

Cardinal Carter swimmer takes on Deaflympics in Bulgaria

By Jeff Doner

Damiano Panetta is no regular 16-year-old.

Instead of lounging around and sleeping in, he spends his time at the gym, going for a run and, most importantly, in the pool.

Damiano recently competed in the 22nd Deaflympic Games in Sofia, Bulgaria, where he managed to break his personal best times in all 10 swimming events he participated in.

A Grade 11 student at Cardinal Carter Catholic High School in Aurora, Damiano said it was an honour competing at the Deaflympics and that it's just one step in achieving his goals.

"It was nice; it was a really good experience," he said. "It was really cool being there and to meet all the other deaf athletes and be able to experience that, as well as being with the Canadian team."

With over 4,000 athletes from 67 nations, he admitted that it was the biggest and toughest competition he has been in thus far. As the only representative from Ontario, he said it was an honour to compete with the Canadian team.

"I went into the finals with the Canadian relay team and we placed seventh," he said, adding that the group got to spend a little time together on the trip.

"We didn't have a whole lot of time to travel around, but the swim team went out on a couple walks around Bulgaria and the city. It was really cool, but it's different."

Back at home, both he and his swimming aspirations have outgrown his childhood backyard pool, so the Vaughan Aquatic Club has been his home outside of home for the past five years.

This is where the budding star has been honing his swimming skills with the help of both his coaches and teammates.

"If you have someone that is close to your times, you can compete with each other and try to bring out the best in each other," he said of his teammates.

Outside of the pool, Damiano has Cochlear implants that help him hear. Combined with his ability to read lips, he has no problem understanding what people are saying. However, in the pool it isn't so easy.

"It does affect his swimming because he is on an all hearing team, so the coaching is a bit different because when his implants are off he can't hear anything," said his mom, Wendy.

But at the Vaughan Aquatic Club, Damiano said his coaches and teammates are a huge help.

"Normally I will just keep asking my coach to repeat instruction, because I can read lips, and I'll ask the other swimmers to repeat things. They are all pretty helpful," he said.

When asked about a potential career path, the honour roll student wasn't so sure about what might be in store, but he was clear and concise about his plans for swimming.

"This year I want to make provincials and then by the end of high school I want to make the senior nationals," he said.

?Then it would be to try and get into the actual Olympics. I've got a whole plan on trying to get myself to the Olympics. This year I've got to make it to provincials, then the next year the next level and just keep going up.?

As for right now, Damiano is eagerly awaiting the start of a regular season in September, which he is hoping will turn out to be a big one for his development.

Like most athletes, he has set his goals and has his eye fixed on meeting them one at a time and just wants to keep the momentum going forward and continue to knock some time off his personal best.

?It's going to be a big step, but I'll keep working at it,? he said.

His mom is no stranger to his goal setting and steadfast work ethic and said she isn't surprised about how far he has come in five years.

?I think it's amazing. It's inspiring for me,? she said. ?He has definitely surpassed everything I expected with the swimming. He always meets his goals; he sets them for himself and meets them and I think the whole thing with the Deaflympics in Bulgaria was just amazing. It was just mind-blowing to see him with all the other deaf athletes and how they just gelled. It was really incredible.?

Listing American swimmer Michael Phelps as a role model and source of inspiration, Damiano will continue to take things one step at a time.

?The Deaflympics was for sure my biggest achievement so far,? he said. ?I just like being in the water and to swim fast.?