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PREPS PLUS

Biology teacher, fellow students help standout Marquette High School athlete get most out of wheelchair track



Zac Bellman

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When Gianni Quintero narrowed his options of which Milwaukee-area high school to attend, he was searching for a school that could demonstrate not only a desire to help him succeed but also an outline of how it may do so.

At 6 years old, Quintero was diagnosed with transverse myelitis, an inflammation of a section of the spinal cord. The condition causes an interruption to the messages his spinal cord nerves send throughout his body, which left him paralyzed on his left side from his hip down. As he toured schools and spoke with administrators as an eighth-grader, Quintero wanted to be shown, not told, how a school would seek to normalize his high school experience.

"Other schools that I looked at, they said, 'We can figure this out, and this out' but they never said, 'We're going to do this,'" Quintero said. "Things they know they can do to help me with sports or just school in general."

Athletics was a particular concern for Quintero, who had loved playing baseball before his paralysis. He refused to be limited by his circumstances, participating in wheelchair basketball for eight years. At an event while in grade school, a coach approached his parents to suggest he try wheelchair track, an option Quintero was not even aware of at that point.

"He's pretty fast for a wheelchair basketball player, he's gotta try track," Quintero recalled being told. "So I went there and tried it and thought it was really fun."

Quintero ultimately chose Marquette High School to continue his academic and athletic pursuits. A freshman, he said the school's experience catering to students of all abilities made the difference in his choice.

"They'll adapt things, like our freshman retreat, they adapted it so I could still get around everywhere," Quintero said. "They made sure all the places we went to had an elevator so that I can go places and all that type of stuff."

As the high school track season approached this spring, Quintero found himself in a position of uncertainty. He did not just want to participate but compete on a high level with his teammates.

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An 'iterative process'

Marquette track and field coach Nicole Williams knew she wanted Quintero to feel as incorporated into the team as possible. Doing so meant finding him some more individual attention than she alone could provide.

"He's not a wheelchair athlete who happens to be on our team, he is a person on our team who happens to be a wheelchair athlete," Williams said.

Enter her colleague and fellow supervisor of the Marquette Science Olympiad team, Anthony Mancinelli. The young biology teacher had no background in coaching but was intrigued by the parallels to teaching and science involved in achieving peak athletic performance. Williams remembers one word in particular that sealed the deal when discussing coaching with Mancinelli at a Science Olympiad event in Boston last spring.

"I was telling him how cool it was gonna be and how we're gonna get to do all these numbers and then there are gonna be spreadsheets and it was gonna be great," Williams said. "And he's like, 'Spreadsheets? I'm in.' "

Midway through their first season working together, Mancinelli has enjoyed the process of making minor alterations to Quintero's gear. Quintero's track wheelchair is on loan from Variety - the Children's Charity of Wisconsin, and has been modified to better suit Quintero.

"How can we attach the rubber to get the best friction on his wheelchair? How can we install the wheels the best to minimize friction? How can we get him fitting in the chair in the best layout?" Mancinelli said. "All these challenges and problem-solving, and this iterative process has fit really well with my science background."

The gloves Quintero uses are also custom-made using the high school's own 3D printer, in cooperation with academic technology coordinator Tom Mussoline. The printer is used to create a composite plastic base and then a piece of rubber is glued to the base to create enough friction to rotate the inner wheel that propels Quintero's chair. Due to a variety of considerations such as how much friction is being generated, overall weight of the gloves, durability and comfort, Mancinelli explained that there have been at least seven iterations of the gloves thus far.

"In engineering they always say we have an iterative process of solving a problem, it's the same thing with these gloves," Mancinelli said. "So you try all different kinds of glue, all different kinds of rubber, all different kinds of composites with the plastic. Really it's just a trial and error thing."

Similarly to how he handles the classroom, Mancinelli seeks to involve Quintero in the problem-solving process as well.

"If he goes around the track, the first thing I'm going to ask him is, 'What do you think? How did that go for you?' and get his input, his thoughts on it first," Mancinelli said. "Emphasizing independence has been the main hallmark in the classroom and on the track with him."

Finding a reference point

For all that goes into Quintero making it to the starting line, the X factor for him is something that cannot be quantified with a timer or reflected on a spreadsheet.

"Gianni's an athlete, and it's been really fun to see that he wants to compete, he wants to work hard, he wants to see how far he can push himself, he loves working into the training programs," Williams said. "'Hard workout? Sure, Coach, let's do one more. Let's do one more....' He wants to push. This is not like a fun hobby, he wants to compete."

That internal motivation is all the more valuable for an athlete who may be able to count the number of competitors he actually faces live on the track on one hand until late into the season.

"It might look like he's doing a couple joy rides around (the track), but I'm there with the times from our school records. I'm there with the times from state records last year. I'm looking at every second trying to see how can we trim down your time to get you as fast around that track as possible?" Mancinelli said.

That passion and the iterative process that supports it is starting to show signs of paying off.

Quintero's time of 2 minutes 14.10 seconds in the 800-meter wheelchair event at the Dan Benson Invitational at Wauwatosa West High School on April 28 was a school record. It also bested the 2022 WIAA state meet winning time by more than nine seconds. His times in other events, including the 100, 200, 400 and 1,600 have all steadily improved as well.

"He's been at this for a couple of months, and he's put up some seriously fast times, so it's exciting to see," Mancinelli said. "We're just in the early stages of it."

Quintero's overarching goal is to compete at the college level, as well as a Paralympic Games one day. In the short term, he is grateful for the opportunities he has had to continue growing as a student athlete.

"It's really cool," Quintero said, "because they're showing that they can be, and are willing to be, inclusive and adaptive towards me."