

Special needs don't stop young athlete

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lumbar shunt. He has no thirst mechanism; he will never be thirsty, so he has to make sure to drink plenty of water on a regular basis to keep hydrated. And his emotions suddenly came on full force.

"He didn't understand all the emotions that were flooding him and there were times he would get them mixed up. For example, when he should be upset over something, he would maybe laugh about it. Or the opposite, if there was something he should be happy about, he wouldn't know how to express that and he'd get angry. He didn't quite know how to handle what he was feeling," Denise says. The association took about a year after the surgery, but sometimes in new situations this issue presents itself still.

Then one day, Nicholas brought a Challenger Little League flyer home from school with him. If his parents would let him play, it would be the first sport in which he ever participated.

"I wasn't real keen on it to begin with because I was afraid of him getting hurt," Denise says. Bob agreed, saying every parent has that type of fear when a child wants to play sports. Plus, Nicholas wasn't terribly fast; they were worried about his ability to keep up with the other kids.

"You have a little boy that's special in a lot of ways and you



Submitted photo

Nicholas Bedlyon smiles for the camera at a baseball game. He plays for a team sponsored by Central Pa. Dock and Door.

worry how it's going to work out for him," Bob says. "We were just so worried —"

"— But it turned out really good!" Nicholas says, cutting his father off in midsentence. "I was nervous." He describes the lump in his throat; he really just wanted to do well.

They took a chance and let him sign up. The first day of practice came, and Nicholas took his place with the rest of the kids.

"I was thinking, 'Oh no, this is not going to be good. But then I got my glove ready,' he says, and from there, it got easier. Bob says that Nicholas was pretty comfortable after the first few games. Through the

course of the season, he learned to run faster, he learned to catch balls, and perhaps most importantly, he learned more about his own emotions and expressing kindness to others.

Because Nicholas never had to deal with his emotions like this before, every out was an emotional blow to him at the outset of the season. By the last baseball game, though, it became part of the game. He also

learned about helping others when he pushed a teammate's wheelchair for him during a game.

After Nicholas's grand slam during their final game, he was given the game ball.

"I got a trophy that has my name on it," he says proudly.

"And then —" he pauses, seemingly for effect, "— we found football!"

When the chance came for Nicholas to play for the Burnham Bulldogs special needs team, he wasn't as nervous. It was mostly the same kids from his baseball team, with a few different faces in the mix. His team played touch football with teams from area businesses, school districts and other organizations.

He picked up catching the ball pretty well, but kicking it still eludes him. By the time the football season ended, though, Nicholas's determination was evident.

"His excitement toward football and just him being a part of something makes him shine and feel good about himself," Bulldogs President Noah Wise says.

Football taught Nicholas to be more patient, whether it was with himself and trying to kick the football, or with others who

hadn't yet gotten to him on a list, and he learned to follow instructions better as well.

"In football, we had to wait until they called our names," he says, before they could run out on the field. It was trying at times, with the excitement building on the sidelines, but he did it.

From Nicholas's point of view, the list of positive effects of sports is lengthy.

"It got me out of the house, eating healthier, meeting new kids, and getting some exercise," he says.

Bob says both programs have done Nicholas a lot of good, and both he and Denise give the program directors and coaches credit for making sure each child involved has equal play time and is made to feel they are a valuable part of the team. The Bedlyons are proud of their son and his progress.

"He's doing better than we ever anticipated," Bob says. "He's just come a long way from where he was."

As for the upcoming season, Nicholas has one goal in mind.

"Sometimes they tag me out. I want to run faster so they can't catch me," he says.

And maybe, just maybe, he'll get the hang of kicking that football.

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