



RISE ABOVE

TRISTAN BRAVERMAN HASN'T LET AUTISM PREVENT HIM FROM PURSUING HIS DREAMS

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SEVEN SECONDS LEFT IN OVERTIME, DOWN BY 1. Quarterfinals of the New York State Association of Independent Schools tournament.

Tristan Braverman comes out of the timeout and walks to his spot near the right baseline. His Lawrence Woodmere Academy (Woodmere, N.Y.) teammate, Trent Parrish, takes the inbounds pass from the Lions' own end and is pressured immediately by a Horace Mann (New York, N.Y.) defender as he drives down the center of the court.

Four seconds.

Parrish is bumped above the 3-point line, just as Tristan makes his way toward him, tracing the line with his steps. Parrish picks up his dribble and scoops an underhand pass to Tristan, who immediately fires from deep.

Two seconds. One second. It feels like an eternity.

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Something was wrong with Tristan.

At first, they thought he was deaf. Tristan would sit in front of "Barney" transfixed, and while that wasn't unusual for many babies and young children at the time (such was the popularity of the big purple dinosaur), Tristan could stare at the screen for hours without moving. As a test, a doctor recommended his parents, Steve and Stacy, bang a pair of pot lids inches behind his head. Tristan didn't flinch, his eyes glued to the TV.

But Tristan wasn't deaf. A neurologist eventually confirmed he had autism.

Autism is now so well known — if not yet so well understood — it's easy to forget that when Tristan received the diagnosis 14 years ago, it was uncommon enough that the first doctor his parents consulted told them not to worry about it, to call in a couple years if the symptoms persisted.

"IF BASKETBALL DISAPPEARED, HE WOULD BE COMPLETELY LOST."

A March study released by the Centers for Disease Control (based on 2008 statistics) found that 1 in 88 children is now diagnosed with autism, a rate so astonishing in its growth — up nearly 80 percent from 2000 — that it's unclear if the disorder is increasingly prevalent or just more easily diagnosed.

But back then, there was far less attention paid to autism, which encompasses a wide "spectrum" of symptoms and severity. Stacy didn't care what it was called. She just knew Tristan needed help.

The Bravermans fought for a "massive amount" of early-intervention services, and they were lucky enough to have the means to pay for those things the state didn't provide. For years, Tristan received every type of therapy imaginable — speech therapy, physical therapy, special education, occupational therapy, family therapy, applied behavioral therapy — and when the professionals left, Stacy would take over.

"I don't think I got out of my pajamas for three years," she says. "I did everything I could possibly think of doing — everything."

The family is convinced that the early intervention is the reason strangers might not know Tristan has autism today. He still struggles with social interaction and interpersonal communication at times — hallmarks of autism — but he's a nearly straight-A student who for all intents and purposes seems like a "normal" kid.

There was one other form of therapy that was pivotal in Tristan's development, however: basketball. It helped him develop physically and socially, and it gave him a positive outlet for the hyperfocus that can be both a blessing and a curse for people with autism. Now a junior, he wants to play for Columbia or

Stanford while he studies medicine. He wants to play in the NBA.

"Basketball is Tristan's entire life," Steve says. "If all of the sudden basketball disappeared, he would be completely lost."

"I would spontaneously combust," Tristan adds, getting a laugh from his family.

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Stumbling back, Tristan holds his right arm aloft, hand bent at the wrist, watching as the ball glides through the air on a medium arc.

"Every basketball fan grows up imagining themselves in a moment where it's them in the spotlight with however many seconds left in the game — three seconds, two seconds," Tristan says. "And when they imagine it, it feels great. But actually being in that situation? There's nothing that you can compare it to."

The ball glances the rim as it falls through the net. The buzzer sounds; the backboard alights with red. Lawrence Woodmere wins, 64-62.

Tristan's mouth goes agape and he lets out a scream, backpedalling a few more steps before turning to meet the mob of teammates rushing the court. The celebration is short-lived, no more than a minute before the coaching staff corals the team into the post-game handshake line.

Walking back to the sideline, senior forward Spenser Berry puts Tristan in a playful headlock, and high-fives and hugs are exchanged with coach Jeff Weiss and the rest of the team. Tristan shares a long embrace with his dad and then his brother, Hunter, and his face is brighter than that backboard. ☺



ON THE WEB

WANT TO SEE TRISTAN BRAVERMAN'S GAME-WINNING SHOT?

Head to ESPNHS.com for the video and an interview with Tristan.