

Blind student competes for high school swimming team

By Steve Reaven, Chicago Tribune on 03.11.15

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Highland Park's Alan Brint, who was born blind, prepares to swim the 100-yard freestyle for athletes with disabilities during the IHSA state meet on Feb. 28, 2015. Photo: Brian O'Mahoney / For the Chicago Tribune

HIGHLAND PARK, Ill. — Despite being born blind, Alan Brint always has a clear vision for how he wants to be viewed by others — no differently than anyone else.

This attitude is especially evident at the swimming pool, where the Highland Park High School senior has spent the last four years training with and swimming against able-sighted competitors.

Brint branched out recently at the boys swimming state meet. He competed in all four of the events for athletes with disabilities. He didn't win any of the four (50-, 100- and 200-yard freestyles and 100 breaststroke) but he set personal-best times in each race. He finished third in two and fourth in two others for a fulfilling conclusion to his high school career.

"I would have liked to have gone a little faster, especially in the breaststroke, but you can't be too disappointed in setting PRs," said Brint, who began swimming as a young child and joined the Highland Park Aquatics Club that his high school coach Tim Sirois founded in 2006.

“I like that I had good competition in every race. In all the races, there was someone who I barely beat or who barely beat me and that makes it worthwhile.”

One of the reasons for his success in the sport is that he treats swimming like he does everything else in his life — not as an obstacle but as an activity in which getting better is the only option.

That has meant countless 4:45 a.m. wake-up calls and honing the details of his craft, like trying to swim as straight as possible and learning when he’s approaching the wall to turn.

“He counts strokes, absolutely,” Sirois said. “At a meet, we’ll tap him to let him know when to turn, when to finish.”

Brint elected not to compete in the state meet as a junior but had Saturday’s event circled on his calendar since last summer, when he kicked his training into high gear.

“Last year I wasn’t the most motivated swimmer, but this year that all changed,” said Brint, who will study business at Beloit College. “I trained hard through club last summer and went into the high school season in great shape.”

While others may marvel at what Brint has accomplished, it comes as no surprise to those who know him.

“People are always amazed that he can swim, but the thing with Alan is that he can swim so well,” said teammate Eddie Hochman, who has known Brint since sixth grade. “He’s always looking for more ways to challenge himself, and it’s important to him that people treat him the same as everyone else.”

Despite this insistence, some basic accommodations do exist to ensure his safety. He holds a cane for guidance around the pool at meets. He relied on assistant coach Adam Washburn at the state meet to help him navigate around unfamiliar territory.

Before beginning classes as a freshman at Highland Park, he spent hours roaming the halls, learning how to navigate by counting his steps. He maneuvers through the school’s maze of hallways without a second thought, as is the case on the pool deck at Highland Park, where he is just one of the guys.

“I’ve been swimming for a long time and it gives me a lot of pleasure,” Brint said. “But the camaraderie with my teammates is the most important thing to me. I couldn’t appreciate my teammates more.”

Brint’s swimming at the state meet seemed smooth, but his journey to that stage hasn’t been without pitfalls. One person who has been there every step of the way is Brint’s father, David.

“He’s learned an interesting balance between advocating for himself and being respectful as a good teammate,” David Brint said. “He started working no-nonsense throughout this past year. Something every child should learn how to do is push themselves to see how good they can be. He’s figured out ways to do that.”

He added, "When a kid has a disability like Alan does and he finds ways around it, it's pretty special. I'm really proud of him."

Quiz

- 1 Which paragraph helps show the challenge of being a competitive swimmer, especially for a blind person?
- (A) One of the reasons for his success in the sport is that he treats swimming like he does everything else in his life — not as an obstacle but as an activity in which getting better is the only option.
 - (B) Despite this insistence, some basic accommodations do exist to ensure his safety. He holds a cane for guidance around the pool at meets. He relied on assistant coach Adam Washburn at the state meet to help him navigate around unfamiliar territory.
 - (C) “Last year I wasn’t the most motivated swimmer, but this year that all changed,” said Brint, who will study business at Beloit College. “I trained hard through club last summer and went into the high school season in great shape.”
 - (D) That has meant countless 4:45 a.m. wake-up calls and honing the details of his craft, like trying to swim as straight as possible and learning when he’s approaching the wall to turn.
- 2 Which of the following matters is left uncertain in the article?
- (A) what special accommodations are made for Brint as a blind swimmer
 - (B) whether Brint had a successful swimming meet
 - (C) whether Brint will continue to swim in college
 - (D) what Brint will study in college
- 3 Which paragraph would make the BEST summary of the article?
- (A) Despite being born blind, Alan Brint always has a clear vision for how he wants to be viewed by others — no differently than anyone else.
 - (B) This attitude is especially evident at the swimming pool, where the Highland Park High School senior has spent the last four years training with and swimming against able-sighted competitors.
 - (C) Brint branched out recently at the boys swimming state meet. He competed in all four of the events for athletes with disabilities. He didn’t win any of the four (50-, 100- and 200-yard freestyles and 100 breaststroke) but he set personal-best times in each race. He finished third in two and fourth in two others for a fulfilling conclusion to his high school career.
 - (D) “I would have liked to have gone a little faster, especially in the breaststroke, but you can’t be too disappointed in setting PRs,” said Brint, who began swimming as a young child and joined the Highland Park Aquatics Club that his high school coach Tim Sirois founded in 2006.

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Which of the following quotes is MOST relevant to the main idea of the article?

- (A) "But the camaraderie with my teammates is the most important thing to me. I couldn't appreciate my teammates more."
- (B) "He's learned an interesting balance between advocating for himself and being respectful as a good teammate," David Brint said.
- (C) "Something every child should learn how to do is push themselves to see how good they can be. He's figured out ways to do that."
- (D) He added, "When a kid has a disability like Alan does and he finds ways around it, it's pretty special. I'm really proud of him."