

Lack of lower legs doesn't slow Otsego boy

Written by By DEBBIE ROGERS Sentinel Staff Writer
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A.J. Digby, 12, a bilateral amputee, stands in his driveway where he plays basketball. (Photo: Aaron C

Like most 12-year-old boys on summer break, A.J. Digby loves shooting hoops, bouncing on a trampoline and swimming in the pool.

He just does it all without two legs.

A.J., of rural Bowling Green, has been a bilateral amputee since shortly after birth. His parents, Robin and Gordon, had no idea that he had Congenital Fibula Hemomelia.

The only complication the couple was expecting for their first child was a breech position. They wanted the baby's gender to be a surprise, so there were no extra ultrasound pictures that possibly would have shown the condition.

When Robin's water broke, she went to the Toledo Hospital for an emergency C-section. As the baby was born, doctors told the couple that they had a son, and he was missing a bone in both bottom portions of the leg so his feet didn't form properly.

There was no sadness or pity, Robin recalled.

"The day he was born, the doctor came in and said, 'He can do anything he wants to do,'" she said.

That prediction has come true. A.J.'s a great student, going into seventh grade in the Otsego School District, where he looks forward to math and history classes. With prosthetics, he plays football, hockey, basketball and baseball.

A.J. handles questions from the curious and stares from strangers with grace, directness and humor.

He loves to tell the story about hitting a line drive toward the shortstop while playing baseball as an 8-year-old. The ball was caught easily enough and thrown to the first baseman, but a little long. As the player was fumbling for the catch, one of A.J.'s prosthetic legs fell off as he was running toward the base. The first baseman - not quite touching the base with the ball - just stood there as A.J. fought for the play.

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"I crawled all the way down, touched first and I was safe," he said with a guffaw.

A.J. gets new "legs" about every 18 months, depending on growth spurts. Robin said often times in their lives are remembered through a certain set of legs and their design: camouflage, baseballs, Cleveland Browns.

The Digbys had to decide early on whether to have the amputation done, or try to repair A.J.'s legs, which would have required a dozen surgeries while he was a toddler. When A.J. was 10 months old, he had the bilateral amputation.

He has no problem keeping up with siblings Ashlyn, 10, and Keegan, 9.

"When I'm at home, if we're inside I like taking them (his prosthetics) off and running around with them off - and when I say running around, I mean running around," A.J. said.

For the last two summers, A.J.'s been able to attend Amputee Coalition of America's Paddy Rossbach Youth Camp in Clarksville, Ohio, with 100 other kids who have a limb loss. The coalition finds sponsors, grants and donations to pay the \$1,800-per-camper cost, said Derrick Stowell, development coordinator for the youth camp program.

Stowell said the biggest impact of the camp is self-confidence building in the kids.

"Our campers are often asked by people they meet about their limb loss or limb difference. At camp, everyone is the same. This gives them the freedom to try new things, and learn from each other. The camp helps to build campers' self-esteem and self-confidence."

A.J.'s favorite camp activities were doing a high ropes course, riding the zip line and playing "ga-ga" ball, which is a lot like dodgeball. He met friends from other parts of Ohio, North Dakota and Alaska.

The best part of the week was the chance to be a kid and not have to answer a bunch of questions whenever a new friend was introduced.

"If you walk into a room with random people here, they would be questioning you about your arm or leg or whatever it is," A.J. said. "My record is 25 questions for the day."

That was the first day of kindergarten seven years ago. He remembers one especially blunt questioner who asked him "Why are you so different?"

A.J. didn't flinch. He told the boy, Nick Miller, his story and the two are best friends to this day.