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news culture outdoors

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On the cover: We couldn't resist juxtaposing pistols with the hydrologist's dueling weapons—data.

He's down with the team

For this athlete, the real hurdles aren't on the track.

By Erica Ryberg

It's a cold gray February day in Prescott Valley when the 31 athletes meet at Bradshaw High School for their first practice. They're soft and out of shape from the winter's dormancy and so their coaches start by walking them in counter-clockwise loops around the

track and running them through junior-high style calisthenics.

Kim Stamper, the local coordinator of the Bradshaw Mountain branch of Special Olympics, introduces me to Kenneth McLoughlin, a jocular man with Down Syndrome (DS) who's come to practice in blue jeans and a purple Special Olympics shirt.

Kenneth has thinning hair and fine wrinkles around his eyes. Twenty years ago he would have been considered an old man at 37, but with improved childhood care and the sharp decline in the practice of institutionalizing people with DS, their average lifespan has shot up since the 1980's from 25 years to 50 years. Now, Kenneth's simply walking a tightrope between the two life expectancies. And it's a challenge. To have the kind of health the average couch potato takes for granted

requires a fair amount of effort for Kenneth. He not only participates in Special Olympics, but works out at least five times a week and manages his own medications.

Like nearly all the 350,000 Americans who have DS, he's got an extra copy of his twenty-first chromosome in each of his cells (this is called Trisomy 21), and all of those extra genes are hard at work doing far more than their fair share. One of them spells out the code for superoxide dismutase, a chemical that puts Kenneth's cells on fast forward, telling them to age and die at an accelerated rate.

So it makes sense in a way that, outside of Special Olympics, his exercise companions are often decades older than he is. He does his cardiovascular workouts at YRMC's Pendleton Center and then goes next door to the Y where, after he shoots some solitary baskets, he descends into a warm pool for his Arthritis Aquatics class. The cardio and aqua exercise help keep his tri-glycerides and blood pressure down and his metabolism up, hopefully adding a few more quality years to his lifespan.

Kenneth is popular with the aqua ladies (and for that matter, they're popular with him; his mother says he prefers the company of older people). These ladies are twice his age and, for them, getting in and out of the pool is a time-consuming, joint-grinding adventure. Perhaps out of courtesy, Kenneth forgoes the ramp, and instead slips in from the side into the pool.

"Even if he felt down, you'd never know it," says Arthritis Aquatics Instructor Deborah Korda. "There are a lot of people who come here who have a lot of pain, and he has a way of making people feel better."

Had Kenneth been conceived in the last decade or two rather than in the 1960s, he might have faced another hurdle. In the United States today, about 80 percent of the fetuses diagnosed with Down Syndrome are aborted. Kenneth might have been born anyway – his family is devoutly Catholic. When you walk into Kenneth's house, the first thing you see is a three-foot-tall statue of St. Gerard, the patron saint of children and pregnancy.

The next thing you see, if it's evening and there happens to be a game on TV, is Kenneth in uniform. Therese says that at around \$125 a pop, the uniforms cost a fortune. And, she says, Kenneth is wild for every sport, as long as there's a uniform. Kenneth has enough uniforms in his closet that when his team starts to lose, he can change into the uniform of the winning team.

Kenneth's sports obsession came to his mother's attention the day she got a call from the junior high football coach. Kenneth wants to come out for the team, the coach told her, and I don't know what to do. You'll have to tell Kenneth the truth, Kenneth's mother told the coach.

Kenneth didn't play football that year, but he did compete on the track team, coming in both last and triumphant. Around that time, special education policy shifted and Kenneth became one of the first special ed students to move from junior high to high school. A place

join a team of dude ranchers who invited him to blaze trails with them. They asked him along because they said his presence on trail rides was good for morale.

That's the magic of Kenneth and other people with DS. Ask the average person on the street, and they'll tell you that people with DS are gentle and good natured. But if you look at the mental health statistics and typically depressed serotonin levels for people with DS, you'll get a different story. These aren't the ingredients for a cheery human being, and yet, there's Kenneth and his basketball at the three-point arc shouting my name like it's a sacred, magical word. Two seconds later, he nonchalantly swishes the ball though the basket, and I'm catching on to the charm of Kenneth.

Kenneth made it over his first hurdles in life before he was even born. About three-fourths of babies with Trisomy 21 spontaneously abort, usually in the first trimester. But the DS babies who make it to term will likely have avoided other birth defects: pile a spinal bifida on top of DS and the mom's body just isn't going to put up with it.

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The clothes make the man

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Special Olympics gives people like Kenneth a place to challenge themselves and to develop discipline. It's also a good time, so much so that the only thing Kenneth hates is when it ends. "The only time I've seen Kenneth down is when we're traveling home from state games," said local Special Olympics coordinator Kim Stamper.

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on the football team as manager – and a uniform—followed. In Kenneth's bedroom, the photographic evidence of his high school career remains, a huge picture of Kenneth the athlete, posing in uniform with his helmet, looking dignified and strong.

He's still competing, both with Special Olympics and now in college. One Saturday, he forgoes a Valentine's Dance with his girlfriend to show up as No. 24 at a Yavapai College basketball game.

Kenneth knows no rejection, says Therese. And that's a good thing to remember when Kenneth the team "mascot" jumps up to get into the huddle at the Yavapai-Mesa game and can't make it past the outer ring of the tree-tall athletes.

A few moments later, I tell Kenneth that we're going to get some photographs. "With the team," he instantly replies, his finger pointing emphatically at the row of sweaty 20-year old bean poles stretching behind him.



Just like the real thing

"It's pretty much like the Olympics – they go all out," said Bradshaw Mountain Special Olympics Coordinator Mark Stamper. "They're allowed to compete in two events and if they want to do a third, they can do a relay."

The 15th annual Yavapai Area Regional Track & Field Competition at Bradshaw Mountain High School in Prescott Valley is on April 21, 8am-3pm. More than 175 Special Olympics athletes from across northern Arizona will compete in various track & field events throughout the day. The regional games at the BMHS track are just a precursor to the huge State games that follow in Phoenix.

"There's an Olympic Village. They have different groups, like doctors, who will go and set tables and do little things for all the athletes," Stamper said. "They have a huge dance for the athletes, so for track and field, I'd say there's usually about a thousand to two thousand athletes in this huge auditorium and they get a DJ and everybody dances for three hours."

But first, it's the regionals in Prescott Valley. There's plenty of parking and seating for spectators at the BMHS track/football field just off Glassford Hill Road. For information on how you can help Bradshaw Mountain Special Olympics as a volunteer (right now, they're looking for people who can coach specialty sports like figure skating, but everyone's welcome) or with your donation, call Ron Smith at 308-0798 or Kim Stamper at 772-0698.

Left: Kenneth McLoughlin is crazy about sports and about life in general. Ask him which sport he likes best and his answer tells the story: "All of them." Ask him how his day went and he immediately fills you in: "Perfect."







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