

Neah-Kah-Nie player is passionately persistent

Spellman hasn't let disability keep him from basketball

By TOM HALLMAN JR.
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The Neah-Kah-Nie High School boys varsity basketball team assembled in the locker room before the game to go over strategy. The Pirates were restless and fooling around, expected after a two-hour bus ride from Rockaway Beach to Gaston to face the Greyhounds.

"Listen up," shouted coach Erick White. Nothing.

"Hey, listen up." Silence.

"Let's huddle up," ordered White. "All seniors are starting tonight. We want to work on early buckets, get that lead right and then bring in the quick group."

White surveyed the room, turning to point at No. 13, Matt Spellman, an 18-year-old senior with a classic basketball body — 6 foot 2 — and an instinct for the game as well as a near photographic memory, able to recall the strengths and weaknesses of the pros from current NBA teams back to the old timers of the 1970s.

"Spellman," said White, "I want you popping out on the corner. You get a shot, you take it."

Spellman nodded.

"Let's go," said White. "Let's do it."

The team jogged to the gym.

Spellman lagged, dragging his left foot and moving with an uneven gait. His left knee turned inward toward his right knee. His left arm remained tucked close to his waist. He can't fully extend it. His grip is weak, and he can't turn his left palm to face the ceiling. After birth, he was diagnosed with periventricular leukomalacia, brain damage that led to a form of cerebral palsy affecting his left side.

The visiting Pirates took the floor first, an announcer introducing them to the crowd.

"No. 13, Matthew Spellman."

Spectators watched Spellman move awkwardly onto the basketball court dragging that left foot. He's worn out the toes of every left shoe he's ever owned.

The Pirates got an early possession and attacked the basket, the guard dribbling up court to set the offense. After a series of passes, the ball ended up in the hands of Spellman, who'd drifted out to the corner.

He shot.

He missed.

No. 13 will never dunk.

No. 13 will never make a pass between his legs.

No. 13 will never make the game-winning shot.

No matter.

No. 13 was never expected to walk.

An attraction to the game

Spellman was born nearly three months premature after his mother's water broke while she and her husband were vacationing in Bend. He weighed 3 pounds, 9 ounces.

Remember that number — 3.9.

It's mysterious and meaningful, perhaps spiritual in the broadest meaning of the word, a number that summarizes a journey that began in a hospital where Spellman spent five weeks in the newborn intensive care unit fighting for life before returning home to Bay City.

His parents drove to a Portland hospital when they saw that their son, while meeting intellectual benchmarks, had difficulty trying to crawl. A scan revealed PVL. Sections of the boy's brain's white matter — what transmits information between nerve cells, the spinal cord and within the brain — had been damaged. The medical team was blunt, telling the couple it was unlikely their son would walk and would need an assistive device.

"This wasn't going to be the fairytale life we'd dreamed of," said his mother, Cheryl Spellman. "We grieved and we grieved. But we decided we'd never become consumed with why or what if. This was now our life, our son's life, and we were going to do everything possible for him."

And so a new chapter began in Tillamook County, a place that has much to do with what happened to Spellman. The couple lived in Bay City, a town of about 2,500 people, in the heart of Tillamook County.

The Spellmans arrived there in 1995 from La Grande after Brandon Spellman lost his job as a soft-drink distributor when the local mill closed, which sent an economic ripple through Eastern Oregon. The couple had always enjoyed vacationing on the Oregon Coast, and they thought this might be their chance to move to the beach. Spellman called companies up and down the coast, finally landing a job as a soft-drink distributor based in Tillamook, about 7 miles from Bay City where they had a home.

The Spellmans were quietly taken in, supported in the unspoken and subtle rhythms of a way of life so often found in towns seen by outsiders as little more than dots on a map. After their son's diagnosis, the news traveled from Bay City to towns throughout the county. People offered to bring meals or do anything the parents needed.

The family began making frequent trips to Portland's Shriners Hospital, where their son underwent multiple surgeries. He received extensive physical and occupational therapy and was outfitted with devices, all in the hopes of keeping him out of a wheelchair. Medical records, in such precise language, reveal what's happening within the body, but they can't explore the soul.

"Matt was so stubborn," said his father,



Sean Meagher/The Oregonian
Matt Spellman of Neah-Kah-Nie High School shoots a three-pointer during the Pirates' basketball game against Gaston last month.



