

Championship in sight for blind water-skier

BY SEAN TREMBATH, THE STARPHOENIX AUGUST 14, 2012



Submitted photo

Riding water skis off ramps is a daunting prospect for anyone, but imagine having to do it without being able to see the ramp coming.

Such is the reality of Ryan Riehl, Canada's only blind water-skiing competitor. With seven years of experience in the sport, the Saskatoon native continues to improve and work toward a world championship.

On Monday, Riehl jumped 14.3 metres in the adaptive ski jumping event at the 2012 Canadian Water Ski Championships in Calgary, breaking his own Canadian record for athletes with a disability of 12.6 metres.

"It was a great feeling. I felt good going into the event, and actually landing, and feeling that rush that goes through my body when I'm flying through the air," said Riehl on Tuesday.

"When I landed, and I actually skied up beside my coach, I didn't know I'd broken it, but I knew I'd went far. I could feel it from the length of time I was in the air."

Riehl competes in three events: jump, trick and slalom. For jumping, his coach Dave Wassill skis beside him and verbally tells him how close they are to the ramp. At the last moment, Wassill tells him to get set then pulls away and goes around.

For slalom, visually impaired skiers use a device called a bat blaster. Rather than going around buoys,

the device measures the angle of the skier's rope to verify they have slalomed the correct distance in the allotted amount of space. A horn sounds to let Riehl know when to turn the other direction.

Riehl started losing his sight at age 9 due to a tumour on his optic nerves. Within a few years his sight was completely gone, save for a very small amount of light sensitivity.

He had always been involved in sports, and his parents immediately got him involved in goal ball, a sport for blind athletes. While he enjoyed the competition, it wasn't quite what he was after.

"I liked it, but I wanted to be outside. Being cooped up in a gym was a big problem. I wanted to be able to feel the sun," he said.

After a while Riehl took up downhill skiing, which he is able to do with the help of a spotter who communicates with him via a walkie-talkie.

Then in 2007, when he was 22, he got an opportunity to water ski. Sport Canada had provided Water Ski and Wakeboard Saskatchewan with funding and training to help them get athletes with disabilities involved with the sport. Riehl was invited to a one-day clinic at the Rathole, a small man-made lake in Saskatoon used for training provincial athletes.

"My first time was an amazing experience, and it's an experience I'll never forget," said Riehl. "I'd never felt that way before. I'd downhill skied before, so I figured I could do it, but the feeling is totally different, just feeling the wind in your face."

He was hooked, and immediately wanted to pursue the sport.

"We took him out skiing, and then he was like, 'What time are you picking me up tomorrow?' But it was just a one-day clinic, so we figured, 'OK, what are we going to do?'" said Wassill, who has coached Riehl since the beginning.

They decided to start training him alongside other club-level water skiers. Less than two weeks later, they took him to Winnipeg, where he became the first blind competitor at Canadian nationals. He hasn't stopped since.

In 2009 he travelled to the world championships in Vichy, France, taking bronze in all three events and the overall category. He duplicated that feat at worlds in Ohio. Next year he will travel to Milan, Italy for another shot at it.

On Wednesday, Riehl will have a chance to extend his record during his second jumping run. After nationals, his next competition will be in Sacramento, CA in two weeks.

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