

A STICK AND A BALL MEET AUTISM

By Nadia Khalil

It takes a village. A village of people who love baseball. A village of people who love dreams. A village of people who believe in the capabilities of each and every person who has the drive to forget the "NO" and are re-inspired by the word "YES." When the word "no" does not exist, neither do excuses, fear, doubt nor worry. What replaces excuses, fear, doubt and worry is drive, dreams and determination.

My son Tarik El-Abour's baseball career started with a lot of no's and the one yes here and there kept him growing. He never took it personally. He has Autism. He seems like he is not listening and he can hear your every word. He has an instinct for baseball, the smell of the grass on the field, running, hitting, standing at the plate, waiting on a pitch that will surprise his desire into action. He looks at a pitch as an opportunity to hit a ball. In a park. With other guys who love the game as much as he does.

When he was in tryouts in his first week of college, and he was not out, he called to tell me, "Mom, I get to play baseball one more day!" His outlook taught me to never think for a minute that I should not try. Adding action to my desires. Like him. He brings out in me, in us, a new way to think of something that we get caught up in when it comes to numbers and when it comes to how someone looks or who someone knows.

None of that exists for the Autistic mind. What does exist is work ethic and passion. Thoughts that keep improving his game, learning about anyone who has ever played, where they came from, their stories, their drive. He yearns to know their road to continuing to play baseball just one more day in the life that is he planning around a bat and a ball. At first he does not look like much. No big hits out of the park, no standing out because of height



Tarik and Sister Sarane El-Abour.

and weight. He blends in pretty quietly until he starts to nickname all the other players and he speaks the truth that at first feels interesting to hear and then you start to realize he speaks on the unspoken and everything around him settles because of that truth, that he cannot help to speak on whether it is about him or what he observes. He has a very childlike way, yet when he is serious, that is when you can't hear a thing. When Tarik is quiet, I know he is asleep; it is the only time he is not discussing sports, coaches, movements, fundamentals, managers' decisions, his solutions and positioning players on teams so that the teams are balanced and can prosper. I realize he is a sportsman if there is such a thing. He trains, he plays, he understands strategies and he looks at every nuance that exists on and off the field, in every conversation about baseball that you end up talking to him about.

Last year Tarik graduated from college and for the first time he found himself without a team. He played on an old Sunday League he played on in the past, yet he wanted more. His drive trains him. It had taken me his entire life to realize that it is his drive training him. He would call people and ask, can you throw with me, can you hit balls for me, can you time me, can you pitch to me? With all that, he would wake up at 5:30 a.m. and go to the park and do plyometrics, come home for a shake, go to the gym and do resistance training, then come home again and walk the long sides of the block and sprint on the shorter sides. Once all that was done, he would come to ask, "What else do you think I should do?" He would go to the trainers in the gym to ask them to look at him for a minute and tell him if he is doing things right.

I watched this for now, thirteen years, from the first day he discovered the diamond on the field. When he was thirteen I got on the Internet to find an organization whose sole purpose was baseball. I did not even know what I was looking for, I just needed an outlet for the passion that was dominating our household and looking for places to play yet more baseball.

I found Worldwide Baseball Prospects and a live person answered me back and followed up with a phone call. That phone call still rings in my home today, to the tune of everyday asking me about Tarik and his progress. This man, JD Nicholls, we call "The Baseball Angel." He has guided, educated, listened and mentored Tarik. He is a voice, a mentor, a friend and a lover of baseball that carried both of their souls to the building of a path, a road, a street, a destination and a future of being able to continue to play baseball.

Tarik had a trainer at the gym, David Bernstein. David was previously a track athlete and ran in his college days on the track team at Cal Berkeley. He volunteers his time to go to the park with Tarik to time his 60 yard runs so that he can track his progress. And then there is the Village at Gold's Gym in Pasadena, California, where the people who caught onto his passion and give him love and their priceless advice and guidance.

There is one thing I have learned about the Autistic mind and that is that the Autistic mind does not respond to negativity. AT ALL. They do not accept it and they do not entertain it; they reject it. When someone is negative, they walk away because they believe that person has their own issues to work out so that they cannot come to them whole. They seek out positive people, positive environments, and positive role models, because they see value in every soul and know that their true resources are through the sharing of each other, of the knowledges we possess and using that knowledge, to them, is their door to learning and growing.

Baseball is baseball. Baseball is the breath that Tarik breathes and it exists in his every thought. He had to bring his body up to the task and in this day, I write you with an opportunity that comes to his soul in this coming week. By the time this article is published we will know the outcome. He is going to a Professional Baseball Camp in the Empire Pro League in Georgetown, Delaware, with the Director of Operations Eddie Gonzales, for a possible acceptance to be able to play baseball just one more day.

Tarik sees everyone's dreams as dreams to conquer. He knows that our dreams need our dedication and our dedication needs us to push, pull, challenge and push ourselves again. Thank God for the diamond, the bat, the ball, the smell of the grass and those who want to play.

Last year *Baseball the Magazine* did an article entitled, "Autism and Baseball" about Tarik El-Abour. That first article can be found at www.baseballthemag.com. For further information on Tarik's progress please contact Worldwide Baseball Prospects.com or like them on Facebook under Worldwide Baseball Prospects Motivation for updates.

(Editor's Note: Tarik played his first full pro season with the Sullivan Explorers of the Empire Pro League and hit .323. He is according to Autism Speaks, the first "Professional Baseball Player with Autism" that they know of.)



Above: David Goldstein and Tarik; below: Tarik with friends from Gold Gym.

