Written by Carol Pomeday
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Millions of people watched the opening ceremonies of the Winter Olympics in Vancouver, but few as intently as 15-year-old Ian Kloehn, who will be in the same stadium for the opening ceremonies of the Paralympics on Friday, March 12. He will then go to Whistler to see Paralympic ski events.

The boy was one of 13 student-athletes with physical disabilities chosen to attend the games by the U.S. Paralympic Committee.

Ian, who is legally blind, skis, plays on a select soccer team, runs triathlons and will be on his school's track team. He hopes to someday compete in the Paralympics.

Sports, he said, motivated him to find ways to do the same things as normally-sighted athletes, including his brothers Tyler, 16, and Brandon, 10.

"I never let my disability stand in my way. I am a stronger person, student and athlete because of it," Ian wrote in an essay that helped him win the opportunity to attend the games.

"Being competitive in sports has helped me realize that there is no limit to what I can do, and you can't succeed unless you try. No matter what the circumstances are, there is always a way to get around the barriers that stand in my way."

Ian said he sometimes has to work harder because of his limited vision, but that prompts him to set higher goals.

“Last year in Ski Club, I was the only student from my school to ever tackle the double black diamond extreme terrain Lake Chutes. To me this was a great feat,” he said.

A freshman at Sussex-Hamilton High School, Ian is a grandson of Nancy and Don Theisen of Port Washington. His mother Tammy is a 1982 graduate of Port Washington High School.

Not only is Ian a talented athlete who finds ways to do what normally sighted competitors take for granted, he also helps younger athletes achieve their goals as a counselor at the Wisconsin Association for Blind Athletes summer camp in Rosholt.

He attended the junior camp for six years and now goes to the senior camp, forming strong friendships with several campers and counselors.

The Port Washington Lions Club sponsored his first summer camp.

Ian was modest and a bit shy during an interview at Sunburst Recreation Area in Kewaskum, where he frequently skis.

But when it came to skiing, there was nothing shy about him. He skied to two jumps with seeming ease and sailed over them.

Only when he got to the bottom of the hill did he explain how he watched his younger brother and other skiers, sometimes following a jacket color in his descent and jump.

It was more difficult when it was shady and there weren’t shadows to help him gauge the landscape, he said.

Sometimes, he said, he has a friend stand by a jump that’s in a shadow.

Distinguishing between some colors is also difficult. Reds and greens look alike, so he watches the cars rather than stoplights when crossing streets.

When he plays soccer, if both teams wear dark uniforms, his team switches to light-colored jerseys. Some ball colors are more difficult for him to see, so his team always brings an extra ball for their vision-challenged mid-fielder.

About the only thing Ian won’t be able to do —unless there is some breakthrough — is get a driver’s license. He rides a bike, but has to be careful and aware.

Ian was born with optic nerve atrophy, and his optic nerve did not develop. His vision, which is 20/200, cannot be corrected with surgery or glasses.

What other people can see at 200 feet, he has to be within 20 feet to see.

“We used to tell him not to sit so close to the TV,” his mother said.

She and her husband Mike are skiers and taught their sons to ski when they were 3 or 4.

“We try not to treat him any differently,” his mother said. “I think you just have to teach them to keep a positive attitude.

“Ian takes it upon himself to work harder. He spends hours studying at night, and it pays off.”

Although Ian sits in the front of the classroom, he cannot see what a teacher writes on a board unless he stands in front of it. That was fine in grade school but not high school. Whiteboards are easier to read than blackboards, but neither are very good, he said.

He has a computer with a camera that allows him to enlarge the print.

“I don’t use it much anymore,” he said, which surprised his mother. “It’s difficult to carry around. Mostly, I try to listen and take notes or the teachers will print them out for me.”

Some teachers put their notes on the school’s Web site, he said.

When taking standardized tests, Ian is given a large-print version.

Ian is a straight A student who plans to be a physician, a decision he said was reinforced when his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago.

She underwent surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

His father is a biomedical engineer. His mother is a nurse practitioner in the infant intensive care unit at Waukesha Memorial Hospital.

Ian is confident he will accomplish his goal.

“My involvement in sports has played a role in teaching me to dream big. I can achieve these goals,” he said in his essay.

Photo by Sam Arendt