

On the Right Track

Perseverance and hard work are paying off for this young athlete who one day hopes to represent the U.S. at the Paralympics.

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He's got a smile that warms a room, a list of athletic accomplishments that trumps most professional athletes, and he's only 14 years old. And that only begins to describe Daniel Romanchuk of Mount Airy, Md.

Born with spina bifida, Romanchuk knows little about his diagnosis because he doesn't see that it makes him any different. This is likely because his parents and early influences at the Bennett School (now part of the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore) never emphasized his disability and only focused on all he could do with his life, in athletics and beyond.

"I'm not really that much different than anyone," says Romanchuk. "I'm in a wheelchair because my legs don't work like theirs, and that's about it."

The teen was born in Baltimore and is home-schooled. And although his schooling is his least favorite activity, it's one he takes on with the same zeal as his sports. (His parents won't let him slack on schoolwork in lieu of training or competition.) He tackles every minute of life with typical teenage angst as well as a little twinkle

in his eye and grin on his face that lets you know how much he's enjoying every minute.

Romanchuk started at the Bennett School at age 2 and has continued there for athletic participation ever since. Although initially enrolled at Bennett for motor development, he excelled with the help of program directors Gerry and Gwena Herman, who founded the curriculum. It has produced world-class athletes, a group Romanchuk is ready to join. The Bennett program introduces kids ages 2-18 to its more than 20 different sports, and the Hermans have continued to coach Romanchuk throughout his athletic successes.

One of his earliest memories is of the Hermans throwing him into the pool. It was literally his "sink or swim" moment — and he swam. Now Romanchuk is swimming triathlon distances with his Michael Phelps-like 6-foot, 7-inch arm span (the same as Phelps).

Fast Track

Romanchuk began swimming at age 2, started swimming competitively on the able-bodied FAST (Frederick Area Swim Team) team at age 8 and continues with this Frederick, Md.-based group today. Gerry Herman, who's coached him since age 2, says he believes at age 4 or 5 Romanchuk was the only disabled swimmer in the country to use all the strokes.

Romanchuk laughs and says swimming on an able-bodied team is "not a lot different, other than the need to keep from being lapped in the pool."

GEORGE SCHLOSSNAGLE



The latest athletic focus for Daniel Romanchuk is paratriathlon, which he says is his favorite individual sport.

During the 2012 Paratriathlon National Series, Daniel Romanchuk improved significantly on his time and is aiming to participate in additional events to test his skills.



GEORGE SCHLOSSNAGLE.



STEPHAN ROMANCHUK

Over his years of competition at the National Junior Disability Championships, Daniel Romanchuk has won every race in his age group.

Swimming is great for his mobility and flexibility needs due to spina bifida, and with his large wingspan and unbreakable determination, Romanchuk is a natural in the water, landing him at the National Junior Disability Championships (NJDC) by age 6. He competes in freestyle, backstroke, and breaststroke but in recent years decided to do only regional disability competitions and NJDC, although he still swims summer meets with his FAST team as a way to cross-train during the week.

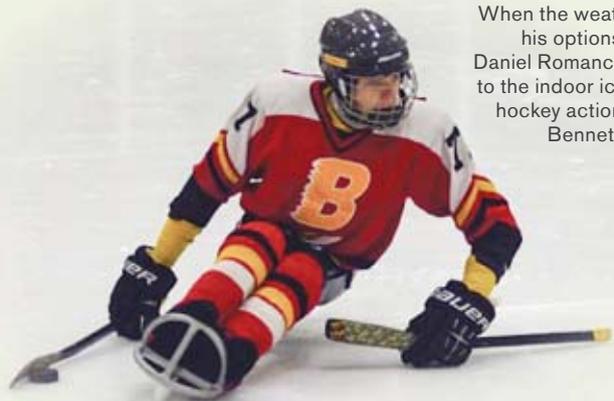
Because of the way spina bifida has affected his limbs, Romanchuk swims in an “L” position, with his lower body in a 90-degree bend from his waist (his hips are fixed this way). He doesn’t see himself as fast in the water and is focused on getting out of his old habits and stroke timing with hopes of one day winning a spot on the U.S. Paratriathlon team.

Need for Speed

According to Romanchuk’s mom, Kim, her son has always had a need for speed. He walked with RGOs (reciprocating gait orthoses) and forearm crutches until he was 5, at which time he ditched them for a wheelchair, which has obviously served him well and not slowed him down.

If you see a blur flying by on the track or race course, it might just be Romanchuk. Track racing is his strongest individual event, and he’s won every NJDC in his age group. He competed in his first marathon this past fall (2:11:04), taking second place over an almost all adult group. In paratriathlon, he also competes against adults in the Open Division and has done about a half dozen triathlons, with more on his schedule. He participated in two triathlons for kids at age 11.

A tried-and-true multisport athlete, Romanchuk finds his best motivation is having someone right behind or in front of him when racing. He pictures



When the weather limits his options outside, Daniel Romanchuk takes to the indoor ice for sled hockey action with the Bennett Blazers.

STEPHAN ROMANCHUK

Perseverance and hard work: two things that exemplify what Romanchuk and his athletic work ethic is all about.

it as if they're not really there, and it gives him something extra to conquer.

"Sometimes there really is someone there," which, he admits, works best.

"Daniel has never met a sport he didn't like," says Kim.

This is evident by the long list of sports he enjoys. These include softball, tennis, table tennis, floor hockey, lacrosse and field events. His main competitive focus remains on the Bennett Blazers basketball team, Bennett sled hockey squad, and track and paratriathlon races.

