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Triathlete leaves competitors, self-pity behind**Blind UW student sets Olympic record**

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By JON NAITO

P-I REPORTER

Aaron Scheidies remembers clearly when his world began turning dark.

He was barely into adolescence, a sixth-grader in Farmington, Mich., with a passion for soccer that bordered on obsession.



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Aaron Scheidies

He was an athletic, outgoing child whose degenerating eyesight would soon rob him of the biggest source of happiness in his young life.

On Sunday in Dallas, the gregarious 25-year-old doctoral student at the University of Washington became the first blind athlete to complete an Olympic-distance triathlon in less than two hours, sprinting to the finish of the U.S. Open Triathlon in one hour, 59 minutes, 41 seconds.

"It was an amazing feeling," Scheidies said of completing a 1.5-kilometer swim, 40-kilometer bike ride and 10-kilometer run in record time. "When I get happy, I start hugging everybody. Everyone and their brother that was around me at the finish got a hug."

That includes Ben Collins.

A pre-med student at Washington, Collins won American and world amateur triathlon championships this year and was Scheidies' guide Sunday. The two were tethered for the run and swim portions of the race, and rode together on a tandem bike for the cycling leg.

They almost didn't make it to the starting line.

Leading up to the competition, Scheidies' injured left knee hobbled him so much he could barely put weight on it. He and Collins did not run together until the day of the race for fear of further injury. They had not swum tethered to one another until Sunday, and they had ridden sparingly on their bike.

It was an unlikely pairing, Collins and Scheidies, one that began when Collins received an introductory e-mail from Scheidies in July. Scheidies told him of his condition and asked if Collins, whom he had never met, would be his guide in his attempt to break the two-hour barrier.

After running Scheidies through a Google search, Collins agreed. They had their first training session -- a two-mile swim in Green Lake -- in early September after Collins returned from the world championships in Germany.

"He's really energetic and has the kind of personality that just attracts people," said Collins, 24, who grew up in the Queen Anne neighborhood and attended Garfield High School.

"He's the kind of person who doesn't believe there is anything he can't do. He has an optimism and a positive outlook on life that I've never seen before. He figures if there is something he really wants to accomplish, he's just going to have to outwork everyone else."

Scheidies was born with a form of juvenile macular degeneration called Stargardt's disease, a genetic condition that causes a slow deterioration of central vision, leaving individuals almost completely blind. In adulthood, Scheidies retains only 10 percent of his sight.

By the time he reached high school, his eyesight was so poor he had to give up soccer. He suffered from an eating disorder and was found to have obsessive-compulsive disorder.

"I started to become more depressed," he said. "I would keep asking myself, 'Why did this happen to me?' I was at a real low point. I lost my friends and didn't know what to do with myself."

His road to recovery began with sports. He poured himself into endurance events, activities that challenged his self-perceptions and rebuilt his confidence. He joined the high school swim, cross country and track teams, and in his senior year at Farmington High, he entered his first triathlon.



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AP

Aaron Scheidies, left, aided by Ben Collins, completed the U.S. Open Triathlon in less than two hours, an Olympic world record.

Eight years later, he has competed in 75 (with various guides), including an Ironman event in Idaho in 2005, and along the way, earned a degree in kinesiology from Michigan State, graduating with a 4.0 grade-point average.

He is a three-time world champion for blind triathletes and has been inducted into the Athletes with Disabilities Hall of Fame. He donates his time to the C-Different Foundation, an organization that aids visually impaired athletes.

Scheidies is three years into a doctoral program in physical therapy at the UW, and is resting his banged-up body before he makes an attempt to qualify for next summer's Paralympics in Beijing -- as a swimmer.

"I really value my independence," he said. "Basically my outlook on life is that I want to be out there living it. I want to be doing what I want to do, instead of sitting around, staying in and letting it pass me by."

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