

Transplant patient gets special medals

Mike Latona/Catholic Courier

Sports

The silver and bronze medals he won this past summer may not have come from Athens, Greece. But for Tom Jansen, earning them was every bit as thrilling as it would be to an Olympian.

For that matter, based on what the Horseheads resident has endured, simply competing in an athletic event is a major feat unto itself.

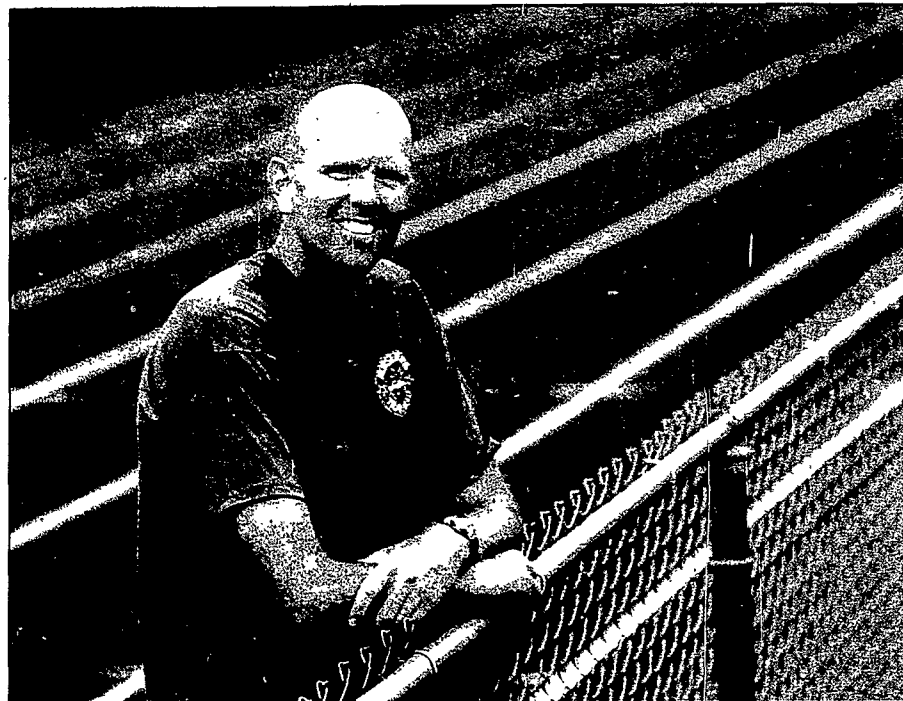
Just weeks before the Summer Games in Athens, Jansen took part in a different kind of large-scale competition. He was among several hundred athletes at the 2004 U.S. Transplant Games in Minneapolis, Minn., where every entrant must be a recipient of a lifesaving organ transplant such as a heart, liver, kidney, lung or pancreas. Bone-marrow recipients were also included.

"I can't put it into words. It was almost kind of borderline shock," said Jansen, 45, of his medals, noting that he competed among many seasoned athletes from across the United States.

Jansen's high finishes were also surprising because he had just broken his ankle in May. He attributes his success to intense focus — "I can be very driven," he acknowledged — and also listening to some of his own advice.

"I'm always telling the kids I coach, you always finish what you start. It doesn't matter whether you're first or last, you give it your best effort," said Jansen, who serves as the head cross-country, indoor track and outdoor track coach at Horseheads High School and is also a health-education teacher there.

Jansen competed in cross-country at SUNY College at Brockport and had continued training regularly after college. But his commitment to fitness was interrupted when he was diagnosed with primary sclerosing cholangitis, a rare and progressive liver disease. The condition has received heightened attention follow-



Mike Crupi/Catholic Courier

Tom Jansen, who received a liver transplant nearly three years ago, continues to coach Horseheads High School's cross-country team and recently won two medals during the 2004 U.S. Transplant Games.

ing former football great Walter Payton's revelation that he had the illness.

Before he could receive a liver transplant, Payton died of cancer related to the disease in 1999 at age 45. The news hit Jansen hard: "If this can happen to him ... he was the NFL's all-time leading rusher and now he's dead," Jansen remarked.

For several years after Jansen's diagnosis, he said, "I was extremely fatigued, very tired. I would just come home and sit in a chair. You really don't feel like eating at all. I had terrible itching, and was sick to my stomach quite a bit."

But Jansen said he was strengthened by the support of family members — especially his wife Mary and sons Colin and Connor — and such friends as the late Father David Gramkee, former pastor of Jansen's parish, Ss. Peter and Paul in Elmira.

"Father Dave told me, 'You know, God's not going to save you from your problem, but he'll save you through your problem,'" Jansen recalled.

Jansen received a new liver nearly three years ago, about eight months after being put on a list for transplant recipients. The operation was performed successfully at Rochester's Strong Memorial Hospital. Although he never knew the donor's identity, Jansen said he wrote a letter of thanks that was forwarded by the hospital to the donor's family.

"I must have ripped it up and thrown it away about 100 times before I sent it. How do you say thank you, how do you frame that? There's really no way," Jansen said.

That feeling of awe carried over

into the Transplant Games, which were attended not only by organ recipients but also by families of deceased donors.

"If there are any heroes, it's not about the people who are surviving. It's about the (deceased) people who give others the opportunity to live," said Jansen, adding that he advocates whenever possible for people to consider becoming organ donors.

Jansen enjoyed the Transplant Games' overall atmosphere, saying, "It's very friendly, you can just tell the connection in most folks. I can't describe it, but you know — and they know that you know — that you both went through the wringer. I was a stranger there, but I felt very welcome."

Jansen hopes to return to the Transplant Games in 2006 (they're held every two years) and is also thinking about competing in the World Transplant Games in London, Ont., next summer. In the meantime, Jansen is still slowly building up his immune system — he has not yet returned to his former role as extraordinary minister of holy Communion at Ss. Peter and Paul, for fear of catching an illness. "A normal flu might be seven days, but for us (transplant patients) you could be looking at two weeks, potentially hospitalization," he explained.

But all in all, Jansen continues to feel renewed both physically and spiritually.

"I don't sweat the small stuff. Sometimes in our lives, we can get so focused and busy on things that really aren't that important," he said. "I also hope I'm a better person because of this. I'm eternally grateful."

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