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## Thomas Brukner

*“I’ve learned that it’s possible, but hard, to stay happy”*

### By David Grossman

Thomas Brukner entered the Toronto District School Board swim championship with much more pre-occupying his mind than winning a race and standing on a podium.

One of the top swimmers at HumberSide Collegiate, Brukner wanted to help his teammates do well in their quest for excellence at the Ontario final – even though it’s an event that doesn’t always attract the best swimmers.

Brukner, even if he qualified, knew he would not be able to join them for personal reasons. The 17-year old, learning from mistakes of the past, focused on hard work and a positive attitude bringing praise from many who supported him.

With his high school days numbering down, and graduation a few months away, Brukner was thinking about what lies ahead – a career in search and rescue, attending Royal Military College in Kingston and maybe, one day, pursuing work as a paramedic.

“I’ve always liked helping people, putting others ahead of yourself, and when it’s possible, taking care of them,” said Brukner, peerless in many ways, overjoyed and gung-ho about achieving a lifelong dream.

On the academic honor roll, Brukner talked about wanting to live an action-packed life and helping people, knowing all of that was possible. But there was one thing he had no control over and that was the health of someone who meant the world to him – his father.

“I am so happy that my father is here to see me swim,” said the multi-sport athlete while pointing to the spectator section of the posh Markham Pan Am Centre. “He has terminal cancer and having him watch me means the world to me – far more than any medal. I am so proud of him.”





After his family learned of the prognosis, Brukner, and his father, each added a tattoo to their forearm that reads, in German, “all is good”.

In the pool, at the city final, things didn’t go as well as Brukner had hoped – but he did reach his primary objective: to help his teammates advance.

His specialty stroke is the freestyle.

Brukner had a superb strong finish in the 200-metre freestyle relay that helped his team move up from 5<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> place – and a bronze medal. For him, it was his fifth medal in four years at Humberside.

In the 200-metley relay foursome, the team placed 7<sup>th</sup>. Both squads advanced to the provincial finals – but with substitutes for Brukner.

“It was an amazing feeling – knowing that I could contribute to help my friends, my team and my school, move on to the next level,” he said. “I am fully confident that they will do their best.”

In the individual races, both occurring earlier in the day and before the team races, Brukner finished 8<sup>th</sup> in the senior boys’ 50-metre race, far from his personal best time of 26.5 seconds. In the 100-metre event, he was 11<sup>th</sup>.

“I’ve learned that it’s possible, but hard, to stay happy – even when someone can be dealing with a terrible situation,” said Brukner. “I have wonderful school friends. I cope with the circumstances and I know how precious life can be.”

Even back at his primary school days, when he attended Swansea Public School, Brukner has been passionate about sports, determined to excel and very active. When he’s not in the pool training or competing, Brukner has devoted time volunteering at a refugee house in Toronto by serving meals and assisting in other ways.

Karen Maguire was his first swim coach at Humberside, but for the past two years it has been Andrew Mancini, a math and chemistry teacher, that has coached Brukner into becoming a strong and committed swimmer.





“He’s resilient and has had to deal with adversity – but he’s made all required swim practices and is a high-level athlete,” praised Mancini. “He’s had it rough lately, dealing with the situation at home, demanding academics in his final year, volunteering and he’s still one of our top swimmers.”

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