

Local boy sets national water ski jump record

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JACKSONVILLE - Can anybody remember the last time someone from the Riverbend area set a national record – in anything?

A 13-year-old water-skier from **Dow** did just that on July 17 at a three-event water ski tournament in Jacksonville, Illinois. One of three siblings who compete at the national level, **Will Roberts** captured the attention of the water ski world this past July when he twice broke the national record in the same day.

In his furthest jump, he soared 144' to best the prior "Boys 2" record by one foot. Imagine flying off a 5' tall water ski jump ramp set next to the goal line on a football field - and not landing until the 48-yard line. That's how far 144' is.

Competitive water skiing involves three disciplines: slalom, trick and jump. It is traditionally dominated by skiers from Florida, Texas, Arizona and California. Midwesterners rarely rise to the top echelon in large part due to the much abbreviated ski seasons here. In the jump event, the rules mandate maximum boat speeds and maximum ramp height to length ratios (effectively the angle of the ramp). For boys 2 (ages 10 – 13), the maximum boat speed is 28 mph.

In utilizing a conventional pendulum approach, Will turns to the jump from the right side of the boat and over a span of two seconds accelerates from actual "skier speed" of 10 mph to 55 mph when he hits the ramp. The boat travels a constant 28 mph.

In 2005, Will began his skiing career at age 3 at a private ski lake in Dow, just south of Jerseyville. He joined his sister Nellie (then a two-year skiing "veteran") in learning about the fun and challenges of water skiing. Three years later, along with their little brother Edward and lake neighbors Brett and Sammy Stackpole, the young children first got the opportunity to slide over their newly-built miniature ramp (18" tall).

Sammy was 9, Nellie 8, Brett 7, Will 6 and Edward 4. With the confidence gained by repeated successes jumping off the "mini", all five have had tremendous success in the ten-state Midwest Regional Championships and at the AWSA National Championships, beginning with Nellie's first appearance in 2009. Now joined by neighbors Brendan and Katie Schultz and a budding young prospect, Michael Roberts, the kids from Lake Richard in Dow are among the top skiers in the country, all with particularly notable success in the jump event.

Not long after first sliding over the mini-ramp, Will became fascinated with ski jumping. He soon discovered he could watch the best jumpers in the world on YouTube videos. Will first watched, then studied video after video of world class jumpers on the family computer. He continued that obsession night after night, year after year. Apparently, it must have sunk in.

Within a year of having first jumped over the mini-ramp, Will (ski age 6) entered his first tournament in 2009 successfully landing all jumps over the big ramp. Weighing just 55 pounds and standing just over 4 feet tall, he was required to compete in Boys 2 since his younger age group did not offer a jumping event. The next year, Will placed 22nd when he jumped 60' in his first appearance at Nationals – the only 7-year-old in history to qualify for that event. At age 8 in 2011, he placed 16th with a jump of 69' – still the longest jump by an 8-year-old ever at Nationals. (The second longest jump by an 8 year old at Nationals is 62' and belongs to Will's younger brother, Edward.) In those two appearances, Will had a handicap beyond the age disparity and his tiny size: his parents only allowed him a 24 mph boat speed at age 7 and 26 mph at age 8 while all his competitors' towboats were going 28.

At the age of 9, at last freed of the parent-mandated boat speed limitations, Will finally got the chance to compete head to head with the 13-year-olds. That year, he jumped 97', (the longest jump ever recorded by a 9 year old) and later placed 8th at Nationals. With his jumping consistently improving in distance and technique, Will won the National Championship in Boys 2 for three consecutive years from 2014-2016. His best jumps during that period were 111' at age 11, 131' at age 12, and National record of 144' at age 13. At Nationals this year in Boise, Idaho, Will out-jumped the second place finisher by 29 feet, the largest margin in recorded Boys 2 history. Will led the national rankings each of the last two years, this year over 20' beyond the second place ranked competitor. In all, Will registered seven jumps of 140' or better during his last year in Boys 2.

Competitive water skiing is filled with great families and great people. In 2011, when Will was 8, the Boys 2 national record of 143' was set by a 13-year-old Florida boy named Taylor Garcia. It was a record most thought could never be broken. At that tournament, Taylor approached tiny Will after Will had jumped. He congratulated Will and told him he would be a great jumper one day.

Taylor is now among the top ten professional jumpers in the world. Upon learning of Will's record-breaking jump this July, Taylor immediately posted on his Instagram page Will's record jump video, congratulating Will on the accomplishment. Then, at the National Championships in Boise, Taylor sat down and talked with Will about Will's future and the challenges and risks Will faces as he increases boat speed and ramp height. In 2011, Taylor toppled the 8-year-old Boys 2 jump record set in 2003 by Zack Worden (also a top ten ranked professional jumper now). While in Boise, Zack also spoke at length with Will about Will's accomplishments, technique and future. Both Zack and Taylor were featured on many of the YouTube videos Will has long since memorized. Their words of advice last month in Boise undoubtedly made an indelible imprint on Will.

Will is not just a jumper. This year, Will was ranked second nationally in the Overall event – which combines slalom, jump and trick scores. His ranking score was a mere 1 percent below the first-ranked skier. His future in skiing certainly isn't limited to the jump event. But, changes are coming for Will. Next year he will be a 14-year-old skier and must compete against 14-17-year-olds in the Boys 3 division. In the jumping event, he will benefit from the ability to increase the boat speed to 32 mph. He has high hopes as he moves to the next level of competition. And yes, Will continues to study his YouTube videos.

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