

Peewee Jay overcomes brain surgery to get back on the field



By Jake Courtepatte

12-year-old Connor Elbaum and his father Mark collect baseballs from MLB players during batting practice.

"Our record is eight," said Connor. "And we once got three in forty-two seconds."

Baseball was ingrained in Connor from an early age. Mark has spent the past fifty years around the game, and now coaches his son on the Aurora Jays Peewee team.

At a record of 4-9-1, the Jays sit fifth in league standings. However, the team goes beyond what happens on the field. In 2013, the players and parents raised \$22,000 for a team trip to Cooperstown, home of the Baseball Hall of Fame. At the Toronto Blue Jays 2013 home opener, the team was on the field in uniform during the national anthems.

While Connor spends most games at shortstop, he's also excelled as a pitcher, catcher, and centre-fielder.

"He's fast," said Mark. "He makes plays that a kid his age shouldn't make."

Mark recalls a 2013 Ontario Baseball Association game in London where Connor pitched a no-hitter, struck out eight and batted 3 for 3.

"He's such an all-around player. He can do anything and everything."

However, Connor's athletics were dealt a serious blow when he was only just beginning.

Connor's complications began in 2009 when he started showing seizure-like symptoms. After countless tests and a number of years of medication, the Elbaums' neurologist was still not fully convinced that what Connor was experiencing were seizures.

"I said, 'Well if they aren't seizures, why are we giving him all this medication?'" said Connor's mother, Marisa. "Let's dig into this a little more."

More testing determined that they were in fact seizures, but they were all stemming from the same area of the brain.

"We gave Connor options," said Mark. "We said he could keep taking his medications for the rest of his life, or the other option is surgery. He immediately shook his head."

It wasn't until the Elbaums brought up a driver's license that Connor saw the upside of surgery.

"I told him, if he wants to go out with his friends when he's older or take a girl on a date and needs to drive, he won't get his license if he has seizures."

After that, there was no question in Connor's mind to go ahead with the surgery. On April 3, 2014, Connor went under the knife for a right temporal lobe lobectomy.

After the surgery, Marisa called Connor's recovery "absolutely incredible." He was released from the hospital after three days, and was off medication within a week. However, there was still a period of recovery for Connor to face.

"He wasn't allowed to participate in any sports or physical activity," said Marisa. "That was the hardest part for Connor, not being able to be physically active. He went through it fast, although he might not say it was very fast for a twelve-year-old."

Connor was back in the classroom two weeks after surgery, but was forced to miss recess. This allowed him the time to catch up on his schoolwork.

And just five weeks later, Connor was given the medical clearance to get back into baseball. At a Pee wee Aurora Jays game, he can be found wearing an unmistakable red helmet.

"That's how a lot of people have noticed there's something different, the kid with the red helmet," said Marisa. "Then they hear the story."

"And it just happened to be a red helmet too," said Mark. "I couldn't buy a black one or a blue one, the red one just stands out like a red flag to a bull."

Connor hopes to get back behind the plate again this week as catcher, as he enters the late stages of his recovery process and can take the helmet off, if needed.

But to the Elbaums, the helmet signifies an adversity that was faced and beaten.

"We'll put it away and have it as a memento," said Mark. "We'll definitely be keeping it."