

Going For the Gold

By Tom Lambke

I was twenty-six years old when I became a father. My wife, Karen, and I had been married over four years and we were excited to be starting our family. Like most fathers, I was hoping for a boy to share my love of sports, but also hoping for him to have ten fingers and ten toes. As I watched the doctor deliver our son, I noticed our baby's eyes looked different. They seemed to have a slight almond shape. I immediately realized our son may have Down syndrome. Among many other questions racing through my brain, I wondered, "Who will I play baseball with?" I could not have possibly predicted that our son, Bryan, would grow up to be a young man who enjoys playing EVERY sport, except baseball!

Yes, Bryan was born with Down syndrome, and Karen and I really had no clue what to do. There was no Internet. The library only had a couple of books, both written by doctors in a way that was not useful to us. So we decided to do what we thought was best for Bryan: raise him as if he was a "normal" baby. By the end of our first year together, I still had many unanswered questions about Down syndrome. To make matters worse, Bryan needed heart surgery, and I was worried about the possible outcome. But on the day of his procedure, just before the doctors wheeled him away, he looked up at me and said his first word: *dada*. I knew then we had a fighter and that everything would be fine.

As Bryan got older, his interest in sports became obvious to us. He enjoyed running and throwing the ball around. So when he turned eight, we got him started in Special Olympics. He ran the 50 meter dash, 200 meter relay run and did the softball throw. When we took Bry to his first practice, I was the one who was nervous. We had no idea how well he would take to

competitive sports and having coaches tell him what to do. But once again, he proved to be a resilient young man and adjusted well to his new friends and mentors. In the nineteen years he has been participating, he has now also competed in basketball, bowling, swimming, dragon boat racing, kayaking and Challenger baseball. He has excelled at each except baseball, and has won numerous medals and ribbons.

By far his most treasured medal is the gold medal won at the 2003 Special Olympics Summer World Games in Ireland. In the summer of Bryan's twenty-first year, he and I were chosen to represent our country on the world stage as a Unified bowling team. Getting picked to compete as one of 7,000 athletes from 162 countries at such a huge event was an incredible honor, and we wanted to do well. For seven months he and I each bowled a total of fifteen games *each week*, courtesy of our local bowling center. By the time we left for Ireland, we were as ready as we could be!

After five days of practice in Belfast, we were bussed to Dublin and treated to a spectacularly colorful and loud Opening Ceremony, held in Croke Park. The 80,000 spectators, including Karen and our daughter, Shauna, were witness to a kaleidoscope of color and sound as we were entertained by hundreds of performers, and we were all left open-mouthed in awe. Stars such as Colin Farrell, Pierce Brosnan, Jon Bon Jovi, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Muhammad Ali led the parade of countries into the stadium where over one hundred Riverdancers, the band U2, Nelson Mandela and many others, helped turn the night magical.

After earning only a fourth place ribbon in our first competition, we were given another chance two days later, when we successfully earned gold medals by trusting the skills we had learned at practice. The rest of the trip was a blur of watching other competitions, sight-seeing and shopping. For me, at least, this was a life-changing, incredible experience that led to my

writing a book: *SPIRIT, COURAGE and RESOLVE: A Special Olympics Athlete's Road to Gold*. The book takes the reader from Bryan's birth to our fifteen days in Ireland.

Since that amazing experience in Ireland, Bryan and I have worked together to pursue a different kind of gold: Down syndrome awareness. He and I decided to write a second book together, about Down syndrome. *I JUST AM ... a Story of Down Syndrome Awareness and Tolerance*, contains pictures and easy to read text that explains how Bryan feels about his disability. We also included a section on facts about Down syndrome and language guidelines. Our goal was to use this book to do school talks and educate the public about disabilities and Down syndrome awareness. Bryan may not talk as much as me, but he does a great job answering any questions the students may have. We are extremely proud that both books have been sold in all fifty states and twelve countries. We are honored that *I JUST AM* can be found on the desk of Eunice Kennedy Shriver. We are blessed that it has been translated into Romanian and French. But it is even more satisfying when we are told how beneficial our books and talks are to people. We really feel like we are touching lives and making a difference.

Of all the things to be proud of as Bryan's father, what I treasure most is how he has changed me as a person. I grew up an ignorant, punk kid who called people retards if they looked "different." Now I am a paraprofessional in Special Education in Bryan's old classroom. Thanks to him and our three-legged German Shepherd, Ozzie, I am now an advocate for people and animals with disabilities, and in the process I have discovered a new side of myself. Bryan has helped me to face life's challenges positively. He has helped me to see those who are different, differently.

It has now been twenty-seven years since Bryan was born. I wonder what my response would have been that day if someone told me he would grow up to be an international gold

medal winner. I am so grateful we have been able to work as a team to pursue and achieve his goals. But while Bryan's accomplishments in sports are remarkable in many ways, I believe the joy and inspiration he brings me, our family, and others, is his greatest victory.

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