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Darius Lopes is excited about his trip to Beijing on Sept. 4 to watch some of the best athletes with physical disabilities between the ages of 12-18 perform at the Paralympics Games. – *SUBMITTED PHOTOS*

Teen heading to Beijing to cheer on Paralympics

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Tribune Staff Writer

Darius Lopes knows there aren't many kids who have an opportunity to go to Beijing, China where the Olympics were just held.

That's why Lopes is excited about his trip to Beijing on Sept. 4 to watch some of the best athletes with physical disabilities between the ages of 12-18 perform at the Paralympics Games.

He will be one of 25 student-athletes nationwide heading to China. Lopes, 16, a Southwest Philadelphia resident, will be the only representative from Pennsylvania heading to the Paralympics.

The only thing is Lopes won't be competing; he'll be going as a spectator.

"I won't be participating," Darius said. "I'll be watching this time. I'm going to be ready for the next Olympics (2012). I'm just happy to have the chance to go to Beijing. I'm going to watch the games. I want to try to see "The Great Wall" in China.

"My grandmother (Cheryl Lopes) will be going with me. We'll be able to meet a lot of athletes from other parts of the country. We should have a nice time. It should be a lot of fun."

Although Lopes won't be playing in the games, he is a terrific athlete. He plays wheelchair basketball and participates in rowing. He plays basketball at the Carousel House, which happens to be a part of the city's department of recreation. The Philadelphia 76ers are his favorite team. He rows down the Schuylkill River near Martin Luther King Drive.

"Darius really likes basketball," Cheryl Lopes said. "He has a great time playing there. He's involved with rowing. He's very active in sports. He



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should have a good time on this trip. It should be a good experience for him."

In order for him to go to Beijing, he had to write a 500-word essay on the impact that sports has made on disabled athletes.

In addition to the essay, he needed letters of recommendation to the Paralympic Academy, which sponsors the program.

"Darius worked extremely hard on his essay," his grandmother said. "We had at least 14 letters of recommendation. We got a lot of support. We really appreciate the help we got from our church, St. Jude Baptist Church (38th and Wallace streets). I want to thank Pastor Cleveland Edwards Jr. and his wife, Carolyn Edwards, for their support.

"The good thing about this trip is that we'll meet kids and other people from around the country," she added. "They all have disabilities. Some are blind. Some need wheelchairs, but they all do some great things. That's what makes the competition so special."

Lopes is a special young man.

His motto is "The sky's the limit." In spite of his disability, which has yet to be determined officially by medical experts, his accomplishments have been nothing short of magnificent.

Lopes is an 11th grade student at Widener Memorial School near Broad Street and Olney Avenue. He has a 92 average. He is the school treasurer. He was named to the Eastern Conference All-Academic Team. He has won several trophies, ribbons and medals for his athletic prowess.

"I want parents and adults to know that are a lot of things you can do for disabled children," Cheryl said. "You can go to the Variety Club, Carousel House and the Shriners. These organizations worked with disabled youth. I certainly want parents of Afro-American kids to know that. Darius has a wheelchair that we received through a grant. He participated in sports and a lot of activities. I want people to know it's really amazing what they can accomplish."