

West Ottawa High School Sports, Holland, MI

One in a Million: Griffin Sotok Inspires People Both In and Out of the Pool

BY BRITTINY GARDNER ON MARCH 1, 2013



The rippling pool water freaked out five-year old Griffin Sotok. He dipped his big toe in and jumped back just as fast. The water was freezing. “Come on Grif, the water won’t bite you,” his mother said. *Oh yes it will.*

Sotok took a deep breath and slowly waded into the pool. His mom, LeAnn Sotok, was waiting with open arms, a beaming smile on her face. “See,” she said. “It’s not so bad.” That reassured him. The innertube kept his five year old body afloat. He smiled; his mom was right. He was floating and he was enjoying it. A half hour later, he realized he’d made up his mind too soon. The nice instructor told his mom to take the inner tube off and let him learn to keep himself afloat.

Sotok’s face paled as his mom took away his lifeline. Still smiling, his mom led him back into the pool. The water splashed him directly in the face. When his mom let him go, he sunk beneath the water. When he bobbed back up, he cried and flung his fists in the air. “No more! Too cold! Face...hurts.”

His mom knew it was imperative that her son learn how to swim, because she and her husband owned a boat, but she hated to watch her son struggle. “He hated swimming. He especially hated putting his face in the water,” she reflected recently.

Soph. Griffin Sotok stood on the platform, eager to start the 50 yard freestyle race. His face was all smiles—he was more than ready to beat the competition. Opponents next to him were nervous, their bodies tense. They weren’t smiling, they were panicking. Sotok was composed. His body was positioned like he was preparing for a track race.

Swimming for Sotok was a chore in the beginning. Macatawa Bay Coach Jeff Hardy will vouch for that. “It was a struggle to get him to stay in the water. He’d swim on the wrong side of the lane—there were a few collisions. It took team effort to help him out when he got frustrated.”

While there were obvious struggles, Hardy said there were plenty of rewards. “He really brought the team closer together. They learned to support one another by helping Griffin.”

As the starter prepared the swimmers, Sotok’s face soon focused on the goal ahead of him. He could practically hear Coach Steve Bowyer’s voice inside his head. Touch the wall, Griffin. Don’t coast the last length. He had to touch those timing pads. *Don’t worry Coach, I won’t let you down.*

Today, Sotok swims for the Varsity Swim and Dive team and is the team manager of the Water Polo team. Bowyer has only positive things to say about Sotok. “I’ve been coaching for thirteen years and have never had a young man like Griffin on the team. He’s very positive, very upbeat, comes to practice every day. He’s a tough competitor. Always races extremely hard. He’s excited when competing, but still relatively

focused. I'm impressed by so much that he can do with the disability that he has." Sotok has Down Syndrome, a genetic disorder that caused him to be born with an extra chromosome. It affects him cognitively (Sotok's at an elementary level academically) and physically, he's extra flexible, and has the obvious physical attributes of Downs. "He's very functioning and is a huge part of the team," Bowyer said.

Sotok has no special accommodations during practice every afternoon. "He's required to do what other swimmers do. And he does, for the most part. We treat him just like he's one of the team. If he's not doing what's required of him, then we get on him to do it," Bowyer said.

Working with Sotok is both very challenging and very rewarding at the same time for Bowyer. "He follows directions pretty well, but he has some hard times communicating verbally. He gets frustrated. But when he's racing, just seeing him smile, knowing he's having a great time that's the reward in the end."



Sotok rests his eyes after a hard-fought race in the pool

The people in the stands were situating themselves, trying to find the best place to see the action. Almost time. Sotok grinned over at his teammates who were alongside the pool. "You got this Grif," they shouted. I've got this. He took a deep breath, positioned himself accordingly and—BEEP! The horn sounded. Sotok plunged into the water, unafraid. He could hear fans cheering. Could hear his teammates who stood at the side of Lane 1. "Yeah, go G-Money!" That motivated him to stroke faster.

His teammates think he's the best and they're very protective of him. They see his enthusiasm; they get him. "He's funny and goofy," Sr. Ben Patchin said. "He's energetic, positive, and always entertaining," Srs. Blake Kata-Carlson and Michael Pierce said. "He's friendly, open, respectful, and I really like that he listens," Soph. Blake Wheeler said.

In Swim and Dive, there's the Octathlon every year. "In the Octathlon, you have to swim every individual length of the pool. It's very hard and straining. I was really impressed with Grif this year, because he participated and put his whole heart into it. He did very well. He even beat some freshmen," Pierce said.

His teammates do more than help him out, they treat him like any other member of the team. Sotok's excluded from nothing. Some of his teammates have him over to play videogames.

"Grif came over to my house one day and played Just Dance for two hours straight. He was so good, I think he set a couple of records on my X-box," Patchin said.

"Ben and I had gone over to his house to play College Football on his X-box 360 one day and he killed us on like every game," Pierce said.

During Water Polo, Sotok shows off his singing talent. "He loves to sing "Don't Stop Believing" to our team," Wheeler said. Sotok also has a mime talent. "Sometimes he'll stand behind Coach Bowyer and mimic him; it's so funny."

