

Hermiston swimmer on a mission to bring joy to the world

By KATHY ANEY
STAFF WRITER

Rian Middleton — the lone Hermiston High School swimmer to compete at the Washington state swim meet last Saturday — could once barely sit up and his parents worried that he might never walk.

As a baby and toddler, Rian missed most of the normal milestones. Instead of crawling, he tended to flop over as if his muscles couldn't hold him up. Finally, Jason and Cindy learned why. Their son had a chromosomal abnormality and hypotonia, characterized by profoundly low muscle tone and high elasticity. His left side is also weaker than his right side.

"As a baby, he was a floppy guy," Cindy said. "He had a couple of hip surgeries to keep his hips from coming out of their sockets."

The little boy learned to walk using a walker. At age three, he fell and broke a femur and did physical therapy in the swimming pool. His parents pushed their son to do as much as he could.

"We've always had high expectations and worked hard to make him the best he can be," Cindy said.

Rian loved sports and decided he wanted to participate. He not only walked, but learned to swim and play basketball, baseball, soccer and golf.

The senior isn't a stand-out athlete talent-wise. His personal best in the 50-meter freestyle of 48.34 seconds is slow in the world of high school swimmers. He competes in the "adaptive" division for swimmers with disabilities at district and state and comes in last a lot in the regular season. Rian's superpower is not swimming, say those who know him, but rather a contagious exuberance that touches everyone around him. Rian Middleton loves everyone and everyone loves him. It's just one of those truths, like gravity.

Jason Middleton said his son is fearless and relentlessly joyful.

"He has never met a stranger," Jason said. "He gives high fives, handshakes and hugs. He's very..."

"Funny," interjected Rian, who sat nearby. "I like people."

And people like him.

Head swim coach Phil Lusted, in his first year with the HHS swim program, marveled as he watched Rian interact with other swimmers, officials and spectators at the meets.



Contributed photo

Rian Middleton trains during a recent practice at the Boardman Pool and Recreation Center, where the Hermiston swim team practices.

"The other coaches knew him. The referees knew him," Lusted said. "He has a community around him during meets. He gives everyone a high five on the way to the blocks. Almost all the swimmers from the other teams know his name."

During the regular season, Rian swam in regular heats, always taking up the rear.

"He didn't care if he won or lost," said Kevin Hamblin, who coached Rian at various levels until last year. Hamblin recalled the state meet at Mt. Hood Community College during Rian's sophomore season. Rian, swimming the 50-meter freestyle, kept on going after 50 meters.

"He ended up swimming 75 meters," Hamblin said. "We stopped him. When he got out, he raised his arms and went over and hugged the officials."

On Thursday, HHS students gathered to send off the school's wrestling team and Rian before they left for the Seattle area. As Rian and his coach stood in front, athletic director Larry Usher talked about Rian and his status as the school's lone state swimmer. Rian grinned and pumped his fist to smiles from his classmates.

Usher smiled too. He has known Rian since Usher's time as Sandstone Middle School principal. The two like to talk sports. Usher the roots for the Ducks while Rian prefers the Beavers.

The athletic director made the trip to the King



Contributed photo

Rian Middleton catches his breath recently after working out at the Boardman Pool and Recreation Center where the Hermiston swim team practices.

County Aquatic Center in Federal Way to cheer on his young friend on Saturday.

The pool was colder than Rian was accustomed to and there was no ladder. That threw him a little. Though he earned personal bests at almost every meet this year in either the 50- or 100-meter races, he swam two seconds slower (about 50 seconds flat) during his state 50-meter performance. No matter. When Rian received his seventh place medal, he beamed and pumped his fist.

That's Rian, said his older sister, Reed. He turns every occasion into a positive, social event.

In December, she said, the family stayed at a hotel in Portland one night. The next morning, Reed left Rian on the front sidewalk for a moment. When she returned, he had made

friends with the valet, the bellhop and a lady walking by with her dog.

"Rian's mission in life is to make friends," Reed said.

"He's so happy. Walking down the hall at school, every kid gets a high five from him," said lifelong friend Violet Mitchell, who is a junior. "His high fives are legendary."

Hamblin, who teaches fourth grade at Highland Hills, said Rian has a way of making people go out of their way to give back some of the joy he dishes out. In eighth grade, he and Hamblin ran the chain for Sandstone Middle School football program as a way to be involved in football, a sport his doctor forbids him from playing. During one game, the team decided to give Rian an experience he would treasure. Rian dressed down



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Rian Middleton poses with his parents, Cindy and Jason Middleton, who are two of the people in Rian's extensive "village" of supporters, friends and fans.

and went in for one play, an extra point attempt, a play that both teams had choreographed together.

