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## A Blind Competitor Will Not Be Deterred

By **THE ASSOCIATED PRESS**

Aaron Scheidies, a blind triathlete, has stumbled over potholes and knocked over tables of water, and he never went back to check if he killed a duck he once ran over.

He nearly swam into buoys and ran into trees. And when he attempts to make history today in Dallas as the first disabled athlete to finish in under two hours at the United States Open Triathlon, his guide will be riding on the front seat of their tandem bike.

“Honestly,” Scheidies said, “you won’t believe how many people ask that.”

The 25-year-old Scheidies is the best visually impaired triathlete in the world, maybe the best ever.

Legally blind since fourth grade because of a genetic disorder, Scheidies is a three-time world champion among blind triathletes. He typically finishes only minutes behind the sighted professionals, many of whom are in line to compete at the 2008 Olympics.

“He’s pushing the limits of what anybody thought was going to be possible for a blind triathlete,” said Jon Beeson, the co-chairman of the physically challenged commission at USA Triathlon.

If Scheidies breaks the two-hour barrier in Dallas, he will set a world mark as the first blind athlete to do so in an Olympic distance triathlon, composed of a 1.5-kilometer swim, 40-kilometer bike and 10-kilometer run. His guide at the Open will be Ben Collins, who is forgoing a shot at a piece of the \$250,000 in prize money to tether himself to Scheidies’s waist for the run and the swim.

And sit up front on the tandem.

“He’s sort of a wonder to me,” said Collins, who turned pro this year after winning the amateur world title. “I’m just surprised how well Aaron deals with his disability.”

Well enough that Scheidies has actually had trouble finding guides who can keep up with him.

Scheidies, who lives in Seattle and graduated from Michigan State, was a third grader in Michigan when his teacher told his parents he was squinting at the chalkboard and burying his face in books to read.

Glasses did not help, and neither did ophthalmologists. Some doctors accused Scheidies of faking a sight problem to get attention.

“They told us it was a power game,” said Mike Scheidies, Aaron’s father.

Scheidies spent almost five years visiting specialists before he learned he had juvenile macular degeneration,

in which central vision deteriorates. Only 10 percent of his sight remains.

He sees shapes but not objects, outlines but not people. In high school, he kept playing soccer until he began whiffing at the ball.

“He really tried to hide it from other kids,” said his mother, Mary Scheidies. “He tried to ignore it.”

“Teenagers can be really mean,” she added.

Things changed once he started doing triathlons. His parents would drive him around the course the night before races, helping him learn the location of the potholes and turns.

“When I look back at everything, having this visual impairment is actually a blessing in my life,” said Scheidies, who has raced in more than 70 triathlons. “I’ve learned that you can’t take things for granted.”

The United States Open is the last in a five-leg triathlon series and will include 40 of the sport’s top athletes, including the Australian Greg Bennett, who finished fourth at the 2004 Olympics, and his wife, Laura, who will race for the United States next year at the Beijing Olympics.

In July, Scheidies finished the New York City Triathlon in 2 hours 3 minutes, his best time.

Beeson, of USA Triathlon, said the only disabled athlete who came close to matching Scheidies was Rivaldo Martins, a Brazilian who was an elite triathlete before losing his lower left leg in an accident. Still, Beeson said, Scheidies’s best times are minutes ahead of Martins’s top marks.

Scheidies said it would take “a perfect race” to come in under two hours.

“It’s definitely a possibility,” he said. “We’re going to fly.”

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