing a 14.3-metre jump. Riehl placed first overall at the same event, after competing in the slalom, trick and jump categories. Most recently, Riehl was named the 2012 Disabled



Ryan Riehl started losing his sight when he was nine (Photo by Joelle Tomlinson)

Athlete of the Year for water-skiing.

Riehl's next big challenge lies in a trip across the world. He plans to travel to Milan, Italy, for the 2013 World Disabled Water Ski Championships, where he will compete against the best water-skiers in the world.

"I've got a lot of training to do. It's pretty amazing to compete against the top of the top. It's a big-time event," said Riehl. "It's what I live for; it's why I do this. People may not know too much about this sport, but this is the highest it gets."

Despite losing his vision, Riehl remains optimistic about the future, and hopes that his experience will inspire other disabled

athletes to follow their dreams.

"I only started when I was 22. I was at the point in my life where I needed to do something, and look where I am now. I think the message I would want to get across it to keep fighting for everything that you want," said Riehl. "Whether it's within sports or the arts or business, people aren't going to give you what you want. You gotta fight and be able to make it happen for yourself."

To learn more about Ryan Riehl and his water-skiing journey, go to [www.ryanriehl.com](http://www.ryanriehl.com) or follow his handle, @RiehlRyan, on Twitter.