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Palm Desert youth competes in Junior Blind Olympics

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PALM DESERT — Austin Morris looked like any child enjoying his spring break this week.

The competitive 11-year-old with shaggy brown hair was shooting baskets, performing tricks on his skateboard and reading before falling asleep every night.

But when Austin was six months old, doctors said he wouldn't be able to perform any of these everyday activities. Diagnosed with optic nerve hypoplasia (ONH), Austin is legally blind, with no vision in his right eye and limited sight in his left.

"When you hear legally blind, you automatically think, 'The kid's not going to be able to do anything,'" said Jacqueline Morris, his mother.

But Morris didn't allow the diagnosis to keep her son from pursuing an active life. Austin will show off his athleticism today at the Junior Blind Olympics in Los Angeles, competing alongside more than 800 athletes from across the nation in various events.

"I'm really fast," said Austin, who is participating in the 100-meter dash and four other events at the Olympics. Among his other events are the soccer throw, running long jump and a rowing event.

Athletes are limited to five.

"They won't allow him to do any more," his mother said. "Otherwise, he probably would."

Austin has ignored limits since he was diagnosed with ONH, an incurable condition that affects one out of about every 10,000 infants. One of the leading causes of childhood blindness, ONH causes the underdevelopment of the optic nerve, which relays visual input from the eye to the brain.

An MRI confirmed Morris's suspicions that her son's sight was impaired. Doctors told her Austin might need to learn how to read Braille or use a cane when he got older. Playing sports was doubtful.

But Morris didn't set boundaries for her son.

"I'm just not one of (those) moms that sits there and babies him. I want him to toughen up," she said. "I want him to go out in the real world because if I hold him and carry him and then I finally release him, the world's going to eat him up."

Austin initially attended a school for the visually impaired, but Morris pulled him out when he was 5 years old. With no sight in his right eye and 20/500 vision in his left, he has learned how to adapt to his limited depth perception and ability to see only shapes and shadows.

Except for the occasional involuntary movements of Austin's eyes called nystagmus, it is not apparent he is visually impaired. He doesn't need a cane like doctors initially thought.

But his sight is still limited. Austin can't distinguish anything beyond his outstretched arm, and when he reads, his nose almost grazes the page. He won't be allowed to drive.

But ONH hasn't kept Austin from gliding around his neighborhood on his skateboard like Marty McFly traveling around Hill Valley in "Back to the Future."

Austin was determined to learn how to skateboard.

"We had this hill. I would go down and every single time I'd fall," Austin said. "Then I'd get back up and do it again."

His perseverance and daring astound his mother.

"I'm surprised he hasn't broken something," Morris said.

His fearless attitude has led him to try a variety of sports.

"He said he wanted to try football," Morris said. "He said he wanted to try wrestling — did it — karate, everything. It never stopped him from doing anything."

Basketball and skateboarding are Austin's favorites. He was the captain of his YMCA team this past season.

Austin also excels in school as a fifth grader at Rancho Mirage Elementary.

"He's the teacher's pet," Morris revealed during an interview.

"Don't tell him that, mom," Austin replied.

He struggled to keep up with his teachers at first, but now he is ready to take his first standardized test on his own without anyone reading him the questions.

Whether Austin reaches the finish line first at the Olympics today, he knows his eagerness to run that race is most important.

"I think I'm pretty lucky," Austin said. "I think I'm probably the best at taking care of myself and trying my hardest."
