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The Story Of "J-Mac"

Posted by: [Aaron Saykin](#), Reporter
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It's a story some still have trouble believing.

During a recent basketball game, a Rochester-area teenager battling a disability gave hope to thousands of Americans. But what's equally incredible is the story leading up to that special night and what happened afterward.

Just four precious minutes was all it took to introduce the boy they call "J-Mac" to the entire world -- the boy with autism given one chance to play in just one game and did the unthinkable, scoring 20 points.

But until that night in February, the story of Jason McElwain was known mostly to just the people of Greece-Athena High School in suburban Rochester. It's the story of a young man battling autism, who was a fixture on the sideline for his high school basketball team as team manager.

"You just love him for the things he is and the things he means to this school," Athletic Director Randy Hutto said. "He is Athena."

But there once was a time when just being so close and comfortable around others never seemed possible, especially to Jason's mother.

"I was aware at six months that something was wrong

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was him," Debbie McElwain said.

As a child, Jason seemed trapped in his own lonely world, his mother said, never speaking until he was five years old.

"There were many sleepless nights because you just really didn't know -- is he going to be able to work. Is he going to be able to function?" said David McElwain, Jason's father.

As Jason grew older, he slowly opened up, becoming what's called high-functioning. And he happened to be in a school district which deeply integrates special needs students with the rest of the student body. It helped him open up to the basketball team, which welcomed him to each practice, giving him his nickname "J-Mac."

"They're great," Jason said of his teammates. "They're great people to be around."

Diana Russell is Jason's speech pathologist.

Reporter: "Could he have come along that far without being in this atmosphere?"

Russell: "Without being in an atmosphere where people understand and accept? I don't know how he could have."

Behind Jason's spirited sideline demeanor had always been a desire to play. He took part in team scrimmages, but Greece-Athena had one of its best teams in school history and was trying to win a sectional title. Though he would be taking an enormous gamble, Coach Jim Johnson decided to reward Jason for his hard work during the last game of the regular season.

"It was kind of his senior gift," Johnson said. "We wanted to suit him up for his senior game."

It was a long-shot that Jason would be able to play in the game, but just being allowed to put on the uniform was a gesture that deeply touched Athletic Director Randy Hutto. He too has a child with autism.

Reporter: "What did it mean to you?"

Hutto: "Well, it brings tears to your eye."

The night of the game students packed the Greece-Athena gym with photos of Jason's face on signs.

"Throughout the game you would hear cries of "I-

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Throughout the game you would hear cries of J-Mac, J-Mac, J-Mac. Put him in, hurry up, let's go," Hutto recalled.

With four minutes left and the game out of reach, Coach Johnson looked down the bench and pointed to Jason. He was sending him into the game. The crowd erupted in applause.

Jason came out firing, but his first shot wasn't even close.

"Right here I air-balled it by six feet," said Jason, who pointed to the spot where he shot and missed.

Then, he missed his second shot.

"And I'm saying, 'just one basket, just one point,'" his mother remembered.

And though he was on the floor with several seniors who seldom played, each refused to shoot, instead giving Jason the ball every time.

Suddenly, it happened. Jason buried a three-pointer. There was pandemonium in the stands, as students and fans uncontrollably jumped and cheered.

"It was the loudest I had ever heard our gym, ever," Hutto said.

Jason was not done. He continued to bury shot after shot after shot.

"I was just hot as a pistol," he said.

And he kept hitting shots.

"And then it got to the point where I was in shock, I was in tears," Coach Johnson said.

All told, Jason scored 20 points in the four minutes he played, including a three-pointer right before the buzzer sounded. As soon as the game ended, the students raced onto the court, raising Jason into the air.

"There wasn't a dry eye here in Athena," Hutto said.

"I've told many people that if they made this [into] a movie, they'd say 'that's embellished. There's no way that happened.' And it did," Coach Johnson said.

After his tearful mother embraced him on the court,

Jason made his way into the stands. It would be the only varsity game he ever played.

But within days the whole world had learned of the team manager-with-autism-turned-hero.

There were live interviews on CNN, crews from ESPN setting up in the gym, congress recognizing him on the house floor, and a meeting with the most powerful man in the world, President Bush.

"I'll call him J-Mac," the president joked. "You call me George W."

And even as Jason returned to his role as team manager, the national media followed his team from playoff game to playoff game, though the focus was clearly on Jason.

"We never dreamed of anything like this," his father said.

*The team went on to fulfill its dream of winning the sectional final. The wild ride ended a few nights later when fell in a state qualifying contest. It was a difficult loss for Jason, who was consoled by his mother at center court. For his team, there were no regrets.

"They taught me so much about what's valuable in life. What's the essence of team work and what's really important in life," Coach Johnson said.

Reporter: "How much has all of this really meant to you?"

Jason: "It's meant a lot. This has been nothing I [could] have dreamed of. This is like a dream come true."

And, it turns out, this young man given a special opportunity gave something even greater in return -- *hope* to thousands of American families also battling autism, who sent emails and letters to his school.

One woman wrote -- "as I sit here crying in front of my computer I have hope for our son Adam."

Reporter: "They look at you as an inspiration. How do you feel about that?"

Jason: "It's just great to look up... I want to give my advice to the autism people. Just keep working. Just keep dreaming. You'll just get your chance."

Hutto: "He has made us a little bit more sensitive --

even more sensitive to the needs of other people."

Reporter: "In some ways, is that more of his legacy than the baskets he made?"

Hutto: "His legacy is the fact that there's conversations about autism... and the fact that people say, hey, wow, he's a normal kid."

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- Contact Us
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- Gannett Foundation
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- Celebrate WNY
- Tough Jobs
- What 2 Do



Features

- WGRZ Behind the Scenes
- 30th Anniversary of the Blizzard of '77
- As Seen On TV
- Black History Month
- City of Good Neighbors
- Gas Prices
- PhotoGalleries
- Mom 2 Mom
- Product Recalls
- Stories 2 Touch Your Heart
- Taxpayer's Web Forum
- Traffic Tracker 2
- Travel Information
- WNY Pictures of Pride

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- Discount Deals
- Educator of the Week

News

- WNY
- National
- Video
- Citizen Photo Gallery
- Daybreak
- Health
- Images of the Week
- 2nd Chance Lottery Rules
- Stories 2 Touch Your Heart
- Story of A Lifetime
- Top Web Story of the Week
- Top Stories of 2006
- Tough Question of the Week
- Kellman's Corner
- Election Results

Programs

- Program Schedule

Sports Zone

- Sports Page
- Buffalo Bills
- Buffalo Sabres
- Ed's As I See It
- 2 The Hoop
- Tee 2 Green
- Where 2 Fish

Weather

- Weather Page
- Forecast
- Doppler Radar
- Current Conditions
- Closing Central
- Weather Plus
- Personal Forecast

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