

Giving Blind Kids a Sporting Chance

By Ben A. Shaberman



Tashin Pasang and Kienzen share a good laugh.

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Though it's been called "Shangri La" and the "Rooftop of the World," Tibet is not necessarily the most enchanting place if you happen to be a child who can't see; blindness there often leads to ridicule from the community and even family. And, it's both tragic and ironic that vision loss is becoming more prevalent in a region famous for its spectacular beauty — the country is nestled in the Himalayan Mountains, the home of Mt. Everest. Disease, ultraviolet rays, and other environmental factors are to blame for blindness in 30,000 of the country's 2.6 million inhabitants.

When a group led by Erik Weihenmayer — the first blind climber to scale Mt. Everest — took six Tibetan children from the Braille Without Borders School (Lhasa, Tibet) on a challenging climbing expedition in 2004, any feelings of self-doubt affecting these kids were quickly erased. Despite the fact that they suffered from

headaches and nausea caused by mountain sickness, and were forced to turn back 2,000 feet short of their 23,000-foot goal, the summit of Lapka Rhi, the kids returned with newfound courage, confidence, and determination. When one young climber, Kyla, was asked during a National Public Radio (NPR) interview what her parents thought about her climbing experience, she said, chuckling, "Now they think blind people can do a lot." (Hear the entire NPR story on the expedition at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4652231>.)



Erik Weihenmayer and Kyla plough through a snowstorm at 17,500 feet. Didrik Johnck © 2004

Keep kids moving

Though it may be logistically and economically difficult to send a child on a climbing expedition in the Himalayas, all children, regardless of their limitations, need physical activity. Kids love to run, jump, swim, or play in the sand. Many love games. Others like to compete or embark on more daring adventures.



Nelacey Porter (right) and his guide at the 2004 Paralympics in Athens, Greece.

“Participating in sports is a wonderful way to develop self confidence, determination, courage, persistence, openness, fairness, patience, and respect, all while having a great time with your family, other students, and within your community,” says Jean Robinson, a family support specialist with the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. “The biggest obstacle is not the blindness but the missed opportunities due to preconceived notions, stereotypes, and attitudes.”

Raising an athlete with RP

When Nelacey Porter of Salem, Oregon, was a young boy, he had a propensity for tripping and knocking into things. “I just thought he was a little clumsy,” says his mother, Peggy. But at age six, he failed his school eye exam, and was later diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa. Peggy adds, “I understood the ramifications of his diagnosis, but as a young child, he didn’t really understand what was going to happen to him.”

As a single mother, Peggy tried as much as possible to treat her son as if he were anyone else. She comments, “When he told me he

couldn’t see to do the dishes any more, I said, “Just use the fluorescent light above the sink” And though he didn’t always do a perfect job, he knew he had to still try and get things done.”

Nelacey was a naturally active kid who loved all sports including baseball and basketball. His dream was to be a National Football League star. But over time, as he lost vision, he struggled more and more, and became frustrated. His brother, Bradford, was often at his side, providing support through much teasing and ridicule. And, though Nelacey was a star athlete in school, he eventually had to give up most team sports.

Nelacey’s first venture into track and field came when he was about 10 years old. A family friend invited him to participate in an open meet. Nelacey entered the 100-meter sprint, and as Peggy puts, “He smoked everyone.” Unfortunately, because he couldn’t see his lane well, and didn’t stay in it, he was disqualified. “He was absolutely devastated,” says his mother. “He swore he would never step on a track again.”

Though frustration was inevitable for Nelacey, giving up wasn’t. With prodding from his football coach who was also the track coach, he went on to become an accomplished runner in both high school and college. “When Nelacey reluctantly tried track again, he realized how free and normal he could be,” says his mother. “And he was good.”

In 2004, he competed in the Paralympics in Athens, Greece, and was a finalist in all four events he entered: 100-, 200-, and 400-meter sprints, as well as the 4x100 relay. Today, at the age of 21, he’s preparing for global competitions in Brazil and Finland.


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Earlier this year, Nelacey and Darren Abrahamson, a 10-year-old who is also losing his vision to RP, received FFB's Hope and Spirit Award for their extraordinary courage and friendship. Darren was drawn to Nelacey, because of his athletic accomplishments despite vision loss. The inspiring pair has drawn the attention of local and national media — they've even made appearances on *Oprah* and *Good Morning America*.

Reaching the summit

It's important for every parent to know and respect their child's limits, and to set reasonable goals. Every child will have their own strengths and weaknesses. As Peggy says about Nelacey as he was growing up, "He knew his limits, and I trusted him when he said he couldn't do something any more. This happened with baseball. When he couldn't see the ball well enough, he told me he needed to stop."

Erik Weihenmayer had some tough decisions to make when some of the young members of his Tibetan climbing expedition became sick. He played it safe — rather than continuing on to the summit, he focused on the extraordinary effort all the kids had already made, and the remarkable goal they had achieved. "I didn't want to be like a Captain Bly and push these miserable blind Tibetan kids to the summit of some peak...they had worked extremely hard," he says. "A summit can be anything...my definition of a summit is getting as high as you can and giving it everything you can." 

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Whether your visually impaired child wants to climb mountains, run track, or play games in the backyard, here are two resources for helping them lead an active lifestyle:

For younger children

If you are looking for basic activities and games for a younger child, the Blind Children's Resource Center (www.blindchildren.org), is a good start. This is the Web site of Parents of Blind Children-New Jersey, which is an affiliate of the National Organization of Parents of Blind Children, a division of the National Federation of the Blind. **They can also be contacted at center@webspan.net or 1-973-625-5999.** Not only does the site provide a plethora of suitable games and activities, it also offers considerations for engaging young children with visual impairments and other disabilities in physical recreation.

For older kids

The United States Association of Blind Athletes (**USABA, www.usaba.org, 1-719-630-0422**) is an excellent resource for visually impaired or blind athletes. USABA's mission is to increase the number and quality of grassroots-through-competitive, world-class athletic opportunities for Americans who are blind or visually impaired.