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Records Set at Youth Triathlon

July 11, 2007

Sue Pascoe , Staff Writer

It was hardly a surprise that David Hafford was the first to finish last Wednesday's YMCA Youth Triathlon. After all, event founder and organizer Deborah Hafford is a triathlete and passed on her competitive genes to her son.

So far, 14-year-old David is making the most of his pedigree. He won the boys competition in 19 minutes, 37 seconds, eclipsing the previous record of 19:43 set by Willy MacMiller last July.

Hafford and MacMiller are both runners. MacMiller attends Crespi High School in Encino and runs for the West Valley Eagle Track Club while Hafford runs track and cross country at Palisades High. They entered the pool at the same time and stayed side by side for the first 125 yards of the six-lap swim.

'Willie was swimming smart,' said Doug Hafford, David's father, who times the event every year. 'I tried to remain impartial. David got a good push-off on the last 25. It was an amazing moment to watch him. He won by heart.'

New records have been set in each of the first five years of the event. This year, MacMiller 10 seconds behind Hafford in 19:47.



Rich Schmitt / Staff Photographer

Kyle Headrick (foreground) swims his final lap at the YMCA pool, followed closely by his sister Cristina, during the Youth Triathlon.

'It was very exciting,' Hafford said. 'I don't know how I got through the announcements.' Finishing third in the boys' 13- to 15-year-old age group was Neil Martin, who completed the event in 20:41.

Thirteen-year-old Mara Silka was the first female finisher, setting a blistering pace to win in 20:53, shattering the previous girls' mark by nearly three minutes and finishing fourth overall.

'It was fun,' said Silka, an eighth-grader at Paul Revere Middle School. 'It wasn't that bad.'

The triathlon course starts with a three-mile bike ride through the streets of Huntington Palisades the same route used for the early morning Will Rogers 5K race. The athletes then run a mile up Sunset to the swimming pool in Temescal Canyon, where they complete the event with a 150-yard swim. Deborah Hafford reported a record turnout this year, with 160 athletes completing the race.

Silka, also a standout on the Palisades-Malibu YMCA swim team, was challenged most of the way by 12-year-old Emily Berkin, who is strongest at the running phase of the event. The two went head-to-head last year in the 11- and 12-year-old category and finished first and second, respectively. They were in different age categories this year but still battled to be the top female finisher.

Berkin arrived at the pool first but Silka, who excels at the swimming phase, made up the difference in the water and beat Berkin by 25 seconds.

'Swimming is easy,' Silka said. 'That's where I catch up to everyone.'

Two-time girls' champion Natalie Farnham was runner-up in the 13-15 division with a time of 22:52, one second faster than her winning time last year. Third in that category was Olivia Kirkpatrick, also a YMCA swimmer.

Berkin took first in the girls' 11- and 12-year-old division with a time of 21:18. Kennedy Corrin, 11, was second and third place went to Isi Ibarra of Cathedral City.

There were 27 entries in the 6- to 8-year-old boys division, with eight-year-old Jack Brew winning and smashing last year's record of 31:22 with a new clocking of 27:43. Second place went to Addison Button and Patrick McNamara was third.

Nine-year-old David Grinsfelder was eighth best overall and won the 9- and 10-year-old division with a time of 21:45. Second out of 21 competitors in the division was Alex Wilimovsky, who chopped three minutes off his time last year with a sparkling 24:26. Third place went to Spencer Nichols.

The largest division this year was the 11- to 12-year-old boys with a field of 34 registered competitors. Josh Rodriguez-Irons took first place in 21:43, Chad Kanoff was second Wyatt Reed was third.

In the 6- to 8-year-old girls division Leah Timmerman, Clara Saab and Elena Saab took the top three spots. The 2006 triathlon had 15 contestants in that division while this year's event drew a total of eight.

Courtney Corrin, who was the top finisher among 6-8-year-olds last year, moved up to the 9- and 10-year-olds division and won it in 26:18, breaking last year's record of 27:39. Rachel Martin, who finished third last year, was second in 28:05. Mara Muslea nabbed third out of 22 athletes in the girls' largest age

group this year.

The last person to finish the race was six-year-old Kaitlyn Betancourt, whose father Jose helps Deborah Hafford bring a group of students from Ninth Street Elementary to Pacific Palisades every Saturday morning in June to train for the triathlon. This year, 21 students ages 6-11 (and one 14-year-old) competed.

On July 4, each child was allowed to bring a guest or family member with them on a bus, which was paid for by the USA Triathlon organization. Hafford arranged for the participants to stay at the pool after the event for a picnic that she also organized. That afternoon, the young triathletes were invited to ride on the YMCA float in the parade.

Once again, Cherie Gruenfeld, a six-time division world champion in the Ironman Triathlon, brought eight athletes from the San Bernardino area, where she trains disadvantaged youth.

One of her trainees, Rodriguez-Irons, ran the Palisades-Will Rogers 5K less than two hours before the triathlon and finished second in his age group by three seconds, covering the 3.1 miles in 21:35.

'Watching him run is a thing of beauty,' Gruenfeld said of her star pupil, who plays AYSO soccer at Loma Linda and likes third base in baseball. As far as the triathlon?

'Running is the best,' Rodriguez-Irons said.

It is hard for the kids to train on their own for the first portion of the triathlon because they don't have bikes at home.

'We can't give the kids bikes,' Gruenfeld said. 'If we do, they're stolen or someone sells the bikes for drug money.'

Doug Hafford praised Gruenfeld for getting her kids to the athletes. 'We pick up people at the school to bring them here but Cherie has to go door-to-door.'

Looking for a way to get more kids involved in the Fourth of July festivities, Deborah Hafford, a 15-year resident of Pacific Palisades, founded the Youth Triathlon in 2003 and the inaugural event attracted 50 kids. Her efforts earned Hafford a Sparkplug Award in May 2006. Participation has grown every year, making the triathlon a 'cool' alternative to the 5/10K races and Kids' Fun Run.

As Mary Elizabeth Lutz watched her 10-year-old son Tommy finish the race at the Y pool, which was packed with swimmers, she was amazed at how much the triathlon has grown in its short history. 'Look what she [Deborah] has turned this into,' Lutz said.

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