

The Gator's Going for Gold ... and You Should, Too!

from DAAA Parent Brian Hedger

I'm a sports nut.

I'll admit it. In fact, I'm oddly proud of it. But the day I found out my daughter Elizabeth was born with a common form of dwarfism (achondroplasia), the "sports nut" in me felt crushed.

Almost nine years ago, I can still remember holding Liz in my arms and thinking about all the things I'd just told her that morning –

before I knew. As I massaged her slightly-bowed legs in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, the way a pediatric physical therapist had shown me, I promised her the sporting world.

I said we'd work on softball and she could pitch or play shortstop because of her "naturally strong arm."

I said we'd work on basketball and she could become a pass-distributing point guard with a blinding first step. I said we'd play catch with a football, stickhandle a hockey puck, boot a soccer ball and, of course, bump, set and spike the volleyball.

We'd do it all, I told her.

And then they whisked her away for a full body X-ray that changed everything. At least, that's what I thought at the time. Turns out, it really didn't change anything. I guess Liz was listening, because she continues to amaze both me and my wife, Lisa, in the sports that she plays.

She was fearless in soccer. She fell in love with softball (plays second base like her old man). She wants to learn volleyball, shoot arrows in archery when she's old enough and this past winter, she joined a local swim club after learning the freestyle stroke last summer.

Even though her stroke is much smoother, I still call her "The Gator," because she used to look like a small alligator trying to kill its prey in the Everglades as she bravely made her way down the pool. Liz also dabbled in track and field in



the “Futures” division at the 2011 DAAA competition in Anaheim, Calif., and there’s no telling what she’ll come up with next.

So, it should come as no surprise that we’re going to make a week of it Aug. 3-10 at the 2013 World Dwarf Games – hosted by Michigan State University in East Lansing, Mich.

We’re pretty fired up about it, too, and so are our family and friends.

Last fall, I even drove Liz up to MSU for the 2013 WDG press conference – where she and buddy, Emily, met legendary Paralympic swimmer Erin Popovich – the female equivalent to Michael Phelps in U.S. Paralympic Swimming history.

I’ve also spent time online searching for swim caps that feature the American flag and looked up record times in swimming and track from past WDGs on the web site, www.2013worlddwarfgames.org. (All I’m going to say is, watch out for Great Britain, because ... man, they’re good)

Hopefully Team USA is up for the challenge this summer, but either way I know our athletes will give it their best shot. They’ll also have a blast doing it.

I know it’s a big commitment to participate in the World Dwarf Games, both from a time and financial standpoint. For us, it helps that MSU – my collegiate alma mater – is located only a four-hour drive from where we live.

Truth be told, though, we’d attend regardless of the location. The reason is simple. This is a chance for Liz to experience something unique and memorable. Some people never get to experience what it’s like to compete internationally and meet athletes from all over the globe, but my daughter will.

It’s also a chance to experience athletic competition on a level playing field. While Liz gets commended by athletes, coaches and parents alike for her “guts” going against kids twice her size, I know she also wonders what it’s like to compete against people her size and age.

The World Dwarf Games provides that opportunity and also gives her/us a chance to meet and interact with many families just like us, from all over the world. Imagine the friendships and memories that await competitors and families/supporters this summer.

At the last World Dwarf Games, held in 2009 in Belfast, Northern Ireland, there were 12 countries represented by 250 athletes. In 2005, 14 countries were represented by 136 athletes in Rambouillet, France.

Unlike the great DAAA competitions held each year, the World Dwarf Games are only held every four years – like the Olympics. This will be the first WDG hosted by the U.S. since the first was held in 1993 in Chicago.

It could be a number of years before it returns, so if you're on the fence about joining Team USA, I recommend just diving in and going for it. Spend some time on the WDG's web site, www.2013worlddwarfgames.org, get familiar with everything that's offered and see if you can make it work.

Take it from an excited Michigan State alum and "sports nut" dad: these Games are going to rock and we hope to see you out there. Help us cheer on "The Gator," as she proudly represents Team USA.

About the author: Brian Hedger is a professional sportswriter who lives just outside Chicago in Northwest, Ind., with his wife, Lisa, and kids, Elizabeth and Chance. Elizabeth "Liz" is 8 and will compete in track, swimming, floor hockey and volleyball at the 2013 World Dwarf Games.

Liz Hedger, in her words:

Elizabeth "Liz" Hedger is 8-years old, will be 9 when she competes in the 2013 World Dwarf games and keeps her parents on their toes every single day of her life.

She's also quite the sportsgirl and is excited about 2013 WDG at Michigan State University. Currently, she's keeping busy by excelling in school and training for her main sport: swimming.

What do the 2013 World Dwarf Games mean to her? Well, just ask her...

Q: What's the main thing you're looking forward to about competing in the 2013 World Dwarf Games?

Liz: "The main things I'm looking forward to are the 25-meter freestyle in swimming and just meeting my friends and athletes from other countries."

Q: What do you think about representing your country?

Liz: "It's a big deal to represent my country because I live here and I want to show my spirit. I'm proud that I'm an American."

Q: What sports have you chosen to compete in and why?

Liz: "I chose swimming because I'm really into it and I love it. I chose track because I like that sport, too, and I like to run. I chose floor hockey because my

dad likes hockey and writes about hockey. And I chose volleyball because I think it will be fun ... and my friend, Sarah, does it."

Q: Which sport are you most looking forward to competing in this summer?

Liz: "Swimming. I've been training for it a long time and I just love how you feel in the water ... especially when you go off the dive blocks."

Q: Why do you think competing in the 2013 World Dwarf Games is a good decision?

Liz: "I'm really excited because normally when I swim, I'm competing against average-height kids and in the World Dwarf Games, I'll compete against kids who are my size or close to my size, from all over the world."

Q: Is there a certain country you'd like to meet some new friends from?

Liz: "Sweden! That seems like a really nice country and they're good athletes ... plus I chose them for a social studies report and I learned that they're really good at hockey, soccer and they seem really nice."

Q: Any other countries you'd like to meet athletes from?

Liz: "Australia ... because I love their accent and I would love to learn about their culture."

Q: What do you think about the Games being held at Michigan State University?

Liz: "I think it's great because my dad went there for college and I'm really excited to go there again."

Q: Would you like to meet Michigan State's mascot, Sparty, this time?

Liz: "Yes! I would. He seems like a really nice mascot and he's really funny."