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Nuhfer takes silver at Paralympics in Paris



photos provided by Grace Nuhfer

By Kara Ennis
reporter

From Greenwood Gators to the 2024 Paris Paralympics, swimming has been a major part of Grace Nuhfer's life since she was seven years old.

But, Grace, Class of 2021, had a condition that affected her sight and her sports activity.

"As we learned more and more about her connective tissue disorder and started progressing through doctors, we realized she wouldn't be able to do sports with balls, bats, and racquets," Mrs. Tami Nuhfer, her mother, said.

Brittle cornea syndrome is an inherited disease that affects not only eyes, but ligaments and joints, too. While there are no current treatments, preventative measures can ensure there is no damage to the cornea.

"We got her into swimming early because it would help tone her muscles and protect her joints from getting an early onset of arthritis. Swimming was a proactive move to help her be the best physically she could be and it was something that she took off with and fell in love with quickly. It gave her a place to be where she could be like everyone else," Mrs. Nuhfer said.

Nuhfer competes in the S13 category, the least severe vision impairment eligible for Paralympic swimming. The Paralympic categories range from 1-13, the most severe level of visual impairment at 1 and the least severe at 13. This category classifies Nuhfer as legally blind.

"I actually just started doing para swimming a little less than a year ago. It wasn't really on the radar because I didn't realize that it was something that I could possibly do until recently, but slowly over this past year, I just realized that it could be a possibility and that it was definitely something that I was really gunning for," she said.

The USA Paralympic swim team trials were held in Minneapolis in June. Nuhfer competed in five events and qualified for Team USA in four.

"I printed out pictures of the Paralympic medals and put it in my locker at school to look at every day just to give myself that extra bit of motivation. I was definitely manifesting being there and winning a medal," Grace said.

Nuhfer attends Akron University, where she competes on the swim team. Her goal

of reaching the Paralympics motivated her to put in extra work during the college team off-season.

"I've had to adjust when I'm hitting the harder practices and when I'm tapering into being performance ready. Compared to my past few seasons swimming with my college team, my schedule has looked a little bit dif-

ferent. I've done more training on my own, but it's been nice because I've been able to train with some para teammates as well," Grace said.

Nuhfer competed in the Women's 100m Butterfly S13, bringing home a silver medal. She also competed in the Women's 200m Medley SM13 placing sixth, the Women's 50m Freestyle S13, and the Women's 100m

Backstroke placing eighth in both.

"There were a lot of people in the stands and a lot of support coming from my family and friends and everyone back in the states. Having all these eyes on the Paralympics and it becoming a more popular movement these past few years has made it even more exciting. Honestly, the excitement overtook all of the nerves. I think the day of my 100 Fly my heart was beating out of my chest the entire day because I was nervous," Grace said.

Before collegiate and Paralympic swimming, Nuhfer competed with the GHS swim team where she was a key member of the team.

"Looking back at my time being a Woodman or being at the middle school, those were definitely a lot of happy years with good memories, and the people and teams there really helped me become the athlete I am today. I am super grateful for my years at Greenwood," Grace said.

Her hard work and training did not begin in college. Her impressive work ethic has been around for a much longer time.

"Grace Nuhfer has always been an amazing person, an amazing teammate, and was always the hardest worker in the room. She was a champion way before she ever went to Paris.

Unless you knew she had a disability, you didn't know she had a disability. She had an unmatched will to win and to compete," Mr. Jerrod Watson, strength and conditioning coach, said.

Many people back home in Akron and Greenwood have expressed their love and how proud they are of her. Her mom, who attended the games in Paris, was especially proud.

"I am absolutely thrilled for her to have the opportunity to not only excel in a sport that she loves but to be engaged with a team and a platform that allows her to demonstrate and advocate for a lifestyle that most people don't understand," Mrs. Nuhfer said.

Now that the 2024 Paris Paralympic games are done, Nuhfer is looking forward to what is to come next in her journey.

"I would just tell my younger self to just make sure I am grounding myself with gratitude and to appreciate where I'm at. Even though high school wasn't the last stop of my athletic journey, it was definitely still a very important time in my life, and there's a lot to be grateful for there," Grace said.

