



Youths bask in accomplishments in Junior Blind Olympics

By Tony Castro, Staff Writer

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SOUTH LOS ANGELES - Joseph Hanna's most amazing accomplishment Saturday wasn't his runaway victory in either the shot put or the long jump.

It was shooting an arrow just six inches from a bull's-eye in winning the archery competition.

Hanna, 20, of Sherman Oaks, literally could not see the target into which he shot his arrow - the Mission College student is blind.

"I've just never thought I should be defined or limited by being visually impaired," Hanna said.

And it was Hanna's inspiring performance and attitude in the fifth annual Junior Blind Olympics that typified the spirit and determination of some 220 competitors from California and other parts of North America.

The Junior Blind Olympics is the country's primary athletic event for youths ages 6 through 19 who are blind, visually impaired or multi-disabled.

Hanna, whose vision loss is related to his

albinism, was eligible to compete because he was 19 at the time of registration.

The purpose of the competition is to provide children "with the opportunity to challenge their athletic abilities, overcome sight barriers and achieve their dreams," said Miki Jordan, president of Junior Blind of America, on whose campus the event was held.

Those youth athletes included 8-year-old David Sandoval of Burbank, born with microphthalmia, a rare condition that resulted in his eyes being extremely small.

David competed in the long jump using a moving handrail attached to a waist-high wire that guided him along the runway to a takeoff point toward the sand landing pit.

As sand kicked up around him, David flung his arms up in triumph.

"He could not wait for today," said his mother, Maria Sandoval. "This morning he was up at 5!"

Was this the highlight of his day?

"No," said David, who was competing in his third Junior Blind Olympics. "I can't wait for goal ball."

Goal ball, a sport designed for blind athletes, involves teams of three trying to throw a ball with bells embedded in it into the opponents' goal. They must use the sound of the bell to judge the position and movement of the ball. Blindfolds allow partially sighted players to

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compete on an equal footing with blind players.

Meanwhile, 6-year-old Graham Kope of Valley Village was competing in his first games and enjoying himself.

He had been nervous until his mom, Yvonne Kope, gave him some motherly advice that is possibly apropos for all athletes.

"I told him that he wasn't competing against seeing kids - that he was competing against himself, and that made him feel better," said Kope.

But it was OK to have jitters, said the apparent star of these Olympics - Hanna - who said he had competed for a Birmingham High School track and field team geared to the mentally and physically disabled.

In his first shot put attempt, Hanna used the classic double-spin technique popularized in the sport by Olympic champion Parry O'Brien more than half a century ago.

"I was a little nervous," said Hanna, who found himself in second place to longtime competitor and friend David Ryder, 18, of Victorville.

So Hanna abandoned the double-spin for an easy beginner's technique - and a shot put effort that won the event.

"I pushed him to his maximum effort," said Ryder, a high school athlete who won his own championship in the sprint competition.

Hanna was equally impressive in the long jump competition. Jumping after Ryder, Hanna knew how far he had to jump to win - and did so easily.

"I have always loved to compete," he said. "And here, it's like being in a dream."

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