

Sports

Taking a leap of faith

By Kathryn Willms
for The Saskatoon Sun

As Ryan Riehl washes dishes in the East Side Mario's kitchen, he dreams of the water. When the sun is out, he yearns to be training at the Rathole, a small man-made lake in north industrial Saskatoon that is home to the Saskatoon Water Ski club.

Often — when the day has been cool and rainy and there's no waterskiing to look forward to after his shift — he thinks back to ski camp in Jackson, Miss., where the water always feels soft like a calm day without breezes. Lately, Riehl's been distracted by the idea of France. He wonders how the water will feel beneath his feet on a different continent. He looks forward to sitting on a ritzy patio after a long day on the lake, enjoying a glass of wine and listening to the French voices around him. But he also worries about the amount of work left to do to be ready for the biggest competition of his life, the Disabled World Waterski championship. After all, Riehl is a Canada's only competitive visually impaired waterskier. By touching down in Vichy, France, in two weeks, he'll already have accomplished something that he never thought possible. But that won't be enough for this 24-year-old. He dreams of defying the odds yet again and winning a medal at his first world championship.

"I'm not going to become world champion right off the bat," he says. "but I hope I come back with some sort of a medal."

Competing in France from Aug. 31-Sept. 6 is the culmination of a journey that began two years ago for Riehl. One day, he got a phone call from waterski coach LeRoss Calnek asking if he was interested in the sport. Riehl had skied on snow as a child but since he had lost his sight to a tumour in Grade 4, had never imagined water skiing. It was an easy fit. Riehl got up on skis on his first try and zipped around the lake three times.

Two days later, coach Dave Wassill called to ask him if he wanted a ride to the lake. By the end of the day, he had been invited to disabled nationals and as Riehl says, it "snowballed from there."

Riehl finished second at the 2008 Canadian water skiing championship in adaptive jump with a disability. He won Saskatchewan provincials and the western Canadian championship in slalom, tricks, jump and overall in 2008.

In 2009, he was asked to be part of the Canadian team.

In two years, Riehl has already made his mark on the national and world scene (where it is estimated there are only eight competitive blind water skiers) but he's hardly one to sit back on his laurels. To prepare for worlds, he's been skiing two sets a day, weather-permitting. He raised the ramp for jumping to five feet and is trying to increase the speed of the boat to 48 kilometres per hour. His goal is to break the Canadian jumping record of 10 metres.

"Everyone's been asking me if I'm pumped about worlds," he says. "Not yet. There's so much more work I need to be doing."

Although he also competes in slalom and tricks, jumping is Riehl's passion. It's also the riskiest maneuver he performs on skis.

To go over a jump, Wassill straps on skis and accompanies Riehl behind the boat. When Riehl approaches the jump, Wassill



—Sun Photo by Liam Richards

Ryan Riehl, a visually impaired waterskier, stands near the Rathole, the Saskatoon Water Ski Club's practice area



—Submitted photo

Ryan Riehl waterskis over a jump during practice

pushes him out of the wake and begins a countdown to the ramp. Wassill veers off at the last minute as Riehl is launched into the air. They meet up when he lands.

"I'm scared every time I come up to the ramp," he says. "I'm always sitting there thinking man, I hope I don't fall. It's slowly starting to go away but I've talked to a lot of pro jumpers and they say that vision of falling crosses their mind as they come to the

ramp. You try to push that to the back of your mind."

While all jumpers can relate to Riehl's natural fear of flying and falling, he faces unique challenges in the air. He has to hold his position perfectly because he can't tell when he'll hit the water.

"My problem with jumping is I always loosen up when I hit the water and the boat catches up to me and ends up pulling me into

the water," he says. "If I stay tight, I'll end up behind the boat."

The challenges proliferate in tricks and slalom. In tricks, Riehl is working on consistency and moving from a wakeboard to a single trickski to rack up extra points. In slalom, he'll wear a specialized GPS system at worlds that beeps to tell him when it's time to cut back to the next buoy. In practice, his coaches blow a whistle to keep him on the course. Riehl admits that even knowing where the wake is represents a huge challenge, but all of those things pale in comparison to his biggest challenge: getting to the lake.

"I always have to have a way out to the lake and a boat driver who knows how to drive with me behind the boat," he says. "You have to be doing shoulder checks and make sure I'm not running into the shore or anything. Which hurts. I did that last year. I ran right up on shore. Not really an experience I want to happen again."

Riehl laughs. Wassill and Calnek have kept on the lake this year and he always has backup in his guide dog, a black lab named Eddie.

"As soon as I go out on the water, he thinks I'm not coming back and he'll jump in the wake and swim after me," he says. "I actually have to tie him to the dock."

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