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Seeing the fun of competition

By Loren Ledin (Contact)
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Juan Carlo / Star staff Joel Mueller of Simi Valley will compete in the Junior Blind Olympics this weekend in Los Angeles. He has won several medals in the previous three years he has competed.

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Today is the day Joel Mueller wins his first 100-yard dash.

Or not. The truth is, it hardly matters.

By the time the 14-year-old Simi Valley teenager cavorts with his fellow runners, soaks in the ambiance and reaches the finish line, Mueller will be feeling like a champion.

"I really like doing it," he says. "It is so much fun."

Mueller has been blind since birth, stricken with a condition known as Cortical Visual Impairment or more specifically, hydrocephalus, where excessive fluid collects in the brain.

His eyes, technically, are completely normal. The accumulation of fluid on his brain leaves him with a tiny field of vision in one eye that acts almost like it's on roller skates.

"It looks like this and it's constantly moving," said his dad, Tom, forming a small oval between two fingers. "It's like this one moment, and its moves over there the next."

Coupled with Cerebral Palsy, which robs him of much of his movement on his left side, Mueller unquestionably tackles life with two major handicaps.

Only the exuberant teen with an impish sense of humor doesn't consider himself "handicapped."

"No I don't," Mueller said emphatically.

He doesn't act like it, either.

Today he will join more than 800 young athletes, ages 6 to 19, who will compete in the fifth annual Junior Blind Olympics. The one-day event, sponsored by the Junior Blind of America and staged at its eight-acre Los Angeles campus, is eagerly anticipated by Mueller.

Greeting a visitor on Thursday, he said with a broad smile: "It's almost Saturday. I can't wait."

Mueller intends to compete in the 100-yard dash, where his best previous finish was third place, as well as archery and the shot put. If they wish, athletes can also take on the field in goal ball — where three-person teams try to push a ball fitted with bells across the opponent's goal line — rowing, soccer throw, rock climbing and long jump.

The competition is ideal for Mueller, who has displayed a yen for adventure and developed a wide range of interests through the years.

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Today, for example, he had to choose between the Junior Blind Olympics or his regular baseball games specifically tailored for handicapped youths at Santa Susana Park in Simi Valley. It was totally Mueller's decision, said his parents Tom and Barbara.

"I had to go with the Olympics," said Joel. "This only happens once a year and I always look forward to it."

Mueller, who is home-schooled daily from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., also participates in swimming and diving, is a volunteer with the Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District, is a member of the Boy Scouts and partakes in such hobbies as ham radio and growing orchids.

That's a full plate for a youngster who entered the lives of foster parents Tom and Barbara with a doctor's bleak assessment for the future.

The Muellers, who have lived in Simi Valley since 1969, have two daughters of their own (Deborah and Lori are now grown and married) while fostering 35 children over the past 10 years.

They picked up Joel from the UCLA Medical Center when he was eight months old, and were sent off with grim expectations.

"The doctor told us he would never see, would never talk, would never walk," said Barbara. "He told us to do the best we could."

What they did was fall in love with him, and made him the first foster child they chose to adopt.

Tom pulls out a picture of Joel as a toddler. "Look at him," said Tom. "How could we not adopt him?"

That happened when Joel was 2 years old and the Muellers have been there for every step as the youngster blossomed like one of Tom's exotic orchids.

"We saw him do things that he wasn't supposed to do," said Tom. "Now he does things that I can't do."

Barbara said his friends don't consider Joel to be handicapped.

"Most of them are amazed at all that he can do," she said.

The parents have accelerated Joel's development by stressing independence. Mueller has learned to use Simi Valley's dial-a-ride public transit, makes his own appointments and knows how to cross the city's busiest intersections.

Sports has played a part, too.

"I love baseball," Mueller said. "I love to play. I love to be with all my friends at the games."

He's been mostly fearless in learning new sports, including diving off the 3-meter diving board.

"Sometimes, that can hurt," he said with a grin.

Tom knows athletics can teach valuable lessons.

"It's given him confidence. It's taught him how to work with others," said Tom. "He has learned how to work hard to get what he wants."

"He hates to lose, too. It makes him want to work that much harder."

Joel seconds that emotion.

"Playing sports has shown me that I can do whatever I want to do," he said.

Mueller is home-schooled through California Virtual Academies, where he takes on a rigorous program for eight hours each weekday.

Appropriately enough, he has a wide range of academic interests.

"Math, history, English," he said, naming a few of his favorite subjects.

Oh, and don't forget writing. His birth name was Joel Stephen King. So appropriately enough, he has a knack for writing sci-fi stories and favors Stephen King as his favorite author.

At age 14, Mueller is already looking ahead to a career.

"I want to be a lawyer," he said. "I just don't know what kind."

Probably the kind with a vision for doing good things, sight or no sight.

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