

LITTLE BIG MAN: Rockford's diminutive Dathan Ritzenhein is a giant among prep distance runners

Friday, April 14, 2000

By Jane Bos
The Grand Rapids Press

Dathan Ritzenhein, a three-time individual national champion distance runner, sneaks snacks into the living room at night after his parents go to bed.

"I'm not supposed to do that," he said, "but I'm very careful, and I only do it a little bit." A 17-year-old Rockford High School junior, Ritzenhein might skulk the occasional pretzel or animal cracker to munch in front of the TV. But he also always does his homework, usually goes to bed around 10 p.m., mostly watches what he eats and always gives his training all he has.

He's pretty careful about everything.

Ritzenhein, a 5-foot-7, 110-pounder, certainly is doing something right. During the last year, he's claimed two state championships and five national titles.

For his efforts, he was named the Male High School Athlete of the Year at the West Michigan Sports Awards last month. And he was a Faces in the Crowd selection in Sports Illustrated two weeks ago. Of course, the magazine misspelled his name: Ritzenheim.

"Oh, I get that a lot," Ritzenhein said and waved it off.

He won't need to wave it off for long. Dathan Ritzenhein could become the next high school Jim Ryun or Steve Prefontaine. Ritzenhein's career best times in the mile (four minutes, 9.7 seconds) and two-mile (8:49.9) events are edging closer to their high school national records. He's moving in on Ryun's one-mile record of 3:58.3 set in 1965 in Kansas and on Prefontaine's two-mile record of 8:41.5 set in 1969 in Oregon.

His 2-mile time is already the Michigan high school record for indoor and outdoor. He's also nearing the state record in the mile (4:06.0) set in 1975 by PortageCentral's Steve Elliott.

Ritzenhein is so good, he could, realistically, be an

Olympian and an NCAA Division I national champion someday.

But the humble Ritzenhein keeps it in perspective.

"Dathan told me, 'My goal is to be the best I can be. I don't know how far that will take me, but I'm going to think of it as an adventure and have fun doing it,'" said Rockford distance coach Brad Prins. "What a great attitude,"

Ritzenhein has had quite an adventure so far.

During his freshman and most of his sophomore season, he ran in the shadow of teammate Jason Hartmann, who graduated last spring and is at running at the University of Oregon.

Then in the 3,200-meter run at the Class A state meet a year ago, he passed him. And won the state championship.

"I wanted to beat him," Ritzenhein said. "I ran behind him for about two years, and I hoped to could beat him. I didn't know if I would. Then at state in the 3,200, I was ahead of him the whole race, and I started to pull away in the last 600 meters. It felt really good finally to beat someone that good."

Things improved from there.

Two weeks later, Ritzenhein won the boys 2-mile race at the Footlocker National Outdoor Field and Track Championships in Raleigh, N.C. (9:01.77). He also was a member of the winning distance medley relay team (10:07).

Then last fall, he captured the Class A cross country state championship (15:05.40).

He followed that with his third national title at the 21st annual Foot Locker National High School Cross Country Championships in Orlando, Fla. He won the race with a personal-best time of 14:29.8.

In February, he set the indoor 1,600 record (4:09.7) at the Michigan Interscholastic Track Coaches Association meet at the University of Michigan.

And last month, Ritzenhein earned two more national titles at the 23rd annual Nike National Indoor Track and Field Classic at Indiana University. He won the 2-mile run (8:52.9) and anchored the winning 4 x 100 relay team (17:46).

"I've never see a kid at his age win more honors, not just state-wide, but nationally, than he has in one year," Prins said. "I knew about Dathan a few years ago. His dad runs with us (North Kent Running Club) and he would take him along when he was in junior high. I knew than that he had a lot of mental toughness and the ability to rise to the occasion in the big meets. I didn't realize his talent level.

"His one weakness I spotted was his lack of leg speed. He ran a 2:09 half, and that's extremely slow for someone of his caliber. He needed to develop power. From power, you get more speed."

So Ritzenhein set upon a regimen of lifting weights (light weights, more repetitions) and plyo-metrics (a series of jumps), which obviously paid off.

"When he was 10, he ran his first road race, and he finished," said Jerry Ritzenhein, Dathan's father. "He was by no means a standout runner then. In junior high, he was the second or third runner in his grade.

"He's always been a natural athlete. In football, he could throw bullets, and he could pitch really well. It still doesn't settle in that he's reached the caliber level he has. He works very hard at it. He's very focused. He's careful about what he eats."

So what does a national-caliber athlete eat?

"I kind of eat what I want," Ritzenhein said. "I don't eat much fat, I don't eat a bunch of doughnuts or anything. Before a race, I eat a lot of pasta.

"I eat cereal in the morning, either Multi-gran Cheerios or Wheaties. The Wheaties need sugar on it, they're pretty bland. For lunch, I usually eat a sandwich, maybe a snack like cookies, some fruit, a granola bar. Supper, I eat whatever is made. I drink lots of water, and sometimes Gatorade."

He goes out for pizza with the whole Rockford team, too, according to Prins. But he never overdoes it.

"Dathan has intelligence and savvy," Prins said about the 3.66 GPA Ritzenhein. "The savvy, how you use your intelligence in a situation, really comes through. He knows how to handle himself in interviews, at big meets. "You see him prepare for a big meet, he's so cool. He just knows how to handle himself and what to do. The bigger the meet, the better he runs."

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