

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Canon-Mac senior competes for national weightlifting team

By Dave Mackall
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Thursday, June 4, 2009

The skinny kid with a tenacious desire to succeed is fulfilling a dream.

Less than three months after returning from San Francisco and a successful showing at the U.S. National Junior Championships of weightlifting, outgoing Canon-McMillan High School senior Michael Nackoul, a self-proclaimed former weakling who is now more than 200 pounds of defined muscle, is preparing for another trip.

This time, he's headed overseas to again compete in a sport he loves, Olympic-style weightlifting, at an international event in Bucharest, Romania, on June 20.

Nackoul recently was named to the U.S. Weightlifting Junior World Team, comprised of the top eight men's and top seven women's qualifiers in the under-20 age group.

He actually missed the cut in qualifying in San Francisco on March 21, finishing third in the 207-pound weight class after combining for lifts of 271 pounds in the snatch event and 355 pounds in the clean and jerk event. But he earned a spot on the team when one of the top two finishers sustained an injury and was unable to participate.

"For me, I couldn't be more excited. It's kind of like a dream come true," said Nackoul, who played offensive guard and defensive end for the Canon-McMillan football team and will attend Massachusetts Institute of Technology, an academically prestigious NCAA Division III school in Cambridge, Mass.

Nackoul chose MIT over Carnegie Mellon and plans on majoring in applied mathematics while playing football. His brother David also played at Canon-McMillan before becoming a four-year starter at MIT through last season.

"Applied mathematics? I can't even apply mathematics," said Craig Wolfley, the former Steelers lineman and current sideline reporter for the team. Wolfley operates Martial Arts and Sports Complex in Bridgeville, where Michael Nackoul trains under Regis Becker, a board member of governing body USA Weightlifting, and Alex Chtanine, a former member of the Soviet Junior National Team.

"You're talking about a fine young man. Mike is a role model, a fiery competitor," Wolfley said. "That's what I like about him. A lot of the guys at the gym look up to him. A lot of them remember him as a pencil neck when he was younger. His shorts could barely stay up, he was so skinny."

But Nackoul's built-in determination -- he credits his parents and his brother, among others, for his unwavering work ethic -- provided him with enough drive to progress.

"At heart, I'm a pretty competitive person," said Nackoul, 18. "Every time I do something, no matter what it is, I like to put as much effort into it as I can. If I commit to something, I want to be the best I can be."

The upcoming trek to Romania may not make him a winner in the scoring column, he said, but he promised to give maximum effort, corny as that may sound.

"Oh, don't misunderstand what he is all about," Canon-McMillan football coach Guy Montecalvo said. "Michael is just a diligent worker in everything he does."

In football workouts last season, Montecalvo recalls the impressions Nackoul made not only on the coach, but the players.

"You've heard it before: 'The first to arrive and the last to leave?' That's Michael," Montecalvo said. "For instance, he wanted to improve his time in the 40-(yard dash). After we'd be done with all of our warmups and stretching and interval training, he would stay and work on the 40. He was running it above 5.0 (seconds), and he got it down to the 4.6's. It was incredible. It was a personification of his diligence."

So goes it in his weightlifting endeavors. Nackoul, at a very early age, saw his brother David competing in the sport and decided to join in. At first, it was awkward.

"My brother is very, very strong, and he started getting into Olympic weightlifting at the gym," Nackoul said. "I was too young, but when I was 13, I started doing it, too. I loved the concept, but I wasn't very strong at all."

He worked hard at it and, at age 15, finished second in the national school-age division (under 17).

"That is when I started to realize what hard work was," Nackoul said.

No matter what he's into, it's all about the competition. Nackoul's motto, to paraphrase an idea, is simple: "Forget winning and losing. Just do the best you can."

Becker called Nackoul "a rare one. He's mature beyond his years.

"One of the things Mike does is develop his own programs, and he'll talk about them," Becker said. "He'll come to you and explain it because he reads and researches things on the Internet. He explains it with a good rationale."

Following a solid high school football career, Nackoul will take his stellar academic record to MIT in the fall, but he's not ready to think about that with great regularity. For now, it's off to Romania.

"Olympic weightlifting is a very uplifting sport, and everybody you meet there is a quality person," Nackoul said. "It's easy to fall in love with."

Dave Mackall can be reached at dmackall@tribweb.com or 412-380-5617.

Images and text copyright © 2009 by The Tribune-Review Publishing Co.
Reproduction or reuse prohibited without written consent from PghTrib.com