

East's Hennefer has shining moment

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The highlight of this scholastic sports season has already happened.

The most magical moment of this winter season happened when a freshman basketball player at Cherry Hill East High School got on the bus to travel to an away game last Tuesday.

It was the first road trip of the young season for the Cougars.

That's when Brad Hennefer boarded the bus with his teammates... along with the boys' junior varsity and varsity squads... for a 10-minute ride into Voorhees to play at Eastern.

That's when Bob and Nancy Hennefer just knew their son was part of the team.

That's when these two long-time residents of the Barclay Farm section of Cherry Hill felt Brad would be OK.

Brad felt it, too.

"The bus ride was a short time," Brad said, smilingly widely, "but it was a lot of fun."

Brad Hennefer has Down Syndrome. The social interaction in a new environment is the most challenging part for him. Playing the game is the easy part.

"It is very refreshing to see him have the confidence level to do that," Nancy said about the bus ride.

Brad has been confident playing sports for a long time now. His older brother, Bobby, 20, taught him golf years ago and Brad recently won the gold medal in the Special Olympics. In basketball, last year, he was the 3-point-shooting specialist for BUDS (Bringing Up Down Syndrome) in Special Olympics, New Jersey.

When Cherry Hill East special education teacher Sue Pyne heard Brad played basketball at the school's open house last spring, she encouraged him to look into playing for the freshman team.

The Hennefers made it very clear they didn't want Brad, the only Cherry Hill East student ever with Down Syndrome, to take anyone's spot. He didn't. The usual 12-player roster was filled. Another spot was added.

"We didn't feel he was at the level to play in high school. What we wanted was the friendship and interaction," Bob Hennefer said.

Bob and Nancy knew they got just what they were looking for when Brad boarded the bus with his teammates, as if he was getting in the family car for a drive to Ocean City, where he had worked part-time the last two summers at Tory's Ice Cream Parlor.

They weren't concerned if Brad would put the ball in the basket this season, just that he would fit in.

"At this age when you sometimes worry about bullying or someone picking on him, this gave him a sense of belonging," Nancy said about Brad being on the team. "We don't worry about bullying... these kids keep an eye on him."

Bob and Nancy said it has been a perfect situation. They both called it a "win-win." It has been a win for Brad because of the inclusion.

It has been a win for the East players because they are seeing how truly special a friend with Down Syndrome really is.

"It is a real tribute to the kids," Nancy said, "it could've easily gone the other way."

Indeed, it really is a credit to the East players... from the freshmen to seniors... for making a special kid feel more special. And it is a credit for coach John Valore for running a successful program on the court that is filled with a roster of good people off the court, too.

"Brad is so enthusiastic and is so happy to be playing with us... he came up and gave me a big hug today, so you know how much it means for him," said Bill Melleby, a junior guard on the junior varsity team who sat with Brad on the bus ride. "But we benefit, too. We are having a good time with him and we enjoy having him. He really brings energy to the team and on the bus ride."

Added freshman Alex Saltzburg: "Whenever Brad is out on the court, he gives 100 percent. We all think he is the nicest kid we ever met. Everyone loves him.

"He has a lot of friends, not just on the basketball team."

Because of his friendship with Brad, Saltzburg doesn't mope around about being sidelined with a broken leg. Instead, he did the scorebook for the freshman game. "This isn't the worse thing that could happen," he said about his injury.

Truly, this has been a "win- win" for Brad and his teammates.

But, thanks to Bob and Nancy, so many others are winning, too, because the Hennefers always have believed in endless possibilities for their son and have embarked on what they call "the road less traveled" in their pursuit of creating opportunities for Brad.

Because of them, other parents with a Down Syndrome child may soon follow their... and Brad's... courageous footsteps.

Because of them, other guidance counselors, teachers and coaches might reach out to a Down Syndrome child to include them in the classroom and on high school level teams.

Because of them, other high school age kids might treat a Down Syndrome child with so much care and respect that he or she won't be too uncomfortable to ride on the school bus. "I get to talk to my friends," Brad said about the bus ride to Eastern.

Brad didn't play in the 35-33 loss to the Vikings last Tuesday. He did, however, play against the East girls' team in a practice game a few weeks ago.

"When he scored in the scrimmage, all the boys and girls cheered for him," Nancy said.

Well, here is a cheer for all the East students, teachers and coaches, for making this happen.

Here is a cheer for Bob and Nancy, for including and sharing their son with all of us. Here is a cheer for, Brad, for being himself.

And here is a cheer for all the East basketball players for making Brad feel so comfortable around them that he didn't even hesitate to go on the first bus ride to an away game.

"They are great kids," Brad said, smiling widely, about his teammates. "They keep me safe."

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