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# "I Can Do Anything"



by Maria Speidel

Rudy Garcia-Tolson doesn't have legs. That hasn't stopped him from playing the sports he loves.

**R**udy Garcia-Tolson is in 30th place after the swimming event at the Steamboat Tri-Express triathlon, in San Dimas, California. That puts him ahead of 37 other athletes, kids and adults, in the three-event race. No surprise there. Rudy,

age 12, is a competitive swimmer who practices five times a week with his local swim club.

But as Rudy pulls himself out of the lake with his arms, it becomes clear just *how* competitive he is. He has no lower legs. His thighs end in smooth stumps just above where his knees would be. To travel the five feet up the



beach to his towel, Rudy must drag his entire body using only his arms.

A pair of artificial legs made for running are on the towel. They have long, thin steel poles that end in flexible metal hooks in the shape of the letter c.

As other triathletes rush by, Rudy has to wait. His dad rinses the sand off his son's thighs so that they won't chafe when Rudy is wearing the legs. Rudy slips the legs over his stumps, his dad gives him a boost up, and he takes off up a hill to get to his bike.

Using the strength in his hips and upper thighs, Rudy powers up the hill by swinging each leg in a wide circle. At the top, he yanks off his running legs, puts on his cycling legs, hops on his bike, and zooms off on the seven-mile ride.

### Saddest Time

Rudy was born with a rare disease that causes birth defects. It left him with a cleft palate, webbed fingers, and legs that were folded up and connected at his thighs and ankles by a layer of skin.

Beginning when he was 3 months old, Rudy had 15 operations to correct the defects. But he still could not walk by age 5.

"I would be inside watching all the kids outside playing," he says, "knowing that I might never be able to walk or play. It was probably the saddest time of my life. When the doctors said, 'Do you want to stay in a wheelchair the rest of your life or just cut your legs off and you can be like anyone [but with artificial legs]?' I said, 'Just cut

'em off,' because I wanted to be like the other kids."

Doctors removed Rudy's legs just above his knees. He learned to walk on artificial legs and was back in kindergarten three months after the operation. The next year, he learned to swim. At 7, he rode his first bike (his mom used bungee cords to strap his feet to the pedals).

### Feeling Free in the Pool

Today, the seventh-grader walks around on his "everyday" legs, which make him five-feet tall. (He has four types of legs in all.) He runs road races, kayaks, plays water polo, soccer, baseball, and basketball, and rides his skateboard (sitting down).

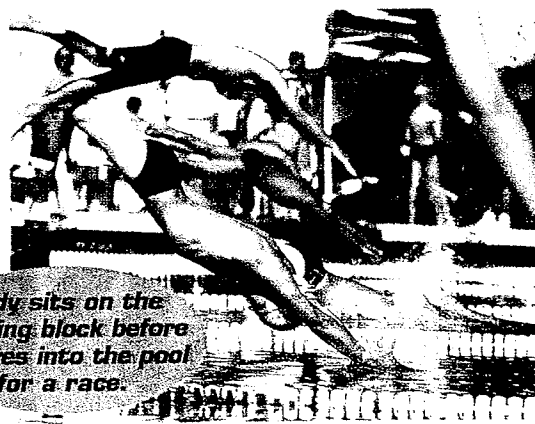
But swimming is the sport Rudy loves the most.

"It makes me feel free," he says. "When I'm in the water I'm not an amputee anymore. I'm a whole person."

Says Cindy Kinzer, Rudy's coach: "Parents sometimes pull me aside and ask, 'How can he swim?' I say, 'Well, he just does. He has more upper body strength.' It's a little humbling for them when Rudy beats their child."

Rudy swims for the Riverside Aquatics club. He also competes on his own at meets for disabled swimmers. Last year, he set the U.S. record in his disability group in the 200-meter breaststroke at the Disabled National Championships. He was the youngest swimmer in the group.

Rudy walks to the starting blocks on a pair of artificial legs he calls "stubbies." They have rubber tips to keep him from slipping on the damp pool deck. He takes off the legs just before climbing onto the blocks for the start of a race.



*Rudy sits on the starting block before he dives into the pool for a race.*



*Rudy uses his everyday legs to play basketball. They are made of steel.*

### Thrill-seeker

Rudy finishes the San Dimas triathlon 10 minutes ahead of his best time. His first thought upon crossing the finish line is test-riding a new racing bike he just received as a gift. He gets on the bike and pedals away while his dad reminds him to take it slow at first. Rudy just keeps going. He is talking about taking up snowboarding this winter.

"A lot of people say things to Rudy like, 'You can't do it,'" says his mom, Sandra. "You can't tell Rudy no."

1. How many people competed in the Steamboat Tri-Express triathlon?
2. How often does Rudy practice swimming?
3. How does Rudy get from the water to the beach to get ready for the next event?
4. What does Rudy need to do before he can put his artificial legs on for running?
5. How does Rudy make his artificial legs work for running?
6. What were three defects that occurred to Rudy because of a rare disease?
7. How many operations did Rudy receive to try to correct his birth defects?
8. Why did Rudy decide to have his legs removed at the knees?
9. How many different sets of artificial legs does Rudy have?
10. Why does Rudy swim so well?