Sotok is the glue that unifies his teammates. "He inspires us. I've never seen a negative attitude from him," said Kata-Carlson. Lee Ann concurs. "Griffin inspires them to do their best—if he can do it, they can." Patchin feels the same way. "It's an honor to be his friend. Grif's a really great guy. He makes me a better person overall," Patchin said.

He was nearing the wall. Ten Yards to go, the people were cheering, and he desperately wanted to see it.

This was not the first time the crowds cheered for Sotok. At Sotok's very first swim meet back in seventh grade, something remarkable happened. "I think this meet is what convinced him to really dedicate himself to swimming," his mom, Lee Ann said. Sotok was behind everyone else, dead last, obviously frustrated with himself. When all seemed lost, his teammates, who were standing around the pool, began chanting his name. Out of their own volition the entire swim team cheered for Sotok. Opponents and their coach started cheering for him as well. Soon every voice in the area boomed, echoing Sotok's name. "Griffin! Griffin! Griffin!" Sotok's response to them was flashing a beaming smile up at the crowd in the middle of the pool. "It was completely spontaneous. The level of acceptance was great," Lee Ann said. Hardy said that after a couple more meets, Sotok really got into it. "That meet really made a difference for him, it was awesome," he said.

A little more than 17 seconds zipped by. Sotok paused briefly considering Coach Bowyer's help in improving his flip turn. That coaching stopped him from going above the water. He was going to power through his flip turn, he was. After the turn, he popped his bleach-blonde head above water and smiled up at the crowd, but only for a moment. The crowd responded by cheering louder.



Sotok and fellow swimmer Soph. Aspen Avery pose for a photo with friends following a Special Olympics race

Even out of the water, Sotok has plenty of people cheering for him, who show him love, acceptance, and support daily. His Special-Education Instructor Jen Dewaard said, “He’s charming. He has a magnetic personality, and a great sense of humor. This is the first time that a student of mine has ever been on a sports team. It’s a lot of fun to watch him in the water,”

“He’s a regular student. He listens to directions, is funny, and he’s very easy to work with,” Dewaard’s teacher aide, Chrisanne MakePeace said.

Outside of the pool and his classes, Sotok’s a regular guy with interests in other sports such as track. He idolizes WOBN and has made himself quite at home with the gang and they in turn happily accept him. “Srs. Ato Condolee and Ryan Verhelst have both taken to Griffin as a little buddy,” Lee Ann said. Verhelst took him out to Captain Sundae one day and Sotok had a blast. When Sotok was the school’s mascot, dressed in the Panther costume, for a fall football game, Condolee proudly rubbed him on the head before going back in the run-up line. At the end of the game, Condolee gave Sotok a big hug. “The fact that Ato took time to accept Griffin and treat him like one of his really good friends meant so much to me,” Lee Ann said.

Sotok’s home life is no different than the average Joe’s either, just ask his sister, West Ottawa graduate Shannon Sotok. “Grif and I play videogames, watch movies, get into fights, and tease and annoy each other. He’s a goofy goober.” Sotok’s parents wanted their children to include Griffin, to treat him no

differently than any other sibling.

As for school, Lee Ann already knew that Sotok was a social butterfly. “He did sports in middle school: swimming, soccer, basketball. We recognized his athletic ability. Even though Grif has a hard time putting into words what he means to say, he makes up for it in other ways, like his signature smile or his sense of humor, for instance,” Lee Ann said.

What started out as a chore for Sotok has now become his life style. He loves to race, and loves his teammates. He feels like he belongs. “I give Griffin props—I tried swimming and it just wasn’t for me. It’s so much work, and he has to sacrifice a lot of time, energy, and sleep. He absolutely loves it though, and I’m so thankful the guys on his swim team are so nice and supportive, too,” Shannon said.

Approximately 21 seconds later, Sotok pushed himself to finish the race strong, to touch the wall. He then came out of the water with a huge grin. He high fived his teammates and they laughed and hugged him. I finished strong. I touched the wall. I did it. Sotok was extremely happy. Some opponents even clapped him on the back. Sotok smiled wider. He felt victorious.

Sotok’s parents are very proud of him. They love cheering him on at his meets. It amazes both of them that Sotok’s able to do all that he does. “It’s a joy to watch him, because he loves what he does.” LeAnn smiles, trying to hide her laughter. “It’s hard to believe that Grif used to hate swimming. Now, I can’t get him out of the pool.”

“I’ll be honest, I was nervous in the beginning; not knowing what Griffin was capable of. Now, I have no worries. He’s amazing in the water. He’s a lot more confident and he continues to surprise me to this day.” Hardy smiled. “He’s funny. Whether it’s leaning on someone’s shoulder or telling someone a joke, Griffin’s aim is to get the person to smile. Griffin cares about everybody. He’s a great guy. I don’t know what it would be like without him.”

Sotok’s one in a million. He’s very expressive, determined, and dedicated to what he does. No wonder peers here at West Ottawa high school love him. “My parents and I were really nervous about him going to high school at first because we were afraid people would be mean or pick on him, but thankfully the opposite has happened,” Shannon said. No worries there, right WO? Sotok’s more than accepted here; he’s a part of West Ottawa.