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SPORTS

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SCOTT BARRETT COLUMN: Helping athletes in need

Foundation raises money to assist families in paying for youth sports



USS category swimmers start the one mile open water race Saturday at Sachuest Beach. (David Hansen/Daily News staff)

MIDDLETOWN — Youth sports aren't cheap. From the cost of registration and travel to state-of-the-art equipment, which is getting more and more expensive, the financial burden of raising a future Tom Brady or Candace Parker is weighing more heavily on parents.

Youth swim coaches, Michael "JJ" Richards and Matt Emmert have seen firsthand what that burden

can do. When the parents of two girls couldn't afford a year-round club coached by the duo, a light bulb clicked on.

That's when Tuesday Night Athletic Foundation, a non-profit organization that aspires to help relieve the financial burden for young athletes, was born.

"We both just thought that youth athletics were so huge in our upbringing," said Richards, who along with Emmert competed on the men's swim team at the University of Rhode Island. "We were both football, basketball, baseball, swimming growing up. We went to summer camps, and we know it gets expensive."

Richards and Emmert, both 26, along with a handful of friends started TNAF in November 2006, and the first order of business was to pay for the two girls to register for the year-round club. A second scholarship was awarded to a boy from Massachusetts to attend a football and basketball camp.

"We'd hate for a kid who could be very successful — make the NFL, make the majors, make the Olympics — somehow miss it because they didn't have funding from their school or whatever," Emmert said. "We want to give every kid a chance at some point."

When freshman sports at Middletown High School were cut at the end of August, Richards and Emmert saw it as an opportunity to help. A donation was received from an alumnus of the school, saving the programs, but those are the types of situations of which TNAF wants to be a part.

Richards pointed to the Newport area, in particular, as a place where funding is needed.

"People don't realize it, because of all the mansions and everything, but Newport has a lot of underprivileged kids and talent that is untapped," he said.

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The scholarships TNAF provides — which are on a rolling basis — are based on applications filled out by potential recipients. The board, which consists of Emmert, Richards, Heather Snyder, Jillian Oresman and Michael Greenwood, reviews the applications and money is awarded for summer camp, registration fees, cost of travel or lodging. When selecting a recipient, the board balances which applicants need funding the most, and those with a good chance of being a standout in that particular sport.

"It gets expensive, with hotel rooms if a kid is playing in a regional tournament, and no family budgets for a kid who ends up being a soccer phenom," said Richards, the program's president. "Nobody really plans for that, and hopefully what we do can relieve some of that financial burden."

TNAF has survived primarily on word of mouth, but both Emmert and Richards said the foundation is just starting to pick up steam. In April, the foundation's first fundraiser was held at Easton's Point in Newport, and, with \$3,500 raised, expectations were exceeded.

On Saturday, TNAF held its first major event, the Second Beach Open Water Challenge, a one-mile swim along Sachuest Beach in Middletown. Nearly 200 swimmers competed, with North Kingstown resident and U.S. Olympian Elizabeth Beisel being the main attraction.

Beisel, who competed in two events at the Beijing Olympics last month, is a prime example of what young athletes can accomplish. When she solidified her spot on the U.S. Olympic team, her mother, Joan, wasn't sure if she'd be able to make the costly trip. TNAF stepped in and offered Joan Beisel, whose daughter was coached by Emmert at North Kingstown High School, a portion of the money to cover the trip.

"We didn't help get Elizabeth to Beijing, but we helped her family get there," Richards said.

Putting together one of these fundraisers is far from easy — consider it a second full-time job. From getting T-shirts made, hiring a D.J., clearing use of the beach with the town council, working out the details with the timing system, not to mention going through all of the registration forms, there's plenty to do.

"I think this is the first time in the last two months that I've started to feel organized again," said Richards, who is in his third year at Roger Williams University School of Law. "It's been a lot of letter writing, a lot of phone calls, a lot of asking for favors. Sometimes it can be a strain on all of us. And we have to be careful that it doesn't become too much of a strain."

Major sponsors for the event included Narragansett, who provided the T-shirts, PowerBar, Coca-Cola, Welch's, who supplied the peanut butter and jelly for participants after the race, and World Trophies in Providence donated the medals.

Even with all of the sponsors in place, Richards and Emmert still had a big problem a few days before the event.

"The scariest part was, about a week ago, we only had about 10 swimmers registered," Emmert said on Saturday. "There were a lot of verbal commitments, kind of like a handshake, and Wednesday night we just got a ton of entries. We were pretty nervous, but these past few days, it's all just been falling together."

TNAF simply wanted to break even from this event and gain a reputation of putting on a decent race. The numbers, however, were much higher than expected.

"We were aiming for 100, and there were 194 registered, so it's pretty awesome," said Emmert, the secretary for TNAF.

Emmert and Richards said they don't really have long-term goals for TNAF, other than keeping it going strong and building it year after year.

"We'd really like to have a kid some day make it to the pros, and have them say, 'It was that one athletic scholarship from Tuesday Night Athletic Foundation that helped get to that level,'" Emmert said. "Just helping those kids get over that hump,

where, if they didn't have that support, it might not have happened."

Learn more about Tuesday Night Athletic Fund at TNAF.org.

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