



JONATHAN QUILTER | DISPATCH PHOTOS

Jeff Brewer of Columbus has gone through strenuous workouts while preparing for the Special Olympics World Games, including using a parachute to provide resistance. "Jeff is a great competitor to train," said Steve Weaver, Brewer's coach. "He never complains."

Taking on the world

By AJ Mazzolini
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Jeff Brewer's cleats pounded the synthetic surface of the running track at Grandview High School, the silver and black on his shoes having faded to shades of gray long ago.

Brewer's cleats have carried him many miles over the years, usually on tracks in and around his hometown of Columbus. This week, they will take the 37-year-old farther than he ever imagined.

The next time Brewer laces up his cleats for track competition, it will be inside the white marble Panathinaiko Stadium in Athens, Greece.

Brewer is one of two Ohioans and 300 total athletes from the United States participating at the Special Olympics World Games, which start Saturday and run through July 4.

Some 7,500 athletes and another

Jeff Brewer is one of two Ohioans in the Special Olympics World Games, and he has earned his spot



Jeff Brewer, 37, won two silver medals at the Special Olympics National Games last summer.

er 2,500 coaches representing 185 nations have gathered in Athens this week. Panathinaiko, a hair-pin-shaped structure that seats about 45,000, served as the host for the first modern Olympic Games, in 1896.

"I've never traveled that far away," Brewer said before one of his final workouts in Ohio. "It's a good thing I'm traveling with my team, Team USA, so I don't get lost."

Amanda Gump, a 17-year-old track athlete from Wayne, is Ohio's other competitor.

Brewer, who specializes in the pentathlon, was selected to compete at the World Games following a pair of silver medal-winning performances last summer at the Special Olympics National Games in Lincoln, Neb.

But in Greece, Brewer will tackle just two of the pentathlon's five disciplines: the long jump and 400-meter run. He'll

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also run on the country's relay team.

Participating in fewer events will be something of a foreign concept to Brewer. He prefers constant competition, so more events equates to more fun.

"(Pentathlon) is interesting because one little mistake isn't going to hurt you as bad," he said. "You can make it up later, more opportunities."

Brewer, who was born with a cognitive developmental delay, is a late bloomer to the athletic arena. He first joined the Special Olympics program in 2004. Before that, he hadn't run on a track competitively since middle school, said his 35-year-old brother, Gary. Jeff had tried out for the team in 2004 but missed the cut.

In the eight years since Jeff's athletic renaissance, Gary said his brother's confidence has grown.

"I've seen him in social gatherings with people he doesn't know a lot more now," said Gary, who lives with Jeff in their parents' old home. "In the old days, it would take a crowbar to get him to open up a bit."

Jeff Brewer's preparation for athletics on the world stage started months ago, said Steve Weaver, Brewer's coach at Goodwill Columbus. Brewer was recovering from a hamstring injury late last year, so the heavy training didn't start until around the first of the year.

"Jeff is a great competitor to train," Weaver said. "He never complains, and I'm telling you, this winter, I beat the living tar out of him. What I put him through, most people couldn't do."

What started as stretches and light jogs quickly turned into weight lifting and hours of treadmill running. When the weather warmed up, the pair moved outside and started in on what Weaver calls "explosion training."

High-resistance running became the norm, with Brewer lugging an open parachute behind him during runs.

Student and teacher have worked together during Brewer's entire Special Olympics tenure on the track — and the basketball court, softball field and bowling alley, among Brewer's other activities at Goodwill Columbus. Weaver said that in 18 years of coaching and volunteering with Special Olympics, Brewer is the first competitor from Columbus to make it to the World Games.

"Jeff is one of those kids that does a lot more than you'd expect him to do," Weaver said. "Jeff likes to go outside of the box, go outside special-needs activities and go out on his



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Jeff Brewer practices the long jump in Granville last week. He'll compete in the long jump and the 400 meters and be on the U.S. relay team in Athens, Greece.



Coaches Steve Weaver, left, and Ben Warren watch overhead as Jeff Brewer practices in the Goodwill Columbus parking garage.

own."

One such example occurred when Brewer decided to study up on the World Games' host country, showing what Weaver calls his "great desire to learn."

"I went to the library last September and got a book on

Greece," Brewer said. "I just want to know as much as I can about their culture — and to try some of their food."

"It'll be fun to be (in the stadium) on that stage where it all started."

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Special Olympics World Games

► **When:** Saturday through July 4

► **Where:** Panathinaiko Stadium, Athens, Greece

► **About the Games:** Approximately 7,500 athletes with intellectual disabilities and 2,500 coaches will represent 185 nations. ... Two Ohio athletes will be among 300 from the United States.

ON THE WEB

► To see a video of Jeff Brewer preparing for the Special Olympics World Games, go to Dispatch.com

