

The coach I'll always have



SAM BARBEE
FROM THE SIDELINES
Sports reporter

The memory is clear. I'm probably 6 or 7 years old and I'm in a big field across the street from my childhood home, and my dad is teaching me how to throw.

"Big ball circles," he said, demonstrating how to properly take your hand and bring it down to your thigh and then back around. I kept shortening my motion, going straight from my glove to my ear. But he would slow down his motion so I could see it. "Over the top," he would say. "Don't drop down. Watch the spin."

It took me awhile to learn the nuances of the "big ball circles," but I heard that particular phrase enough times to eventually figure it out. The funny thing is I never developed an over-the-top motion. I was always three-quarters, and eventually that was how I threw. But the phrase "big ball circles" stayed. It was his go-to phrase, that and "Don't run the bases like geese."

Until I was 17, I played for my dad. He was my recreation league coach from T-ball until I was 16, and was at least an assistant on every all-star team I made. I didn't know anything different.

Just about everything I know about baseball I learned from my dad. There were some things — like the finer points of pitching or advanced first-and-third plays — that I learned in high school, but he taught me the basics. He taught me how to love the game, how to pay attention to what happens and how to appreciate good baseball. He taught me how to throw, how to catch, how to run the bases, how to wear my uniform. My theories on the game are his theories. My interpretations and takeaways are his. The only real differences between he and I are I'm tall and left-handed. The story of how my left-handedness was discovered has two versions: the good version, and the true version. The good version has my mom scurrying out to buy a baseball glove and coming home with a left-handed one, sealing my fate. The true one, as told by my dad, is I would mirror him throwing the ball to me. He would use his right hand, but it was on my left, so I repeated what I saw. Even then, I was taking what he did and making it my own.

We agree on so much. We agreed on Seattle's play call at the end of February's Super Bowl. We agree on the Mariners (though he is more optimistic than I am). I've taken queues from him on how to think, how to behave, how to work hard.

I didn't always accept or notice the queues, however. I was a bit difficult growing up, especially when I played sports. I had high expectations for myself and embarrassed easily. I threw things when I struck out and pouted when I didn't play the position I wanted to. And my dad rightly hammered me. He held me to a higher standard because I was his son, he was directly responsible for me.

I look back on those years I played for my dad with an appreciation I can't explain. I can't do it justice. He worked at a paper mill and would get to work at about 6 a.m., work until 4 and then coach my team at 5. He'd deal with us and our nonsense, and then do it again the next day. He was the president of our Cal Ripken Youth Baseball league for a couple years and was president of my Babe Ruth League, too.

And if you ask him why, he'll say because someone had to do it.

There are a ton of things I learned from him. But that's maybe the most important: helping to help. Being president of a youth baseball league is a tough gig. You have to deal with parents and their gripes. You have to deal with issues — some serious, some not — that arise on the field, off it or with another league. I remember the phone ringing every 20 minutes with the funniest questions you could ask for. Any my dad dealt with it with patience and courtesy.

The people he's worked with and my peers he coached almost always recognize his effort. My friends who played for him still call him "Coach" when they see him. That's my dad. Always coaching. Always ready to help, to answer the phone and talk.

Even now he's my coach. He's my dad, obviously, and that will never change. But he's never stopped being my coach. He's never stopped offering a better way to do something, or explaining why what I did wasn't right and how it can be improved. He'll send me notes about the stories I've written and have questions about games I saw.

Ever since I was 5, he was my coach. And he'll be my coach until he's not.

Happy Father's Day, Dad. Thanks for everything you've taught me. Nothing I can do will ever repay your patience, support, necessary sternness and unconditional love. Thank you.

—Sam Barbée is a sports reporter for the *Hermiston Herald* and *East Oregonian* based in Hermiston. He can be reached by email at sbarbee@hermistonherald.com or by phone at 541-564-4542. Follow him on Twitter at @SamBarbee1 and follow *Herald sports* at @HHeraldSports.

