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Tri, Tri Again:

Wrentham elementary student strives for triathlon wins, athletic success

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Completing a triathlon is an accomplishment that most adults will never cross off their bucket lists. To many, finishing such a race—a combination of swimming, biking, and running—is too great a challenge. For Danielle Gresham, an eight-year-old resident of Wrentham, the greatest challenge is in putting socks on wet feet after a swim.

In July, Danielle was one of the 800 triathletes from 11 states and 2 countries who competed in the 2013 New England Kids Triathlon, the largest children's event of its kind in the Northeast. She completed the race, her third, with a competitive time of 30:38. The track consisted of a 100-meter swim, a 3-mile bike ride and a half-mile run, and was set at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge.

An active participant in Wrentham's local sports programs, Danielle is no stranger to athletic competition. Participating in a triathlon, she said, would be a good physical challenge and an opportunity to train for the upcoming fall season. When Danielle isn't swimming at the Adirondack Club or pedaling about her neighborhood, she plays softball, lacrosse and soccer for Wrentham as well as the Scorpions Elite West team (U9). She started playing soccer, her favorite team sport, at the age of four—it was the earliest athletic opportunity the town offered.

"I really love to be active," Danielle said, "And I think that kids who are active while they're still young, each can do more things while they're older."

Springtime, her father David Gresham says, is a blur of going from one field to another. In addition to taking charge of Danielle's schedule, parents David and Jennifer must tackle their six-year-old son Jack's activities as well: flag football, baseball, lacrosse, soccer and skating lessons (in preparation for ice hockey). Both have also taken up coaching positions—this year marks David's fourth season of softball, Jennifer's fourth year of coaching soccer.

"[My wife and I] wanted the kids to be involved in local sports," David said. "Working together with your friends for one common goal is invaluable. As kids get older, I think it's good for kids to experience winning and losing but also the ability to compete and to learn to deal with adversity."

Learning to deal with hardship is a lesson Danielle and her family have learned on and off the field. One of the greatest challenges for the family came in 2010, when Jennifer was diagnosed with breast cancer. Danielle and Jack were five and three years old.

“The journey through cancer was difficult emotionally, physically and spiritually,” Jennifer said. “The hardest part was that I felt I was unable to do my job as a wife, mother and keeper-of-the-home. We were so incredibly fortunate that we had a tremendous amount of support. During my treatment weeks, neighbors and friends brought us dinner and people were always offering to drive the kids to and from activities or just have them over so that I could rest...it’s never easy to surrender to the fact that you need help, especially help taking care of your family, but in this case I didn’t have much of a choice.”

During Jennifer’s treatments at Dana Farber Cancer Institute, it was sports that helped keep the family going.

“Sports were a great escape,” David said. “It was the center of the family. Jenn was still able to go to games and the activities allowed the kids just to be kids.”

“My parents did a good job of explaining it to me,” Danielle said of her mother’s diagnosis. “I was sad at first because I didn’t want my mom to be sick from all the treatment. I didn’t want her to lose her hair. My mom couldn’t play with me the way she used to, but over time, I saw how brave she was and how hard she tried to do everything still. It made me proud that she was my mom.”

It was her mom’s battle that first brought Danielle to the world of triathlons. In 2011, her dad David ran the Sharon Sprint Triathlon on Team “Real Men Wear Pink,” a group started by family friend Scott Clifford. The team raised money for the Ellie Fund, a charity that provides services such as free home-cooked meals, transportation to medical appointments, housekeeping and childcare to hundreds of breast cancer patients and their families across Massachusetts each year.

As David drew near to the end, he jogged to the sidelines to grab Danielle and Jack so they could finish the race together.

“Real Men Wear Pink was [Danielle’s] first experience of crossing the finish line,” David said. “When she heard there was a kids’ triathlon, she wanted to do it herself.”

A year later in 2012, Danielle completed her first New England Kids’ Triathlon with a time of 26:38, placing third against 63 other kids her age. She returned to the track again in July of this year, months after her mother had been declared “cancer free.” Although she was nervous, Danielle was excited and ready, having trained hard all summer.

“I just focus and concentrate and I really don’t let anything distract me,” she said. She added of her starting line mentality: “Things usually happen for a reason.”

Danielle started off well in the swimming portion of the 2013 event and transitioned quickly to the bike portion, but a minor setback delayed her finish. Near the beginning of the cycling portion, Danielle’s bike chain broke. Though she was visibly upset, her mom noted, Danielle walked the course with her bike until she found a volunteer able to fix it. She then climbed back on and headed toward the finish line.

She finished the bike portion and took off running so quickly that a volunteer had to remind her to take off her bike helmet.

“This was the thing we were most proud of her for,” Jennifer said. “She did not quit. She did not sit on the side of the road waiting for help. She sought it out and finished strong. We’ve had a lot of conversations since then about how much of life is beyond our control!”

Danielle’s determination is a trait well known to her coaches and teammates. Bryan Aaron, who coached her this past softball season, says her competitive streak and attitude made her an exceptional teammate.

“She always showed up excited and ready to play. Danny is just one of those kids that everyone liked,” coach Aaron said. “She always gave 110% and got along with everyone.”

Danielle returned to her team sports at the start of the academic year. When she isn’t running, jumping or playing, Danielle can be found curled up at home with a book (*Magic Tree House*, *The Boxcar Children*, and *Harry Potter* are her favorites). This month, she will be attending the Pretty in Pink gala, a charity event her parents will be hosting as newly elected board members of the Ellie Fund.

Every day, Danielle looks forward to her next race, her next challenge.

“I want to challenge myself,” Danielle said. “Once I cross the finish line, I feel like I can do anything.”