

CENTRE DAILY TIMES

www.centredaily.com

Philipsburg-Osceola student inspires

By Vinny Pezzimenti
Feb. 4, 2009

Growing up in Philipsburg, Sean Carpin was always ahead of the other kids his age when it came to sports. He was bigger, faster, stronger. He was a star quarterback and an ace pitcher.

Plus, he had genes on his side — his father Kevin was the quarterback for Philipsburg-Osceola's undefeated football team in 1985 and his uncle Dennis was a safety at the University of Maryland.

"Up until he was about 13 he was the typical athlete," Sean's mother, Laurie, said. "He excelled in everything that he did and won all kinds of awards."

When suddenly and drastically, about four years ago, Sean's peers began to catch up quickly on the field and court, it was mind-boggling. Soon after, they passed him by completely.

It was obvious there was something clear and present that was ailing Carpin, when after pitching in upon in as a 13-year-old, he didn't have enough strength to even walk the next day.

"It sucked," Sean said, "because I couldn't do what I wanted to do."

Now a high school senior at P-O, Sean is even more of a shell of the athlete he once represented.

He lives with limb-girdle muscular dystrophy (LGMD), a rare deficiency that causes the muscles around the shoulders and hips to slowly deteriorate.

What the disease hasn't touched is Sean's soul, and certainly not his will. They are alive and well.

That was evident on Monday night, when Sean distinctly hobbled slowly up and down the basketball court, trying like heck to keep up with teammates, enjoying it all.

"I just have it and I deal with it," Sean said of LGMD.

"There's nothing I can do about it so I deal with it the best I can."

Sean has become an inspiration of sorts, at P-O and beyond. Mounties coach Mel Curtis refers to him as "the backbone of the team." Fans young and old stand and cheer when he connects on the Carpin specialty, the 3-point basket, which he has made 13 of this season.

"Watching him play," Curtis said, "it gives me chills."

His name, his story are spreading fast.

For two years, Sean's physical decline was a mystery. At first, the family believed the pain he was enduring was due to growth spurts.

Sean saw several different doctors. He underwent several different tests, from blood work to x-rays. Doctors were ready to perform a muscle biopsy when it was finally concluded that LGMD was the culprit.

That was in 2007 when the Carpins learned of the progressive disease that, in time, will almost certainly force their son to need a cane to get around and possibly confine him to a wheel-chair.

The effects of LGMD are evident in the way Sean walks with a limp, his struggles with balance, and the pain he feels after a long practice.

"For Sean to run up and down the court it takes 10 times the energy as it does for a normal person," Laurie said. "Physical exertion is hard for him to a greater extent. If him and a friend would go down to the gym and workout, his friend may be sore but Sean is going to be twice as sore because his muscles have to work twice as hard. Somebody that can lift 50 pounds, Sean would probably be better off lifting half of that, so it's not putting as much exertion on his muscles."

But Sean plays on through the pain and through the risks (P-O athletic trainer Jeff Peachman worries of bone dislocation, specifically with the hips, because of Sean's weakening muscles).

Sean seldom misses a practice, and he also plays baseball — pitching from time to time. Essentially, he lives for sports.

“Me and him have been the only ones consistently out for the team every year from junior high on up,” fellow senior and teammate Brad Rocco said. “It’s good to see that a kid like him can stick it out in a school where a lot of kids choose to walk away from sports just because they’re not getting a lot of playing time or something. That’s not a priority to him. He’s just here to play ball.”

But why?

Sean has been made fun of for his herky-jerky jog up the court, and some nights he has to spend hours after practice in a hot tub soothing his decaying muscles.

Why not play Nintendo, or keep up with American Idol?

“Most kids would’ve walked away from athletics all together,” Curtis said.

What keeps Sean going?

“A whole lot of heart,” he said. “And most of these kids look up to me. I keep going for them as a motivation factor.”

Following the Mounties’ senior day game last week, teammates Cody and Luke Curtis approached Sean. Cody tried to describe to Sean how much he looked up to him. Luke, who grew up with Sean, said he’d give one of his arms for his friend.

The feeling reverberates throughout P-O.

“With most schools,” Mounties senior Dusty Golding said, “Sean wouldn’t even be a part of the team, but our coach understands that he’ll work hard.”

Sean has been rewarded with playing time, though it must come in short bursts and most of the time at the end of quarters.

“I can do basically anything,” Sean said. “It’s just a matter of how much I can do. Some things are more difficult than others, some things are easier. Getting up and down the court is the hardest thing.”

P-O started its senior day game against Huntingdon with Sean, who moves about half as fast as most of his teammates, on the floor and in a defensive alignment that Curtis phrased a “box-and-none.” To keep Sean in the game and give him opportunities to score, Curtis told Sean to stay on the offensive end of the court while his

teammates defended a man down.

“We all played hard on defense and tried to get him the ball as much as we could,” Golding said.

Sean was held scoreless in the overtime loss to Huntingdon, but oh-fors have been rare. Going into Tuesday’s game at Lewistown, he has hit at least one 3-pointer in 11 of the Mounties’ 20 games, and had a mid-season string of five straight games with at least one 3-point make.

Curtis often calls plays to set up Sean for open perimeter shots. Equipped with a set shot reminiscent of the era of NBA legend Bob Cousy and a release quicker than most of his high school peers, Sean seldom fails to deliver.

“It pains me to watch sometimes when he’s trying to run,” Sean’s father, Kevin, said, “because I know what he was capable of before (being stricken with LGMD). It makes it all worthwhile when he does hit a three.”

So much so that a Sean 3-pointer has become an event of sorts in Centre County — a cause for standing ovations, smiles and warm feelings.

“I hit a three here and everybody just goes nuts,” he said. “Last week in Penns Valley I hit a three and even their fans started going crazy. It feels awesome when I hit threes, just knowing there’s so many people out there supporting me.”

Said Golding: “I was actually surprised because Penns Valley is one of our rivals.”

Yet, nothing about Sean should be surprising after hearing his story.

He also coaches youth baseball, serves as the first base coach for P-O’s varsity team and always has words of advice and encouragement for his basketball teammates.

Curtis, the director for the Moshannon Valley YMCA, has used Sean to help him give demonstrations to youngsters.

“He’s great with kids,” Curtis said. “He can get things out of kids.”

But his true passion lies elsewhere.

“I want to get a job in sports broadcasting and maybe end up on College Gameday someday and take over Lee Corso’s spot,” said Sean, who will attend Indiana University of Pennsylvania in the fall. “That’s what I’m really aiming for.”

And at this point, who’s to doubt him?