His Bennett Blazers softball team took the national Junior Varsity title this past summer, and Romanchuk was named to the all-tournament squad. In basketball, the Blazers regularly compete at the National Wheelchair Basketball Tournament. Sled hockey is his favorite winter and strongest team sport.

Main Attraction

Romanchuk's favorite individual sport has become paratriathlon, where he sees the combination of mental and physical challenge as the main attraction. At the Nickel City Triathlon (Buffalo, N.Y.), part of the 2012 Paratriathlon National Series, he shaved 20 minutes off his race time. He finished the sprint triathlon in an astounding 1:23:32. His prior sprint triathlon, although a slightly different distance, yielded a handcycle time of 1:23:00 alone.

Although Romanchuk was completely wiped out after the sprint, he was so pumped from it that he went out and did the fastest pushrim time (the last segment of the triathlon, also considered the "run") by close to a minute of anyone in the race, including the Canadians who took the top two places.

"I learned how fast I could go," he says. "And I learned to push myself more."

Romanchuk competes in one of six sprint triathlon categories for disabled athletes — the wheelchair classification, also called TRI1. This includes the open swim, the "bike" section on a handcycle and the "run" in a racing chair. His always improving race results indicate he's right on the tail of many elite-level racers, some of whom are already Paralympians.

Romanchuk's newest coach is Hector Torres, a professional triathlon coach from Orlando, Fla., and owner and head coach at Tri Peak Athlete, LLC. Torres has a passion for paratriathletes and is in regular contact with Romanchuk to help him up his game, providing a whole new level of challenge for the athlete.

While Romanchuk says he's typically not too tired at the end of a full triathlon, Torres's training routines have him doing endurance and non-endurance drills 2–3 hours per day, nearly every day of the week. Romanchuk receives workouts from him mostly by email.

"Hector is pretty hard-core, but that's fine with Daniel," his mom says. "Daniel appreciates the fact that Hector pushes him — he is used to that approach from the Hermans, who have always treated him as an athlete, not as a disabled athlete."

Although he is a successful swimmer, Daniel Romanchuk says he still sees room for improvement.



GEORGE SCHLOSSNAGLE

All For Fun

When asked what he does for fun, Romanchuk's smile gets even wider. "It's *all* for fun," he says.

In the little free time he has, he is studying for his amateur HAM radio operator's license. He likes throw-

Daniel Romanchuk and the Bennett Blazers junior basketball team often earn their way to the National Wheelchair Basketball Tournament.



STEPHAN ROMANCHUK

ing the ball with his dog and having some extra time when school's out for the summer, too. Although he describes his day as "waking up, eating, school and television," his heavy training schedule is somehow fit into nearly every single day, with hours of exercises at his coaches' direction.

A training schedule this grueling is also as varied as it is intense. It usually includes swimming, track (pushrim) on rollers, bike (handcrank) on rollers, pull-ups, pushups and more. Romanchuk hasn't blinked at the new requirements, although he's found some new muscles or at least is feeling them now. But he laughs at his "lighter" training regimen, which some weeks has only been four instead of seven days.

Romanchuk's competition schedule is as demanding as his workouts and often covers every weekend. It can be even more intense when sport seasons overlap or when every other weekend involves an "away" game. He and his parents are always running non-stop. With his parents' assistance, he travels to triathlons, track races, swim meets, basketball games, hockey tournaments and much more.

His parents are his biggest and admittedly loudest cheering section (along with brother Josh and sister Kathryn). Romanchuk gets so focused and engaged when competing, though, he says he never hears all the cheers and support coming from the crowd.

Competing at the Rio de Janeiro 2016 Paralympics would be a dream come true for Romanchuk. And if he hopes to get there on the track, he says he'll need to get faster and "do what my coaches tell me to do."

A Leader & Mentor

Romanchuk's parents emphasize their son's maturity, which has brought him so far in sports so early in life.

"I think what makes Daniel successful is his willingness to do whatever his coaches tell him and his willingness to try new sports," says Kim. "He works hard — no excuses, no whining. I'm proudest when he's on the field, court, or ice and is more concerned with playing defense and involving his teammates in the play than he is with scoring a point."

And even at his relatively young age, Romanchuk is already serving as a mentor to the younger kids at Bennett and elsewhere. He's dedicated to helping younger teammates learn the game, even if it means losing a point or game.

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"When Daniel was probably about 9 years old and learning to play softball, Gwena Herman explained that the runners had to tag each base as they went around," says Kim. "Daniel proceeded to hit a long line drive, then wheeled up to each base, stopped, picked up his leg and touched his foot to each base, 'tagging' it like he had seen baseball players do. Doing exactly what he had been told! He didn't quite get the fact that running it over with his wheel was enough."

"Whatever sport he's involved in, if you ask him to do something, he's going to do it or die trying," Gerry Herman says. "Many top able-bodied athletes would lag behind Daniel in morals. If I tell everyone (I'm coaching) to do something, other kids will fudge it, but Daniel will say he's not done until he's done. His innate athletic ability combined with that makes him exceptional."

"He's like a rock. I'm impressed with his overall persona as an athlete but also as a person; he's so level-headed and such a hard worker. If I tell Daniel to go home and take 1,000 wall shots, he'll go home and take 1,000 wall shots. Many people want to be Paralympic athletes, but they think there's some magic to get there. But the only way to get there is perseverance and hard work."

Perseverance and hard work: two things that exemplify what Romanchuk and his athletic work ethic are all about.

What is Romanchuk's advice to other junior athletes aspiring to improve? "Do what your coaches tell you to do and don't make up a ton of excuses unless your arms are barely hanging on."

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For more information on Paratriathlon, visit:
usatriathlon.org/rio2016.org/en/the-games/paralympic/sports/paratriathlon