

Mackenzie Downing returning for brother's memorial swim meet

The 2011 Ryan Downing Memorial Swim Meet will welcome a special guest who should more than make up for the absence of visiting teams.

By Jonathan Russell on October 27, 2011



Photo by Justin Kennedy

OPENING MEET – A swimmer cuts through the water during the 2010 Ryan Downing Memorial Swim Meet. This year's meet will feature Ryan's younger sister MacKenzie.

The 2011 Ryan Downing Memorial Swim Meet will welcome a special guest who should more than make up for the absence of visiting teams.

Canadian National Swim Team member – and former Whitehorse Glacier Bear – MacKenzie Downing is en route to her hometown to take part in the meet, set for the Canada Games Centre pool from Oct. 28-29.

Sanctioned by Swim BC, the meet will start Friday at 4 p.m. and continue through Saturday afternoon.

MacKenzie will also run a Fly Camp for the young swimmers on Sunday.

The memorial meet holds special significance for Ryan's younger sister.

"He loved racing, and he loved competing, that was where he really excelled,"

MacKenzie said. "He was a great competitor, but he was also a great friend and a great teammate. He always wanted other people to do well, as well as himself."

Ryan was a member of the Whitehorse Glacier Bears Swim Club since the age of 4, and continues to impact the club after passing away in 1996 at age 13 due to heart complications.

Inspired by Ryan's work ethic, MacKenzie went on to swim for the University of Victoria Vikes varsity team and at the Commonwealth Games.

Most recently, MacKenzie competed at the FISU World University Games in Shenzhen, China, where she was a finalist in the 200-metre butterfly.

"I remember (Ryan) was so competitive, but he and one of his really good friends always raced together when they were younger, and they always tried to tie for first.

He has a really good legacy and influence of sportsmanship and competitiveness and hopefully some of that comes through in this swim meet," she said.

This will mark MacKenzie's first time attending the swim meet since she was in high school in 2005.

"The meet is obviously really important for me on a personal level," she said. "It's really great to be able to be there and support it and support my home community and my home club, who has supported me so much over the years, and it's great to be able to give something back."

Glacier Bears head coach Stephanie Dixon said that something will go a long way for the young swimmers.

Dixon – who has won 19 medals at the Paralympic Games – visited Whitehorse to give technical tips in April before taking over as head coach of the Glacier Bears from Marek Poplawski.

"It is so amazing to have somebody of her caliber come here and compete at this swim meet," Dixon said of MacKenzie.

"A lot of our swimmers have not seen a national team member swimmer before or seen them compete. In the past, if we've had national team members come up to do a camp with the kids, that's a much different situation than actually seeing the swimmer compete. So I think that'll be really exciting for them to see what it looks like to go a time that is one of the best times in the world."

Glacier Bears president Mike McArthur agreed.

"She's a great role model and this is a great opportunity for her to mentor some of our swimmers and to see her and talk to her," McArthur said, adding of Ryan's legacy:

"He's had a lasting impression on swimmers, and this will be a special meet having Mackenzie here."

The Ryan Downing Memorial Swim Meet marks the start of the Glacier Bears competitive season.

But this is the first Ryan Downing meet that no visiting teams will participate, to McArthur's memory.

"I think the swim meet's competing with Halloween, perhaps," he said. "We haven't heard from Juneau. I'm not sure just what's going on, why we're not having anybody come. It's a little disappointing, but we fully understand that there are competing with interests and competing with swim meets. It's been a few years since nobody has come."

But for Dixon, the focus will be on technique and race strategy before results.

Building a team dynamic is also key, she added.

"It's really important for the kids to feel like they're a part of something bigger than just their individual swims, so we're really going to try to encourage the older kids to work with the younger kids," Dixon said.

"They will have a goal that is something they can control, something they've been working on. They can come out of the race, even though they didn't go best times, and feel like it's something they can be proud of and walk away with something positive. It's great to go best times, but that's not the focus."