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High School Player With Down Syndrome Shoots and Scores

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BRAD HENNEFER grimaced as his Cherry Hill High School East basketball teammates' comeback was thwarted by rival Lenape in the final seconds. The loss was disappointing, and the closeness of the game meant that Hennefer, a 5-foot-10-inch substitute shooting guard, did not get any playing time.

It was not like the game he got in a couple of weeks back, when the crowd in Washington Township was yelling: "B-Rad! B-Rad! B-Rad!" They wanted him to get the ball, and when he did and hit a 3-pointer, they went absolutely bananas.

Brad has Down Syndrome and is believed to be the only boy with the disorder playing on a varsity high school basketball team. David Tolleson, executive director of the National Down Syndrome Congress, said there was no reason that a high-functioning boy with Down Syndrome like Brad couldn't play an aerobic sport like basketball, but that to his knowledge no one had done it on a varsity high school level.

Brad, 19, and his parents, Nancy Hennefer, an accountant, and Bob Hennefer, a casino floor supervisor, were at a high school special education orientation session when Sue Pyne, the Cherry Hill East facilitator, heard about his skill as a Special Olympics athlete in several sports.

She went to John Valore, the boys' basketball coach at Cherry Hill for 32 years.

"I told him I had this good candidate for a team manager," Ms. Pyne said. "A few weeks later, I see John in the hall and he gives me this sad look. 'Brad can't be manager,' he said. I get angry and say, 'Why not?' 'Because he made the freshman team,' he said."

Mr. Valore said he had no qualms about bringing Hennefer onto the team. He has had, in the past, a blind boy and a student with autism as team managers.

"It is unbelievable the chemistry that has developed on this team because of the other boys' association with Brad," Mr. Valore said. "He shows us what is going on in life, and how hard some people have to work to get where they want. He has enlightened us all."

When Brad was born, the Hennefers, who also went to Cherry Hill East, had little knowledge of the special education world. Their older son, Robert, was 5 and had started in the usual suburban round of sports and activities.

“There was little choice if my older son was going to do things but to bring Brad along,” Mrs. Hennefer said. “So he was doing T-ball when Robert was doing Little League and miniature golfing and basketball, whatever. We decided that if he could do things, we would encourage it.”

Brad is actually a better golfer than basketball player. He played his freshman year, then sparingly as a junior varsity player the next two years. His brother, 23, who played golf at Cherry Hill East and then in college at Franklin & Marshall in Pennsylvania, is the assistant pro at Woodcrest Country Club in Cherry Hill, and has mentored him in that game. Brad is on the high school golf team and regularly shoots in the 90s.

“Someone asked him what his handicap was,” his father said. “He said: ‘What do you think? I have Down Syndrome.’ He’s funny too.”

Cherry Hill East’s principal, John O’Breza, said, “Every kid on the team, and it seems every kid in the school, feels that they have grown because they have seen what Brad can do.”

Mrs. Hennefer said Brad is often stubborn and is not really receptive to change in his daily routine. He does as well as he can in school, but math is difficult and often frustrating. He has a girlfriend he met five years ago through a Down Syndrome group and, like a typical teenager, wants to spend as much time with her and his other friends as possible.

He is muscular from working out five days a week in the school weight room and has a hip, floppy-at-the-top, shaved-around-the-edges haircut. Like many with Down Syndrome, he speaks haltingly. But he tries hard to be articulate.

“I want to go to college, but first I want to be with my teammates and Coach Valore and have a great season,” he said after the Lenape game.

The week before, Brad had made his second 3-pointer of the season, near the end of a 75-38 loss to one of the state’s top teams, St. Patrick’s of Elizabeth — a feat that had made him quite proud.

“Not many players get to score against St. Patrick’s,” he said.