More than a game

Brandi Howard still spreads her husband's message 6 years after losing him to cancer

BY SAM BARBEE
HERMISTON HERALD

Brandi Howard met her husband at the garage, like usual, on an October day in 2008. Her husband, Jeremy, was returning home after an appointment to have a mole examined. Brandi had been suggesting Jeremy see a doctor for some time, but Jeremy was resistant. Then, one day, Jeremy decided to have it examined. The mole was bugging him.

So after Jeremy's mole was excised and tested, Jeremy walked into the garage and past his wife to close the door so his daughters wouldn't hear.

"I have melanoma," he said. "I remember just being like, 'OK.'" Brandi said. "You know, you're processing it. Being so naive, I remember thanking the Lord it was just skin cancer. Because I didn't understand, I didn't know. Of all the cancers, I'm like, 'We got this. You're the strongest man I know. We'll be fine. We can do this. It'll be OK.'"

They saw the best doctors. They went to Seattle and were told they caught it early. Doctors said they love seeing cases like Jeremy's because they felt it was salvageable. And for the first six months, it was.

"And, yeah, it wasn't fine," Brandi said. "He lost his battle in 13 months."

Jeremy is survived by his wife and four daughters, the youngest of which was 3 when he died. For the first few months, Brandi wasn't coping well. She describes herself as "a hot mess."

"I couldn't even talk," she said. "It was life-changing. I'm not done celebrating him."

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The first time Brandi ever saw Jeremy, it was on the softball field.

"He was pretty attractive," she said with a remembering smile. "He loved the game." Jeremy had played baseball since he was a kid.

"He even made it to play semi-pro in California," Brandi said. Baseball gave way to softball and time spent around the ballparks led to lifelong friendships.

When his two oldest daughters became old enough to play themselves, Jeremy hung up the cleats and grabbed a chair. He wasn't a player anymore. He was a dad. Sometimes old teammates would call to try and pry him from his new duties. He would tell Brandi he has a problem, that he can't play. He'd say, "I can't play one game. If I swing that bat, you're gonna lose me for the rest of the summer."

So when it came time for the Howards' friends to support them during a time of need, they jumped at the chance.

"When Jeremy was sick, this whole community was amazing," she said. "The cancer took over very quickly and it was a tail-spin. There was a wonderful benefit to help us because we were traveling so much. And I wanted to figure out a way to keep celebrating him, but to give back to this community because it really is amazing. This is bar none one of the most giving communities ever."

So Brandi hatched a scholarship and a softball tournament to fund it. She said more than \$13,000 have rolled in for this season, more than \$10,000 than they had in the first year, in 2010. In all, more than \$34,000



SAM BARBEE PHOTO

Payton Howard, daughter of the late Jeremy Howard, reads a poem she wrote Friday about her dad at opening ceremonies of the 6th Annual Jeremy Howard — For the Love of the Game co-ed softball tournament in Hermiston. Her big sister Courtney holds her speech while Payton reads to the crowd.

have been raised in six years.

The scholarships are awarded to two local graduating seniors who played at least two years of athletics and maintained a 3.0 GPA. This year, Madison Welch and Michael Potts were each awarded \$3,500.

"I have a small business and most of these (sponsors) are not corporations, they're small business who are handing over checks," Brandi said. "And so, that's blood sweat and tears that they're giving, that they earned and worked hard for and believe in. Whether they knew Jeremy as a child, because he's from here, or as an adult or a hothead on the field — it's not (about) the dollar amount at all, but it does help us do what we do, and it does help bring out-of-town teams where we can start spreading the message more and more."

"(Hermiston) completely embraced it — whether you're a ball fan or not. This little town gave over \$13,000 in sponsorships. Just this year. Talk about chills, huh? Like, how do you show your gratitude? I hug everybody I can and thank them. But really this little town — \$13,000. That's not a teensy amount. It's crazy."

Friday at opening ceremonies, surrounded by well-wishers and friends of Jeremy and with Jeremy's number — 9 — his nickname — Duck — painted in centerfield, eldest daughter Courtney couldn't help but be blown away yet again but the turnout at her "favorite weekend of the year."

"It makes my heart so full to come to this weekend and to see the hats everywhere, the shirts, painting the outfield — it is the most... I can't even describe how full my heart is how much love I feel right now."

