

# Sports



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COMMENTARY

## PSU Ability Athletics' Shirey to be guest at charity event

BY CHUCK SYPULA

Meet RJ Shirey, State College resident, graduating Penn State senior and, on Saturday, a special guest at the PennWood Home and Hearth BBQ cook-off charity event benefiting the Pleasant Gap Fire Company.

It is an honor well deserved. Shirey is a certified EMT and by all accounts a darn good one.

He instructs his fellow EMTs and other first responders on emergency, lifesaving techniques.

Shirey, too, is an elite Penn State Ability Athletics athlete. Ability Athletics is the Penn State program for adaptive intercollegiate and intramural sports. An amputee, Shirey has been representing Penn State in intercollegiate adaptive javelin and shot put competitions since

his freshman year.

Respected EMT. Elite adaptive athlete. Two significant life accomplishments that by any measure make RJ Shirey worthy of the title "special guest."

But what is it, if anything, that connects these remarkable achievements?

In 2016, Shirey, then a 15-year-old sophomore at State College Area High School, was involved in a horrific hunting accident and

lost his right leg. Had it not been for the actions of local EMTs on that predawn April morning, he may have lost his life.

That, however, is not the connection between these very different accomplishments.

Flash forward to Shirey's freshman year at Penn State. Competing for PSU's Ability Athletics for just a short 8 months, Shirey, then a virtual unknown in his sport, came

from nowhere to medal in the 2019 Junior National Championships in Minneapolis in both the javelin and shot put events.

His throwing future was bright and Shirey ambitiously set his sights on the 2020 Paralympics in Tokyo.

But there was still unforeseen adversity yet to come for the aspiring Paralympian.

First came the retirement of his coach, mentor and friend Teri Jordan. Then, COVID and the unavoidable disruptions associated with a pandemic, significant turnover within Penn State's Athletic Department staff, the extended "pausing" of the Ability Athletics program by the university and a reorganization that saw his beloved Ability Athletics program moved

## SHIREY

from Intercollegiate Athletics to Campus Rec, a move that many saw as a de facto deemphasizing of the program.

It was a gathering storm of unfortunate events that threatened to end not only Shirey's promising career as an adaptive athlete but the whole of the Ability Athletics program itself.

Yet through it all, Shirey persevered. His resilience, drive and determination were relentless.

In time, his commitment to his sport and devotion to Penn State paid off. Shirey recently qualified to compete in the Hartford Nationals, the longest standing national sport championship

of its kind and the pinnacle of competition for adaptive sports.

His appearance at nationals alone highlights a revitalization of the Ability Athletics program. New leadership within Penn State's Athletic Department hit the refresh button on the program, returned the program to its rightful place under Intercollegiate Athletics and hired a coach to work exclusively with Shirey.

It was as if Shirey himself had willed the sudden resurgence of this once Penn State proud program.

And it is here that the connection between Shirey's esteemed service as an EMT and his status as an elite adaptive athlete is to be found.

Will, commitment, courage and character are fundamental requirements of any aspiring EMT first responder.

So too, and perhaps even more so, of any aspiring competitive adaptive athlete.

Just ask RJ Shirey.

A hero to some, an inspiration to all and just the spark Penn State Ability Athletics needed.

*PennWood Home and Hearth's BBQ Fest & Cook*



RJ Shirey holds up his gold medal from the adaptive sports junior nationals in 2019. Shirey wants to continue competing through Penn State Ability Athletics, which has been on pause since the pandemic.

*Off charity event will be held 9 a.m.-3 p.m. on Saturday at PennWood Home and Hearth, 294 W. College Ave., Pleasant Gap.*

*Chuck Sypula is founder of Rise Above; Friends of*

*Ability Athletics www.riseaboveability.com, a not for profit, all volunteer organization created to independently and collaboratively provide support to Penn State Ability Athletics.*

## REACH US

The Centre Daily Times sports department strives to provide our readers with the most comprehensive, accurate coverage of Centre County sports.

To help us toward that goal, submissions, suggestions and sports tips are welcome.

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