Aug 15 Bowling coach earns honor for sport

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Michael Nyitray's resume includes being the coach of the national bowling teams of Thailand and Saudi Arabia, coach of bowling clubs in Sweden and Venezuela, as well as coach of the University of Miami bowling team. But Nyitray said his current position, as a high school bowling coach in Broward County, Fla., is arguably the most valuable work.

"As a coach, as a mentor, as a guiding force I have the ability to be able to affect the direction of young lives," Nyitray said. "I'm able to help them think more effectively, teach them ethics and morality and so forth all under the guise of a sport."

Nyitray was awarded the U.S. Olympic Committee's Developmental Coach of the Year Award in June. Nyitray was one of five coaches honored by the USOC as part of the 2011 National Coaching Conference held in Colorado Springs. The other coaching award recipients are: Ray Watkins (Paralympic Coach of the Year), Grant Schaffner (skeleton/Doc Counsilman Science Award), Dave Farmer (rugby/Volunteer Coach) and Brian Shimer (bobsled/National Coach of the Year).

This was the first national USOC coaching award for the sport of bowling and Nyitray is hoping it will help raise the profile of the sport in the United States. "This gives bowling an opportunity to have a national platform where the United States Olympic Committee, the epitome of sports, is actually recognizing a bowling coach for having done so much to better his environment," Nyitray said. "I accept this not just for me but for the entire sport. "This is going to be an opportunity to get more respect and more credibility for America's most popular sport." More than 70 million Americans bowl every year, making the sport one of the most popular in the country.

A constant goal of his is to give youth the opportunity to bowl competitively, which is why he started the Broward County High School Bowling League last year. His participation in this program was a large reason why he earned the coaching award. Nyitray, who was born and raised in Miami, moved to Parkland, in Broward County, in 1998 after coaching overseas for several years. He spent the next decade coaching collegiately and giving private lessons before landing a job as the coach of a varsity team at a private high school in Dade County, south of Broward. Through that position, Nyitray developed a relationship with Florida High School Athletic Association and eventually pitched the idea of a Broward County High School Bowling League.

"High school bowling existed in Dade (County) for 50 years and in Palm Beach (north of Broward) for 40 years but Broward has never had it," Nyitray said. "That just bothered me to no end, given the fact that I personally coached dozens of youth bowlers throughout Broward County, some of them are national-class players but they have no way to play." In 2010, Nyitray set up a system that is sanctioned by the FHSAA and U.S. Bowling Congress where Broward high schools can start a bowling team with as few as one participant. In the system's first season, 13 public and private high schools were a part of the league and Nyitray said he has three more joining next season. "My rationale is to create opportunities for these kids," Nyitray said. "I seem to be the only person who has the vision to put it together but I don't mind that. It's worth it, it's the right thing to do."

One of the students in Nyitray's league is Nathan Ricks, who Nyitray has been coaching privately for the past seven years. He averaged 246 in the league's first season – unofficially the highest average in U.S. high school competition. "I'm in two halls of fame and I've never averaged that," said Nyitray, who has been inducted into the Florida Bowling Hall of Fame and the Greater Miami Bowling Hall of Fame. "What's so exciting is I actually see room for improvement." "As a bowler he's given me what I don't think any other coach could have," Ricks said. "He always has something positive to say to reassure me. We're always fine-tuning myself to be better and in other ways he's given me meaningful advice for school, applying to colleges and he's definitely helped me become a better person."

Nyitray continues to meet with principals and parents to explain his league, which is free of charge to the schools, and tries to bring bowling to other high schools in the county, with the hope of expanding to other Florida counties in the future. Being named the Developmental Coach of the Year out of a pool of 25 coaches that were nominated from different sports is a big boost for Nyitray's program and should help him to expand it with the proof that it is successful. And though his heart is in developmental coaching, he also has bigger plans in mind for his sport. "I really hope that this can be a spark that could help direct bowling in the direction of being able to get in the Olympics," Nyitray said. "That I would have to say is my ultimate dream for the sport."