

Shelburne's Gabe McHughan competing in World Dwarf Games

By Mike Pickford

One Dufferin youngster is counting the days as he prepares to represent his nation at the upcoming 2017 World Dwarf Games. Kicking off at the University of Guelph with an opening ceremony on August 4, the 10-day international competition will welcome close to 500 athletes from 20 countries all across the world. Amongst those is seven-year-old Gabe McHughan, a soon-to-be Grade 2 student at Glenbrook Elementary School in Shelburne.

Described by his parents Crystal and Mattas as something of a sports fanatic, Gabe is ready to literally take the world by storm as he gets set to compete in eight events next month.

"Gabe has been incredibly active ever since he learned to walk. He's been playing soccer for five years now, he plays a little basketball and he loves baseball," Crystal told the Citizen this week. "We're just so excited that he's going to have the opportunity to compete on the same level as someone with the same condition that he has, which is nice because we've never had that before."

Competing at the Junior A level (7-11 year olds), Gabe will represent Team Canada in soccer, curling, basketball, boccia, floor hockey, the 20-metre sprint, the 40-metre sprint and the softball throw.

Also boasting a Futures age group (ages 6 and younger), Junior B (12-15 year olds), Open (any age) and Masters (ages 35 and older) and with more than 15 different events to choose from, there is something for everyone at the World Dwarf Games. And while it is seen as a perfect avenue for the younger generation to have some fun and make friends, this is the real deal for older athletes.

"Sitting here and talking about what Gabe will be doing and how much fun he's going to have? I don't want that to overshadow the fact that this is a big deal. It's essentially the Olympics for little people," Crystal said. "You'd be hardpressed to find anyone in the world that hasn't heard of the Olympics, a lot of people also know about the Paralympics. I want people to know about the World Dwarf Games."

Much like the Olympics, the games take place every four years. Athletes represent their nation and compete for gold, silver and bronze medals. According to the World Dwarf Games' website, this year's event will be the largest sporting event in history held exclusively for athletes with dwarfism. According to its mission statement, the Games' aim is to provide participants with a professional environment in which they can realize their athletic potential, while also promoting awareness of dwarfism across the globe.

Dwarfism is defined, in humans, as an adult with a height of less than 4 feet 10 inches. While there are more than 200 types of dwarfism, two disorders - achondroplasia and growth hormone deficiency - are responsible for the majority of human dwarfism cases. Approximately one in 40,000 children is born with dwarfism.

With the Games being so close to home this year, Crystal is hoping that local residents will make the short drive south to cheer Gabe and the rest of the Athletes on throughout the week.

"This is all free for people to come out and watch, so the more we have down there to support everyone and cheer the athletes on the better," Crystal said. "Gabe is going to have a lot of friends from the community down there to watch him. There are a lot of parents, teachers and other students from Glenbrook that will be there, so it's going to be an awesome experience for him. He's going to be competing against people from all across the world? It's a big deal."

And, should he enjoy the experience as much as his parents think he will, Gabe will be afforded every opportunity to pursue sports in the future, with Crystal stating she'd like to travel overseas and attend other World Dwarf Games events in the future.

"Gabe loves sports so we're definitely going to encourage him and support him in any way that we can," dad Matt said. "If that means traveling to different places so that he can compete against people his own age with his condition then great."

Crystal added, "This is going to be huge for Gabe. Not that he's lacking in confidence at all, but this will just be nice for him that he gets to be there with so many people that are just like him. He's going to have a blast down in Guelph and I'm sure he's going to make lots of great friends."

For more information on the World Dwarf Games, visit worlddwarfgames2017.org. Anyone interested in volunteering is encouraged to contact volunteer.wdg2017@gmail.com.