

Field of Dreams

Bray Morrell
overcomes
disability
to follow in
his hero's
footsteps

By Jen Kocher
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Propped on his knees behind the pitcher's mound in a crisp red Douglas Mighty Cats jersey, 8-year-old Bray Morrell watches the empty plate and waits.

Purple storm clouds hover over Bartling Park in an ominous clump as the gusty wind kicks up dust along the hard-packed field. Yesterday's coach-pitch game was canceled due to storms and tornado warnings. Bray doesn't want a repeat.

In the bleachers parents bundle under layers of sweatshirts, bemoaning the abrupt return of cold weather. On the diamond, the players don't seem to notice.

Bray spits out a pumpkin seed, a nod to his all-time favorite Rockies player Trevor Story. Story chews sunflower seeds but Bray doesn't like them. Pumpkin is close enough. Underneath Bray's ball cap, his reddish-brown hair is shaved on one side with a sweeping part in imitation of Story's.

On the mound, the butterflies swarm in Bray's stomach as the batter leans in for the first pitch – a line drive down the infield. Bray springs into action, dragging his body through the dirt to nab the ball, at which point he hurls it to the first baseman with the full force of his entire upper body, wobbling backwards to catch his balance.

Before the second pitch is thrown, his knees are already crusted in dirt.

Later, his mother Nicole will have to wash the blood off his knees and put on bandages like she did after last week's season opener. This week they tried to ease the damage with kneepads but they kept slipping down Bray's calves. He'd rather play

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Tristan Palmer operates as Bray Morrell's "legs" as he pushes him down the first base line after Bray knocks the ball into the outfield at his first at-bat on June 13.

on scabby knees than be slowed down. Despite the pain, underneath the shaded bill of his cap, Bray's smile can be seen from the bleachers.

THE CONTRACT

For as long as he can remember, Bray wanted to play ball and watching his hero play only made the desire more intense. Last year, his mother made him sit out at which point he bargained for next year and she tentatively agreed. To seal the deal, he drafted a contract and insisted she sign. Half-heartedly, she scribbled her name.

Though Bray was already active in other sports like wrestling, golf and basketball, Nicole nonetheless worried about crushing Bray's dream. She worried it might be too competitive and that the coaches or teammates wouldn't respond well to having a kid in a wheelchair on their team.

Bray had no fears. He knew he could show his mom that he had what it took to hold his own on the team, and after his first game last week, he now has the stats to prove it. Three hits, a couple earned runs. Admittedly,

his batting still needs a bit of work, he concedes, but his in-fielding skills are pretty up to par.

Nicole has to admit that she's been pleasantly surprised by the welcoming reception by both the coaches and players, particularly the camaraderie between Bray and his teammates.

Coach Dax McCarty loves having Bray on the team.

"There's no quit in him," McCarty said. "No matter what you put him up to, he'll keep up and do it just as good as the other kids. They really like having him around."

Last week after Bray played his first ever ball game, which Nicole missed due to an out-of-state conference, he called to tell his mom that it was the best day of his life.

OVERCOMING ODDS

At 15 months, Bray was diagnosed with spinal neuroblastoma, the third most common form of childhood cancer after leukemia and cancer of the central nervous system, according to medicinenet.com. Neuroblastoma are cancer cells that form in the nerve tissue of the adrenal gland, neck or chest,

or in Bray's case, in his spinal cord. Removing his tumor led to permanent spinal cord damage. As a result he has spent his life confined to a wheelchair. Doctors told Bray's parents that the idea of walking again — even with the aid of crutches — was pretty much out of the question, let alone playing sports.

Today, not only can he easily amble around on crutches, he's also now working with a physical therapist to pare it down to one crutch.

He's always been like this, according to his parents, Brad and Nicole. He works his tail off and doesn't get frustrated or give up.

"We never let him feel sorry for himself or dwell on what he can't do," Nicole said. "Every once in a while he'll complain about hating his wheelchair or not being able to play football (the only sport in which a wheelchair really doesn't work), but it quickly passes and he's back to his cheerful self."

He puts his heart into everything, she adds, and along with all the sports at school, he also takes part in several wheel-chair sport camps every summer in



Phillip Harnden photos

Bray Morrell drills the ball to the catcher after nabbing a ground ball. He prides himself on his stellar in-fielding skills, which he practices in his spare time with his dad, Brad, as well as his uncle and grandpa.

Denver, and is always practicing to get better.

To date, there is no cure to reverse Bray's paralysis though there are some promising signs that it's at least getting better. He now feels a tingling in his legs and has a wider range of hip movement.

And who knows what the future might hold in terms of medical advancements, Nicole adds.

"Maybe one day he'll be able to walk?" she shrugs. "Either way, he's going to do his part to make it happen."

CROSSING HOME PLATE

Sitting in his child-size wheelchair with his eyes shielded behind sporty blue lenses, Bray swings the small aluminum bat above the rubber wheels of his chair and misses the first pitch.

He scrunches his face in concentration but misses again. Three more pitches get past him, but each swing is as hard as the first, and the smile never leaves his face. He's still grinning, even after the fifth missed ball, when coach wheels over the T-ball stand.

With an echoey twang, the ball bounces into infield and over the second baseman's head, while fellow teammate Tristan Palmer pushes Bray's chair safely onto first. The next batter's hit sends Bray to second. Another knocks the ball into left field where outfielders scurry after it with gloves extended. Tristan and Bray round third. A wolf whistle from the crowd erupts as Bray fist pumps the air.

Another notch added to his scorecard as his wheels kick up dust and he crosses home.

The age of super teams

By Ryan Mitchel Collins

As LeBron James watched the clock tick to zero and the hopes of the Cleveland Cavaliers winning another championship was dashed in five games, Steph Curry and the Golden State Warriors hoisted the championship trophy with the aid of Kevin Durant last week.

The addition of Durant last offseason proved to be the difference maker on an already stacked Warriors squad, and despite the flack Durant garnered for taking his talents to the west coast, he accomplished what he set out to do -- win a championship.

Now that the finals are a thing of the past and the offseason is here, the Cavaliers are looking into adding a piece or two that will

put them on top again. There have been rumors of a Paul George acquisition, and possibly a trade for Carmelo Anthony. They will need more juice in order to take down Durant and the reigning champs to bring the trophy back to Cleveland.

Durant and James are two of the latest examples of how super teams form, and championships directly follow. No matter how many championships James ends up winning at the end of his career,

he will never be able to escape the infamous press conference where he broke the heart of Cleveland and took his talents to Long Beach to form a super team with Chris Bosh and Dwyane Wade.

Cleveland fans renounced the move as nothing short of treasonous, and sunk back into their predictable routine of being in the cellar of the NBA standings, watching as James won two rings. James had accomplished what he set out to do -- win championships.

When James announced he was returning to the Cavaliers after winning two championships



Ryan Mitchel Collins
The Endzone

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