

Bonus story

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ONE

OF

by
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THE

GUYYS



In the world of 16-year-old athlete Jeff Douglas, sports aren't about who scores the most points or who wins the game. They're about something much bigger.



Team bus rides to away games . . . after-school practices . . . high fives during warm-ups. These are ordinary moments in the lives of most kid athletes. But they mean everything to 16-year-old Jeff Douglas of Edwards, Colorado.

Stat sheets, victories, playing time. They're what matter most to some athletes. But to Jeff, just being a part of the team is what's important.

"Sports make Jeff feel normal, whatever that means," says Taylor Roach, Jeff's childhood friend. "It's something he can do that puts him on the level of other people."

Jeff has fragile X syndrome, a type of mental retardation that makes him much slower mentally and physically than other kids. In spite of his disability, he has always attended a regular school. He is now a sophomore at Battle Mountain High School, where he takes mostly special-education classes. When he's not getting one-on-one tutoring, an adult aid is with him at all times, guiding him from class to class and helping him follow instructions from his teachers.



Jeff (above, center) huddles with his teammates during a hoops game last February. He played on special teams as a freshman footballer (left).

COURTESY OF DEBBIE DOUGLAS

It's hard for Jeff to stay focused on any one thing, even for a short period of time. He'll pop up from his chair and leave the room in the middle of a teacher's lesson. He reads at a first-grade level. If he has trouble sounding out a word, even a simple word like *apple*, he grabs his thick brown hair in frustration.

Jeff speaks in fragments, so instead of having a regular conversation with someone, he repeats phrases, often shouting them out to friends and teachers. One of his favorite words to use in a phrase is *trashed*. He'll say, "This room is trashed" or "Your shoes are trashed" or "Your car is trashed."

Says Maxine Glazer, his tutor: "The gap between Jeff and other kids his age is enormous."

At school, Jeff spends more time with adults than with his classmates. He loves playing sports because he can be treated more like a regular kid. His favorite place to be is on the field or on the court, hanging out with his teammates.

"When you get on the field, everybody, in a sense, is just one of the team," says Fred Koetteritz, Battle Mountain's athletic director. "That's a huge comfort to Jeff."

Team Spirit

It doesn't matter to Jeff if he gets a lot of playing time. As a special-teams player on the freshman football team last year, he was on the field only for kickoff returns. This year, he's a guard on the freshman basketball team and might get to play only at the end of the game. But that's okay with him.

Before he steps onto the court, Jeff will adjust his shorts so that they hang low, just the way his teammates wear them. "Jeff's a little hipster," says teammate Vinny Cisneros. "He's always pulling his shorts down."

Says Bob Reed, Jeff's hoops coach: "Jeff wants to interact with the other kids and have fun. He just wants to get out there and run around."

The fact that it's twice as hard for Jeff to master basic motor skills — such as catching, throwing, and running — doesn't stop him from trying, and his determination has taught his teammates a lot.

"It's a privilege [having him on our team]," says Vinny. "When we're in the game, we try too hard. He takes away the feeling of having to win."

Football Legend

Jeff started playing football and basketball and running track as a seventh-grader at Berry Creek Middle School. His mom, Debbie, and the school's principal felt that enrolling him in sports would make him feel more comfortable at school. His willingness to try anything impressed his teammates, and they encouraged him.

"Our football team would lift weights," says former teammate Cody Stackpole. "Coach would be afraid to let Jeff lift. It was tough for Jeff to sit there and watch us, so we showed him how to do it. You could tell how hard it was [for him], but he'd keep doing it. I've learned to try a lot harder because of Jeff."

Jeff didn't like making tackles at first, so his teammates came up with a plan: They told him that if he made a big hit, they'd treat him



Jeff doesn't get much court time, but he still loves being on the hoops squad (left). He excels on the ski slopes, where he has struck gold as a Special Olympian.



to ice cream. In a game not long afterward, Jeff nailed his man, knocking him to the ground. His teammates roared their approval and high-fived him, and Jeff got his ice cream.