Sean Meagher/The Oregonian
Spellman gets a few words of wisdom from his father during the Pirates' basketball game against Gaston.

Brandon Spellman. "He was determined to walk. He'd pulled himself up to things and hang on to stand, even just for a moment or two."

Doctors did more surgeries, changed the braces and continued therapy, telling his parents that he should be given a walker, but the child would have none of it back in Bay City.

"He wouldn't even hold my hand," Cheryl Spellman recalled. "He wanted to walk. But he was so unstable. That boy would fall backwards and hit the floor. He's experienced more falls in his life than anyone I've ever known. He never cried or complained. He just got up and tried again."

Spellman doesn't recall those early years. "What I really remember is when I started school," he said. "I'd see these other kids walking and running. I'm not going to lie. There were times it was terrible. I couldn't even step over something with my left leg. I'd get mad and wonder why it was happening to me."

A younger sister was born. His parents divorced when he was 7. They agreed to joint custody — the kids coming to spend a week at a time at the other home. Brandon Spellman moved to Tillamook, less than 6 miles away from his ex-wife's place. Spellman's parents eventually found love with others, bringing stepchildren into an extended family.

When Spellman was at his father's house, he watched basketball games on television. His father showed him highlights of Michael Jordan, considered the best player in NBA history. He told his son that Jordan was great not just because of his obvious athletic ability, but also because of his drive to win.

"I studied Jordan like a religion," Spellman said. "It made me want to be like him." At his mother's house, he became obsessed with trying to use a basketball, difficult at first because he had to rely on only one arm.

"I had a great room we never used," said Cheryl Spellman. "I cleared everything out and put a plastic hoop out there. I could never find that kid anywhere but in that great room. He couldn't even make a basket, let alone hit it. He had no power in his arms."

His father began taking his son to basketball games at the local YMCA.

"He'd watch us play, a bunch of older guys," said Brandon Spellman. "He loved the game. I got an adjustable hoop I could lower, and I put it on a court at our house. I'd play him one-on-one. I mean hundreds and hundreds of games. He was always trying to do his best. He never gave up. There's no quit in the boy. I have to tell you, I'm envious of that."

Spellman's speech and intellect were first rate. He made friends in school and earned good grades. The Neah-Kah-Nie School District has one middle school and one high school, which has 250 students.

That means students are as familiar with

one another as if they were brothers and sisters. But the middle school years — big city or small town — can be tough, a reality Spellman found out in the sixth grade. He told no one until one night when he was at his mother's house sitting and talking with his stepfather, Mike Bentley.

"He said no one wanted to play basketball with him at recess," Bentley said. "The kids said he couldn't walk or run like them. He started crying right there in front of me. He said people said no one wanted to be stuck with Spellman."

At school one day, Spellman saw a sign about an upcoming contest a few months away involving basketball. Students were invited to compete in a free throw competition to determine the best shooter in the school. To enter, a student had to get 10 paying sponsors with the all the money raised going to support OHSU Doernbecher Children's Hospital. It was easy for Spellman, an outgoing kid, to go hit up adults for a donation.

Then reality hit.

The boy no one wanted on the team would have to go out on the court in front of all the students and attempt to make a shot from 15 feet into a basket 10 feet off the ground.

"It wasn't going to be easy," he said. "My balance is super affected because of my left side. I had to get some strength and learn how to use my left arm as a guide."

So began an intense period of training.

He practiced shooting free throws at the hoop at his father's house, and he was up at 5 a.m. doing daily strength and balance exercises.

"He walked through the house constantly pretending he was shooting the ball," said Cheryl Spellman. "It drove us crazy, and we kept asking him to stop. He refused."

On the day of the event, the rules were simple: The winner would be determined by who made the most free throws in 20 attempts. Spellman was realistic and hoped only not to make a fool of himself.

"There were some real basketball players in the contest," he said. "Some eighth graders, too."

Then it was his turn. He concentrated, thinking about his form and balance, all the shots and exercises he spent hours perfecting.

"I made 14 out of 20," he said. "I won." It was, in that young life, a turning point. "People underestimated me," he said. "I may not always be first. But I'll never be last."

'He does everything we do in practice'

When he started at Neah-Kah-Nie High School, he learned the school is so small that administrators instituted a "no-cut" rule for kids who wanted to join a team or participate in a sport. The freshman got a spot on the junior varsity team but was in over his head that year and his sophomore season.

