

Heading to Russia

Sioux City hockey player prepares for Deaflympics

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SIOUX CITY | Every time a hockey player enters a rink, he uses speed, sight and sound in order to compete in the sport.

But what happens when the player can't hear?

"I rely on my eyes," said Sam Holzrichter, an assistant captain and left wing for the Sioux City Metros

High School hockey team. "I keep my head up and see everything that's in back of me, everything that's in front of me and everything that's around me."

A North High School 11th-grader, Holzrichter has been selected to participate in the 18th annual Winter Deaflympics, being held in Khanty-Mansyisk, Russia from March



Holzrichter

28-April 5.

The 17-year-old Sioux City native was chosen to be on a team which will include other hearing-impaired skaters. The U.S. team – featuring of hockey players, ages 17-38, will be taking on athletes from Canada, Finland, Russia and Kazakhstan.

"Sam tried out for the team while attending an American Hearing Impaired Hockey Association (AHHIA) camp in Buffalo, N.Y., this past August,"

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Dawn J. Sagert, Sioux City Journal

North High School junior Sam Holzrichter, 17, of Sioux City, practices with the Sioux City Metros at IBP Ice Center in Sioux City. A hockey player since he was 5, Holzrichter will be participating in the 18th annual Winter Deaflympics in Khanty-Manstisk, Russia in late March.



Dawn J. Sagert, Sioux City Journal

North High School junior Sam Holzrichter, 17, of Sioux City, practices with the Sioux City Metros at IBP Ice Center in Sioux City.

Deaflympics

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Holzrichter's dad Dan Holzrichter said. "We figured if he didn't make it this time around, he could try again in four years."

But a few days before Christmas, Holzrichter discovered he had, indeed, made the cut.

"I couldn't believe it!" he said with a smile. "I'm going to Russia!"

LIKE ANY OTHER KID

Dan Holzrichter said his son became deaf a few months shy of his first birthday.

By the time he turned 5, Holzrichter had surgery where a cochlear implant was fitted into his right ear. Seven years later, he received one for his left ear.

A small electronic device, a cochlear implant consists of an external portion that sits behind an ear and a second portion that is surgically placed underneath the skin.

While the implant doesn't restore normal hearing, it can give a deaf person the ability to pick up environmental sounds and help him understand speech.

"When you have a special needs child, so many things enter your mind," Dan Holzrichter admitted. "Will Sam be able to talk? Will he be able to go to a regular school? Will he be able to lead a life any other kid?"

Not only did Holzrichter excel at school, he found a home on the ice.

LIVING OUT HIS HOCKEY DREAMS

A longtime coach with the Siouxland Youth Hockey Association, Dan Holzrichter coached his eldest son Ben in the sport. It was only a matter of time when his youngest son would want to get on the ice.

Indeed, Holzrichter has been a part of youth hockey since he was 5. Unfortunately, his hearing devices won't always fit under his helmet.

"Sam is very observant,

always watching," Dan Holzrichter noted. "One of the smallest players on the team, he knows he will get hit. He has to keep his head and learn to deal with it."

"I may get hit," Sam Holzrichter said, nodding, "but I keep on going."

Excelling at chemistry and physics, Holzrichter said he wants to study material engineering when he goes off to college.

Between homework, hockey and band practice (he plays the cello and percussion), Holzrichter admitted to not having much down time.

"When I'm not playing in a game, I'm practicing," he allowed. "When I'm not practicing, I'm refereeing a game."

PUTTING A NEW FACE ON HEARING IMPAIRMENT

Dan Holzrichter can't help but smile as his son recounts his typical day.

"I was worried that Sam's deafness would keep him from doing certain things," Dan Holzrichter said. "Obviously, that hasn't been the case."

In fact, Holzrichter said many of his friends forget about his hearing impairment.

"When I'm in the locker room, I won't have my cochlear in," he said, smiling. "It's only when I point to my ears that they notice I can't hear them talk."

TESTING HIS ABILITY IN RUSSIA

At the Deaflympics in late March, cochlear implants won't be allowed.

"Competing with other deaf athletes, they want everybody to be on an even playing field," he explained. "That means we will all be deaf on the ice!"

No matter how well he does in Russia, Sam Holzrichter is proud that he's been chosen to participate.

"I may not be the biggest hockey player there, but I always give it my all," he said.