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BOY'S BASKETBALL

Bellefonte player feeling the love of game

Vinny Pezzimenti - vpezzime@centredaily.com

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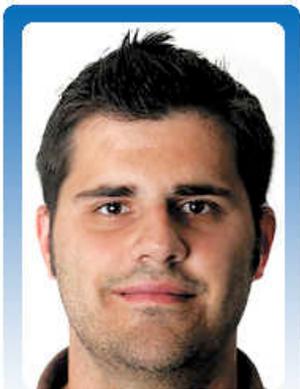
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The beauty of sports could be seen in the beaming smile that prevailed over the face of Dennis Wakefield Jr.



Pezzimenti

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It was pure. It was unbridled. It was ear-to-ear.

And as Wakefield slowly trotted back down the court, it wouldn't go away.

Moments later, after the final buzzer had sounded, Wakefield's Bellefonte junior varsity basketball teammates

jumped from the bench to engulf him in celebration. They slapped his hands and patted his back as if he had just sunk a shot to win a big game.

What Wakefield had done was merely hit a free throw to pull the Red Raiders within 18 points at the end of a lopsided loss to Penns Valley.

But the final margin had quickly become lost in all the jubilation. It didn't matter, anyway. It never mattered.

For there was the true meaning of sports, still alive and well, in the smile worn by a once-troubled teenager who simply needed someone, anyone, to give him a

chance to succeed in life.

"I wish I had the words to describe what he went through and what he's going through now," says Wakefield's father Dennis Sr. "It's night and day. It's really amazing."

Dennis is not your average junior in high school, though that is difficult to distinguish by his outward appearance.

He lives with Tourette's syndrome, in addition to other mental, physical and social disabilities. He struggles mightily to merely run up and down the court, shoot the ball and dribble it — the things kids his age take for granted.

And not long ago, his life was going no where fast.

Growing up in Mount Union, Dennis was often picked on, laughed at and belittled.

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He would do anything to create a friend, which almost always led to trouble. It was a common occurrence for Dennis Sr. to field calls from the school chronicling his son's disobedience.

"He was heading down a bad road," Dennis Sr. says.

So bad that one day in 2009 Dennis Sr. decided to pick up and leave

Mount Union, the place where he grew up and graduated high school and made a life — the place he still calls home. He had to.

"When we moved up here I told Denny that we were going to start over," Dennis Sr. recalled. "It was a new life."

Dennis Jr. has made the most of it — and then some.

His dramatic transformation started to really blossom when he joined the football team this fall. The Bellefonte players and coaches brought him in, embraced him and made him one of their own.

Dennis Jr. felt the affection at one of the first practices. While he stumbled and fought to finish a conditioning drill, assistant coach John Wetzler sidled up next to Dennis and ran with him, encouraged him.

The moment touched Dennis. It made him feel wanted. "It was awesome," he says.

Dennis didn't see much of the field, but his new warm presence was felt. Teammates adorned him with the nickname "Big D" and he embraced them in the same way.

When Bellefonte senior Corey Ross went down with a knee injury one game, Big D was with him. He consoled Ross and cried with him.

"I like to have friends," Dennis says now. "I'm a good-hearted kid."

Much like Bellefonte football coach Duffy Besch, varsity basketball coach Dan Miller had some doubts when Dennis expressed interest in coming out for the team.

Miller's concerns quickly melted during tryouts.

"If you spent just a couple minutes around Big D, you feel like a mother or father does with their son ... just an overwhelming sense of unconditional love," Miller says. "Not only toward him but the unconditional love he gives everybody in return."

The Wakefields agree whole-heartedly that sports have played a huge role in Dennis Jr.'s ascension. He's an honor roll student now and Dennis Sr. no longer receives unwanted phone calls from school.

"I think it completely turned his life around," Dennis Sr. said.

"I call this place home now because of all that I've achieved," Dennis Jr. added.

Dennis has become a centerpiece of sorts for the basketball program. He leads cheers before games and is quick with pats on the back of teammates after them.

"It's fun to be around people," he says. "Moving up here, I want to try new things."

So there Dennis was, on the court last week at Penns Valley. He had played in one junior varsity game before but only briefly and never got his hands on the ball.

Playing in the middle of Bellefonte's zone defense, he first

grabbed a rebound, then recovered a loose ball and was fouled.

The first attempt wasn't even close. The second swished through perfectly.

"The first one missed pretty bad," Bellefonte assistant Brian Stover said. "It was almost like some higher power guided that next one."

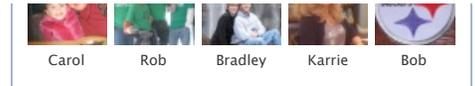
Bellefonte and Penns Valley supporters alike, filled to the gym's brim, erupted in cheers as Dennis, wearing that wide grin, trotted back on defense.

"It was a new feeling for me," Dennis said. "People were saying that even Penns Valley was cheering for me. That's pretty amazing."

In the midst of the roaring ovation, Bellefonte junior varsity coach Tyler James noticeably fought emotions.

"I don't think that he was the only person," Miller said. "I know I did and I think a lot of the people that were the gym that night had the same things. (Dennis) brings out the best in people and puts things in perspective."

Miller's voice trailed off, before he added: "We're just really blessed to have Dennis be a part of



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our team.”

Dennis already has his sights set on going out for the track team in the spring.

“Each day I can see him growing into being a man,” said Dennis Sr., coaxing this reaction from his son: “It’s pretty nice hearing my dad say that about me. He wouldn’t have said that about me two or three years ago.”

The day after Dennis’ big shot, the Red Raiders gathered as a team before practice. As customary after each game, Miller gave out a small award to the varsity player who best exemplified pride, integrity and guts. It went to standout senior Zach Moerschbacher, who, without hesitation, handed it off Dennis.

“That’s the least that any of our players could do for Dennis because of all the goodness he brings out in each one of us,” Miller said. “You should have seen the smile on Dennis’ face.” Fortunately, we did.

Vinny Pezzimenti covers boys’ high school basketball for the Centre Daily Times. He can be reached at 231-4629 or vpezzime@centredaily.com.



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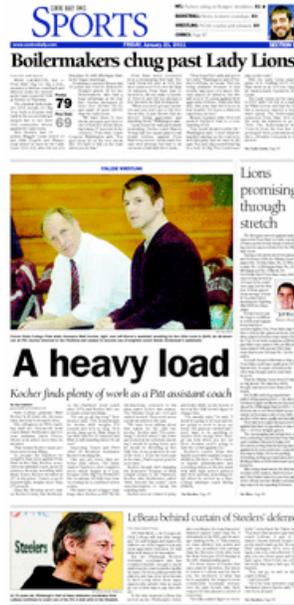
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