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The tournament has experienced exponential growth since its inception in 2010. Brandi remembers being blown away that even eight teams were registered that first year and that \$3,000 was donated. Six years later, teams as far away as Boise have come. And the focus of the tournament isn't mourning Jeremy's passing, it's ensuring that Jeremy's death wasn't in vain.

At the start of play and every two games following, players line up on the baselines for a spray down of sunscreen.

"It's rule No. 1," Brandi said. There has been some re-



SAM BARBEE PHOTO

Brandi Howard (right) speaks with her daughter Courtney after opening ceremonies of the 6th Annual Jeremy Howard — for the Love of the Game co-ed softball tournament in Hermiston.

sistance in the past, with players unsure why they're being forced to wear sun block. "It's a simple, really simple thing to do," she said. "Sunscreen is mandatory. This area gets it, because we've gotten the word out so well. But we get teams from Boise, from Vancouver that come all the way down and they don't know Jeremy and not all areas preach it. We've had some that are like, 'We don't have to do that.' And really, it's the No. 1 rule. You're out."

After a modest eight-team turnout in 2010, the field has exploded to 22 in recent years. Brandi had to turn away teams this summer. Word has gotten out about the tournament and Brandi's mission. People from out of town see her, recognize her from Jeremy's celebration weekend and ask her if she has sunscreen. Of course she does and never refuses it to anyone.

"That is the biggest compliment I can get," Courtney said. "It's, 'Oh, Courtney, do you have sunscreen?' I have it in my car, in my purse, I carry it in my backpack at school. I play softball at George Fox and they're always like, 'Hey, Courtney, I know you have sunscreen.' I had, like, six bottles in my bat bag at one point. Just the other day we went and picked up my little sister from summer camp, and she was spraying herself down. She's 8 years old and knew that she couldn't go outside and play without her sunscreen on. It was devastating, but being able to move out of that and make a change and be able to adapt and find something good out of something

that changed my whole world. But I think that my family is developing and building this community into something where sunscreen isn't something else to do. It's a habit."

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"This isn't a memorial," Brandi said of Jeremy's tournament.

"It's a celebration. This is extremely difficult for me. I fall in love with him all over again, because I can't do any part of the tournament without thinking of what he would want, and I know him well. But I tend to put that off to the side because my four daughters, there isn't anything they don't love about the tournament. People will come up who they don't really know and shake their hand or share stories."

Payton, her youngest daughter, now 8, is scheduled to read a speech she prepared. Because she was so young at the time of Jeremy's death, Brandi said, she has no unique memories of her father. She looks at pictures and invents stories about what they were doing. Her sisters and mother and friends tell her what her father was like, hoping to paint of the best picture of him they can.

Payton's message is celebratory, not a lamentation.

"My dad would want us to be happy and laugh together," she wrote. "So let's celebrate my dad and wear as much sunscreen as we can this summer. Let's stuff ourselves with food and watch some ball."

GO SEE IT

Softball
For the Love Tournament, 8:30 a.m., Theater Sports Park, Northwest Sixth Street off West Harper Road.

Softball
For the Love Tournament, 8:30 a.m., Theater Sports Park

Baseball
Starfield @ Irrigon/Riverside, 5 p.m.

Coed softball
Untouchables at TRCI/Java Junkies, 6 p.m. North softball field, Theater Sports Park
Riverside Sports Bar at Purosho, 6 p.m., South softball field, Theater Sports Park

TRCI/Java Junkies at Untouchables, 7:30 p.m. North softball field
Purosho at Untouchables, 7:30 p.m. South softball field

Baseball
Hermiston vs. Starfield (DH), 4 p.m.

Men's softball
Elite at Purosho, 6 p.m., North softball field, Theater Sports Park

Purosho at Elite, 7:30 p.m., North softball field

Men's softball
Shearer's at DQ, 6 p.m., North softball field, Theater Sports Park
Preferred Realty at C&C Construction, 6 p.m., South softball field, Theater Sports Park
DQ at Shearer's, 7:30 p.m., North softball field
C&C Construction at Preferred Realty, 7:30 p.m., South softball field