

*"Don't let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do."*

-John Wooden

I met this month's Athlete of the Month approximately six years ago at the local basketball gym. His older sister, Rachel, is quite the basketball star and she played with my girlfriend's daughter. Nick regularly attended her games with his mother, Sheri, and father, Peter. I got to know this extremely nice family. Nick caught my eye, he would frequently jump out on the court during time-outs and halftimes to run around to dribble and shoot as best he could. At just four years old, his athleticism was immediately impressive- he was strong, fast and above all, tough as nails.

This toughness would become more evident over the years as we continued to attend the girls' basketball games. I would notice other children staring, walking away, shooting on the other hoop, while Nick quite often played alone. I don't believe the other kids intended to be mean, but that was certainly the result. Nick wasn't able to communicate verbally as well as the other kids and seemed to be in a world of his own. I was interested in knowing more about Nick. He seemed to be a very kind young man who loved sports, was really good for a boy his age, and appeared to just want to make friends and be with other kids his age. As I asked more about him, I found out Nick was born with a rare genetic disorder called Bronchio-Oculo Facial Syndrome. Nick has severe hearing loss and it has affected his speech and facial muscles.

Six years later, December of 2015, Nick's mother contacted me and stated that Nick really wanted to play little league baseball for the first time and that he had never played organized baseball before. Nick attends The Learning Center for the Deaf outside of Braintree and wanted to start participating in town activities and meet local kids. Nick did not know the rules of baseball, did not know if he threw right-handed or left-handed, did not know which side he batted from and did not have any equipment of his own. We agreed that Nick should come to the Braintree Baseball Club- we could provide him with all the equipment, figure out all the other matters and he could jump into our little leaguer hitting clinics and see how he liked it. The rest is something I will never forget and is exactly why we all love coaching baseball.

Nick was able to throw from both sides- righty and lefty! He threw much harder from the left side, so Nick is now a lefty. Nick was definitely a righty hitter, but he needed a bat. I went into our supply closet and sized him up and picked out a real nice bat that for some reason caught my eye amongst the fifty plus bats in the bin. Nick swung it and seemed to be comfortable with the size and he loved the look of it. The bat was Nick's to own and keep. His huge smile told me everything- He loved his new bat. We walked out after a short lesson to the front desk area where Scott Creedon, my son Cal's neighbor, was working. He looked at the bat and said, "Hey, that's Cal's old little league bat! He crushed dingers with that bat!"

This moment made us all stop in our tracks, Nick's eyes jumped out of his head; his Mom and I were just stunned as we realized the significance of this moment. I had no idea whose bat that was until then and the message was clear. Nick belonged at this club.

Nick was a regular attendee at private lessons and clinics throughout the winter and early spring. He was in the club at least 3-4 times a week getting hundreds of repetitions in all areas (throwing, fielding and hitting) a week. His improvement was such that I began to use Nick as an example to other attendees at the clinics of a good batting stance, focus, helpfulness, work ethic and improvement. Nick has since become a leader in the club amongst his peers, respected by all for his laser-like focus and his wicked line drives.

Nick's first Little League games were just a few weeks ago- he's since had his firsts of hits, catches, slides, runs scored, even a first hit by a pitch, and many new friends and teammates who respect him as one of the better players on his team. Nick, through his toughness in dealing with many surgeries, hearing impairment, speech therapy, has overcome so much more than most children will ever have to worry about. I asked a group of our 12 year old Bandit team members back in March, as they walked by Nick hitting in a cage, "How long do you guys think Nick has been playing baseball?" after they were wowed by his line drives. I heard responses such as "2 years!!", "4 years!" Well, the correct answer was three months. They were amazed as they all introduced themselves to Nick, shook his hand and told him how good he was already and that he should keep coming to the club and working hard. I then watched as they all walked to their practice in amazement with what they just observed.

Nick has done more for the club than we could ever do for him. He has taught us all about overcoming adversity- so-called obstacles. I've learned that because of Nick's hearing loss, that he was able to "see" better, therefore, he was able to learn quicker than most. Nick's ability to absorb visual instruction gives him the ABILITY to learn faster than most players I've coached.

The term "disability" does not apply to Nick Tutkus. He's able to do so much more than any of us thought was possible. Nick has not only learned how to play baseball, he's learned that he can change the world around him- my world, for one, just by being who he is. Not only is Nick a favorite baseball player of mine, but he is my friend forever. He has taught me way more than I could teach him. I will never forget this experience. Nick, thanks for coming into the Braintree Baseball Club and making us all better. Congratulations on being the April, 2016, Athlete of the Month.