"The coach at the time was all about working the ball inside for layups," he said.

"Those are hard for me. I'd get into a game for a maybe a minute, but I never scored."

For one game he and the team traveled by bus 80 miles to play. He never left the bench. He came home and told his mother he was considering quitting the team.

"I wasn't getting anything out of it," he said. "I had my moment of anger and then started to look at the big picture. I was getting an experience I'd never get again. I was getting to be with my teammates. I told myself that even if I never got to play again, I should enjoy the memory."

Spellman began working out daily, working to raise both arms to catch a pass thrown from far away, something he'd need to be able to do if he was going to be a long-distance shooter.

The pandemic disrupted everything. The JV basketball coach left, and the coach of the girls' varsity squad, Erick White, was asked to fill the vacancy while continuing to work with the girls.

All the kids knew White, who was born and raised in Nehalem and graduated from Neah-Kah-Nie High School in 1997. He has two daughters and a son, and over the years volunteered to coach multiple youth basketball teams. When his best friend, the high school's athletic director, asked him to coach the girls' varsity team, White agreed and then suddenly also had the boys JV team dropped into his lap.

"I knew Spellman," said White. "He'd been going to school with my kids, and they ran in similar groups. I think one thing that's pretty valuable about being a coach in a small town is you get to be more present. You're not just a coach a couple hours each evening. You bump into these kids and their families year-round in the community."

During that COVID-19-shortened JV season of Spellman's junior year, White saw progress in the kid whose professional basketball idol was no longer Jordan but Stephen Curry, the Golden State Warriors point guard and prolific outside shooter.

"I knew what I couldn't do in basketball," said Spellman. "I was never going to be able to take the ball to the rim. I knew I was never going to be able to out jump another player. I knew I could never be physical or fast. All that was left for me was to learn how to shoot."

During tryouts for this season's varsity team, White saw Spellman had developed into a player with a shot that was impossible to ignore. Spellman, who expected to remain on the JV squad, was stunned when White named him to varsity and assigned him No. 13.

"This was no charity pick" said White. "I don't believe in that. He does everything we do in practice. Sometimes his leg gets sore, and he's got to sit something out. But he never, and I mean never, expects special treatment. We all treat him like he can, not like he can't."

White is reflective.

"Honestly it's not just about the product on the floor," he said. "Spellman's a great teammate. He notices the little things. We were doing film study the other day and he was pointing out things other players miss. He told me, with a smile, that when he's sitting on the bench so much, he learns to notice a lot of things."

Teammate Matt Erickson said Spellman's work ethic is "crazy."

"If he didn't have cerebral palsy," Erickson said, "he'd be the best player on our team."

Erickson said a player on another team was "talking mad trash" and making fun of Spellman in the weeks before the two teams met, saying that Spellman would never contribute to the team. When Spellman entered the game that night, the trash talker guarded him.

"He was rough, adding an extra shove and doing cheap stuff the ref wouldn't be able to see," said Spellman. "Later, a teammate kicks the ball out to me. That kid guarding me came running out and I shot it over him. It was a rainbow. It went in and the crowd freaked out and I knew that trash talker was demoralized. The player who wouldn't contribute made a three-pointer over him."

Spellman relishes the memory.

"I didn't say a word," he said. "My shot spoke for me."

Spellman has begun considering his future beyond high school. A couple years ago he started a business, sourcing and selling high-end collectible basketball shoes to buyers around the country. He's turned a profit and now plans to attend college in Oregon and major in marketing and minor in recreational sports management.

This year's basketball season was up and down. Practices were called off and games had to be rescheduled because of COVID-19. Even so, the Pirates were in contention for a final league playoff spot if they could beat Columbia Christian Knights at an away game in Portland.

From his spot on the bench, Spellman knew the Pirates were going to lose. He dealt with what he called waves of emotion — sadness, melancholy and an awareness that nothing is permanent. Losing didn't matter. What hurt was knowing that his life on a high school team would soon be over. He'd miss the fooling around, the rides on the bus and wearing that uniform.

Coach White interrupted his thoughts.

"Do you want the last seconds?"

The clock showed 3.9 seconds left in the game.

3.9.

"You want in?"

A nod.

And with that, No. 13 checked into the game one last time.