

Blind wrestler is determined to succeed

Written by Tom Fruehling

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Marion High School Coach Jason Haag found out years ago how hard it is to hold down sophomore wrestler Alex Gillaspie.

Blind since birth, young Alex attended Starry Elementary where Haag also serves as physical education teacher. One day in gym class, it might have been about the first grade, Alex climbed all the way to the top of a net strung down from the ceiling.

“I touched the ceiling with both hands, too,” he recalls.

Even then, says Haag, “I could tell he was fearless.”

Alex was born with one gene missing from the retina in his eyes. He can detect sunlight. But otherwise, he explains, “I don’t see anything at all.”

He doesn’t consider it a disability, however. “I was born that way, so it’s all I know,” he says.

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He's always attended regular classes at Marion schools. And he's a straight-A student.

When in kindergarten he brought home informational papers about the Little Indian Wrestling Club. His folks, Ann and Chuck, thought it fine for him to join.

"I loved it," Alex says. "And I've been at it ever since. I like the fast pace of it. And the adaptability of it."

Unlike most other sports, he can compete in wrestling with few limitations. The only rule change is that his opponents must maintain contact at all times. Breaking contact results in a penalty.

"I haven't had any problems," says Alex, who is 16. "There are certain moves that are harder because I can't see the other guy's legs. But, for the most part, I'm like anybody else."

As a cub wrestler, he once made it to the third round of a state meet. And he went up through the fifth grade without being pinned.



"That first time was terrible," he remembers.

As a freshman on the Marion junior varsity last year, Alex won seven of 21 matches. Wrestling this season at 138 pounds again on the JV squad, he's doing even better, winning half of his matches so far.

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And he wrestled in one varsity match, getting pinned with a second to go in the opening period. "But the kid I wrestled was a state qualifier," Alex explains.

Haag says Alex is getting better all the time, through determination and hard work. His training regimen is pretty much the same as others, although he spends more time on the exercise bike and not as much in running and weightlifting. But he gets no special treatment.

Haag does find he has to do a better job explaining the mechanics of the sport, rather than merely relying on demonstration.

"But I know that's made me a better coach," he says. "And I think Alex is an inspiration to others. It's hard enough being a wrestler, much less blind."

Alex wants to wrestle full-time on the varsity before he's done and has his hopes set on the state tournament.

"That's my goal, to make it to state one time," he says. "I just to have to keep working harder."

High hopes, indeed. But then Alex has never been afraid of heights.