"They handed him the ball and he went in," Hamblin said. "He spiked the ball and put up his hands. The (Sandstone) team cheered for him. The other team came over and shook his hand."

Longtime friend Karmyn Cooke often picks up Rian and gives him a ride to school via the drive-up lane at Dutch Bros. She called him a positive force.

"He's a good example to

me," Cooke said. "I want to be Rian. We all want to be Rian."

This spring, Rian will leave swimming behind for golf. He'll walk with his class in June at graduation, though he'll return in the fall and continue there until age 21 as a student with disabilities. No doubt another influx of students will experience the legendary high five of Rian Middleton.

"He is on a mission to bring joy to the entire world," Reed Middleton said of her brother. "He takes it to everyone."

Hermiston's Ray, Romero earn MCC basketball honors

By ANNIE FOWLER
SPORTS EDITOR

Jayden Ray was named Defensive Player of the Year, and Jazlyn Romero was named to the second team of the girls Mid-Columbia Conference all-conference basketball team.

"Coach (Maloree) Moss called me into her room this morning and told me," Ray said. "I was like, 'is this for the whole league?' I was excited. It's awesome to see that you put in practice and games, and the hard work pays off."

Romero, a senior, averaged 12 points a game for the Bulldogs, who finished 14-9 overall and 10-6 in the MCC.

Ray, a junior, was an integral part of Hermiston's defense that allowed an average of 49 points a

MCC ALL-CONFERENCE TEAM

Player of the Year: Talia von Oelhoffen, jr., Chiawana
Defensive Player of the Year: Jayden Ray, jr., Hermiston
Coach of the Year: Daron Santo, Kennewick

First Team

Talia von Oelhoffen, jr., Chiawana; Rian Clear, sr., Walla Walla; Meilani McBee, sr., Kennewick; Madeline Gebers, jr., Kennewick; A'nyiah Heavens, so., Pasco.

Second Team

Jazlyn Romero, sr., Hermiston; Iliana Moran, so., Hanford; Mya Groce, so., Pasco; Laura Smith, jr., Richland; Jayda Clark, jr., Richland.

Honorable Mention

Kylie Thorne, sr., Chiawana; Aislin Fiander, sr., Kennewick; Amani Davis, jr., Kamiakin; Alyssa Agundis, sr., Chiawana; Taija Mackey, so., Pasco.

Defensive Team

Jayden Ray, jr., Hermiston; Alyssa Agundis, sr., Chiawana; Emmalynn Ogden, sr., Walla Walla; Taleya Maiden, so., Pasco; Nikole Thomas, fr., Kamiakin.

game. She also averaged seven points a game.

"It's awesome to see Jazlyn on there," Ray said. "She has put so much hard work and dedication into our program."

Hermiston was the No. 2 seed from the MCC into the District 8 Tournament. The Bulldogs beat Shadle Park, held district champ Mt. Spokane to a season-low 43 points, then dropped a loser-out game to Kamiakin.

Chiawana junior Talia von Oelhoffen was named the MCC Player of the Year, while Kennewick's Daron Santo was named Coach of the Year.

The Hermiston did not have anyone selected to the MCC all-conference team.

Chiawana's Cooper DeWitt was named Player of the Year, while Chiawana's Chad Herron was named Coach of the Year.



Photo contributed by Erwin Watson

Stanfield's Eastern Oregon Taekwondo program poses for a picture with their medals after participating in the 28th Annual Walla Walla Karate-Do Invitational on Feb. 15, 2020.

Eastern Oregon Family Taekwondo has 6 place first at Walla Walla Invite

By BRETT KANE
STAFF WRITER

Stanfield's Eastern Oregon Family Taekwondo program placed six athletes in first, six more in second, and 11 in third place at the 28th Annual Walla Walla Karate-Do Invitational on Feb. 15.

The Stanfield dojo brought 23 total students to the competition.

Kionna Idris, 16, placed first in both sparring and in forms in her respective age category. Jordan Velasco, 7, and Zander Baher, 6, both

earned first in sparring and second in forms. Zayden Higareda, 4, placed first in sparring, and Grant Lissman, 11, also took first in forms.

Rebekah Pace, 7, took second in forms, and Lillah Brown, 8, earned second in sparring. Jezly Higareda, 7, and Henry Lissman, 4, placed second in sparring.

"There were more competitors this year than there were before," EOFT owner and instructor Erwin Watson said. "We had three weeks to prepare, and all they participated in were forms and

sparring. They weren't used to the 3-point sparring and how the rules go, but a couple did a good job preparing themselves. Of course, I didn't expect everyone to bring any hardware or medals home, and I feel bad for them because they worked so hard, and now they have to work for the next tournament."

Earning four additional fourth-place medals, the Stanfield dojo brought home 27 total awards.

Their next tournament will be held in Portland in May.