Jeff never missed a Berry Creek football practice or game. Before he graduated, his coaches honored him by retiring his jersey. Jeff is the first Berry Creek athlete whose jersey has been retired.

"Jeff brought this attitude that reminded everybody how lucky they were just to be able to *play* sports," says Todd Huck, Berry Creek's football coach.

But being the center of attention is not one of Jeff's favorite things. At the jersey ceremony, he bolted to the locker room the first chance he got. He wanted his whole team to be honored, not just him.

Special Olympics Champion

Outside of school, Jeff has excelled in Special Olympics, a program that gives people with mental retardation the chance to train and compete in any of 26 Olympic-type summer and winter sports.

Skiing and cycling are Jeff's specialties. In the winter, he skis with a Special Olympics group every Saturday and Sunday. He competes in the intermediate division, and he's *good*. One look at the medal-covered bulletin board in his bedroom will tell you that. He won gold medals in the slalom, giant slalom, and downhill at the 2001 Special Olympics Colorado State Games. At the 2002 Games, he won silver in the slalom and giant slalom.

But being the best doesn't mean anything to Jeff. "[He] doesn't really understand the concept of winning or losing," says his mom. "He'll ski down the race course and just wave to you."

During a Special Olympics bike race last year, Jeff was in first place when he noticed that another rider was lagging behind and struggling just to keep going. Jeff turned around so that he could ride

side by side with the cyclist and help him finish the race.

"The competitor in me was thinking, *What's he doing?*" says Mrs. Douglas. "But it made perfect sense to Jeff."



Jeff gets a visit from classmate and friend Tim McLaurin.

Hard Core

Jeff loves cycling. For the past two years, he has completed an 85-mile tandem (two-person) bike ride for Best Buddies, an organization that helps people with mental retardation. The fund-raising

ride is held in Massachusetts each May. Cyclists pedal from Boston to Hyannis Port, a town on Cape Cod.

Scott Weaver, the president of Special Olympics in Colorado, asked Jeff to be his partner. Jeff jumped at the chance. "There are a lot of athletes I could have done it with," says Scott, "but I knew Jeff would be committed to training." In the months leading up to the race, Jeff and Scott rode once a week, and Jeff rode 20 miles at least three times per week on his own. He also logged one 50-mile ride.

Jeff doesn't understand the concepts of distance or time, so the



LARRY LEVIN

mile markers during the race meant nothing to him. He used Dunkin' Donuts shops as his own markers, counting the stores as he rode along.

In Jeff's first Best Buddies ride, he was the only person with a development disability to complete the route. The second year, one of Jeff and Scott's tires blew out 14 miles into the ride. A TV crew offered to give them a ride in their truck, but Jeff and Scott said no way. They changed the tire and finished the ride in about 5½ hours. "That's just a testament to Jeff's will and to the kind of kid he is," says Scott.

Seeing Sports Differently

Down the road, Jeff's opportunities to play sports will become more limited. The junior varsity and varsity level are too competitive for him. He may try out for the school's ski team next year, but he's going to give up basketball and has already stopped playing football.

"As Jeff gets older, Special Olympics becomes more important," says his mom. "It will always be a place where he'll be welcomed for who he is."

Whichever sport Jeff competes in, the people with whom he competes will learn to see sports differently because of him. Just ask some of his former teammates, like basketball teammate Brad Reed: "Seeing Jeff out there is a constant reminder to keep sports in perspective."

Or Cody, his football teammate: "Jeff made me realize how much just being one of the guys can really mean."

1. What type of mental retardation does Jeff have?
2. Where does Jeff live?
3. What is Jeff's best sport?
4. Jeff competed in the 85 mile Tandem bike race. Who was his partner?
5. How did the football team at Bear Creek Middle School honor Jeff when he graduated.
6. As a freshman football player, what special team did Jeff play on?
7. Jeff gets very angry when he doesn't get to play as much as the other players. True or False
8. As Jeff gets older, special Olympics have become more important or less important?
9. How did Jeff do in his first best buddies ride?
10. When this article was written, what grade was Jeff in?