

OC VARSITY

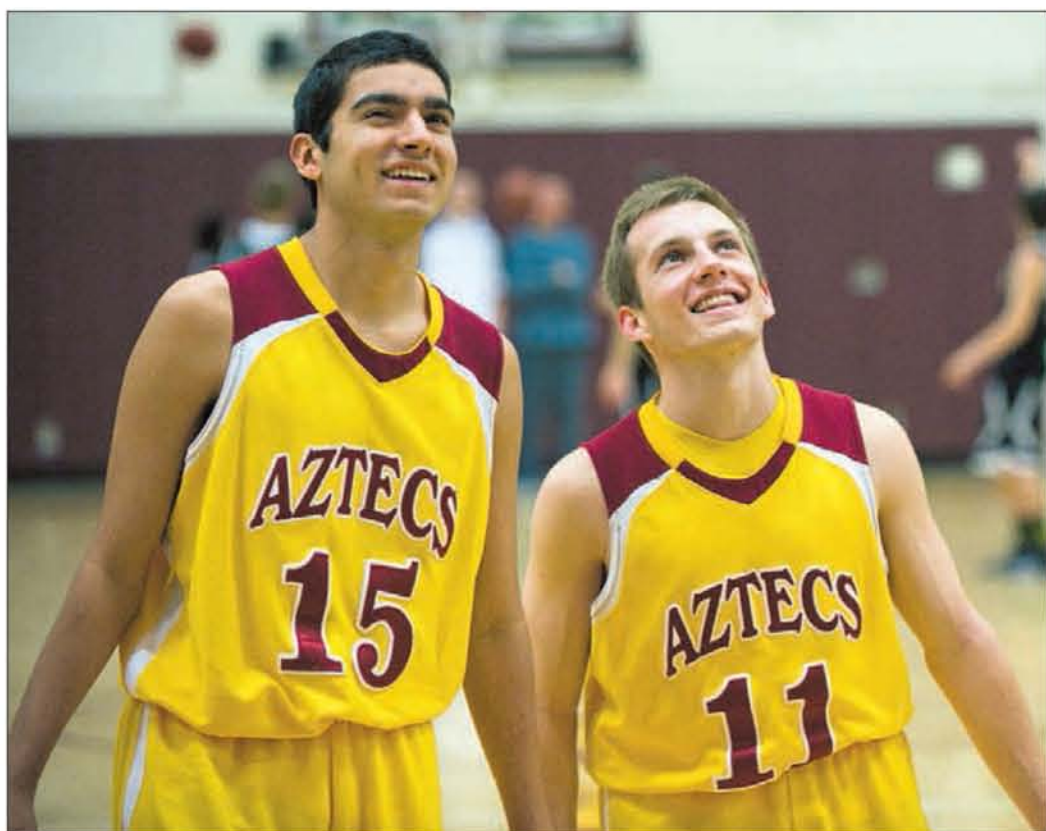


FOSTER SNELL, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Despite his short size, Esperanza's Jake Johnson plays with a big heart and drive in the tall man's game of basketball.

TALL IN SPIRIT

Jake Johnson doesn't let a growth problem faze him in life and on the court.



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Esperanza's Jake Johnson, right, shares a laugh with Daniel Karraa before the second half of a Century League game.

By MARK COOPER
ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Every four months, Jake Johnson boards a plane to Sacramento, a 65-minute flight to see the "growth doctor."

The day trip normally lifts off on a Monday morning, with his sister Paige and mother Tami. At this point, Jake, a 17-year-old senior at Esperanza, has travel traditions. He has set the Sacramento airport Pop-A-Shot record four times, though it keeps getting reset. His high score is 82.

But most of the time, the back end of the trip is silent. The results are normally the same.

You're healthy, but you're not growing.

"It was very predictable," Jake said.

The visits to Jake's and Paige's endocrinologist were to check hand X-rays and blood work, looking at the two children's growth. Jake and his



JOHNSON: HIS PLAY ON COURT SHOWS SIZE DOESN'T MATTER

sister, who is in eighth grade, have skeletal dysplasia, for which a common term is dwarfism.

With one semester of high school left, Jake, a member of Esperanza's basketball team, stands at 5 feet, 3 inches.

Jake has not let his short stature limit him from pursuing basketball, fundamentally a tall man's game. He is a captain and backup guard with a sharp 3-point shot.

He plays only 5-6 minutes per game, but Aztecs coach Mark Hill said Johnson is like an extra assistant coach.

As he prepares for college next fall, Jake would like to latch on as a basketball team manager, hoping to work his way up to Division I coach.

His parents, Mark and Tami, made a decision when Jake was in fifth grade to administer nightly growth hormones to their children. For eight years they have fought through pain and tears to give Jake the chance to grow a few more inches.

The last doctor's visit provided a disappointing but not unforeseen conclusion: His growth plates are now closing. With them, a chapter of his life is as well.

The next trip in February might be Jake's last.

AN EARLY BOND

Jake was born June 23, 1996, and basketball was immediately a part of his life.

His father was lacing up his shoes on a Sunday to go play in a men's league game when Tami's water broke. Mark hurried her to the hospital.

"You cost me a game in our men's league," he says now to Jake, jokingly. Between 12 and 18 months old, Jake hardly grew, so the Johnsons were referred to Floyd Culler, an endocrinologist in Irvine. Culler would become the "growth doctor," and the family eventually followed him when he moved to the Sacramento area.

Later on, the Johnsons visited a geneticist, which is where they learned about the skeletal dysplasia term.

One in 4,000 children has skeletal dysplasia, according to the Ann & Robert Curie Children's Hospital of Chicago. Mark and Tami carried a recessive gene for a mutated growth hormone, and both their children picked it up.

Jake barely was skimming the bottom of the doctor's growth chart when he began playing basketball in second grade. His father and another parent soon started the Yorba Linda Pumas program. Their teams won championships in fifth and seventh grade.

With Mark as the coach and Jake as a player, emotions often flared, especially on car rides home. But it was part of a process. Mark's passion for the game — and for coaching — was being passed to Jake.

"I got a lot of pleasure out of it," Tami said. "I could see the two of them, the bond that they had early on in basketball."

TURNING OVER EVERY ROCK

The evidence of a fight to grow is all over the Johnsons' Yorba Linda home. On the laundry room wall, instead



MELINA PIZANO, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER
Johnson, who has skeletal dysplasia, takes a shot. He plays 5-6 minutes a game but helps coach from the bench.

of the multiple-inch spikes many adolescents achieve, there are markings denoting quarters and eighths of inches. They had always hoped for more.

The kitchen cupboards to the right of the refrigerator are the medicine cabinets. Jake and Paige have plastic bins full of medication inside.

Discussions with Culler about hormones began in third grade. But at the sound of the word "needle," Jake would walk out of the office. In fifth grade, Jake was presented with a needleless injection that punctures the skin. He stayed to listen.

The needle-free device, called the cool.click 2, dispenses hormones from vials similar to the insulin vials for a diabetic.

Every night, Jake is injected. It has the sound and feel of a rubber band snapping against the skin. He injects the left and right sides of his stomach, then the left and right sides of his buttocks.

At first, Jake resented it. Tami chased him around the house to administer the injections.

Jake's tears led to his mother's tears. Mark couldn't stand to watch. "He'd cry, and I'd leave the room crying thinking that he hates me," Tami said.

There's no way to decipher whether or not the nightly hormone injections paid off. But the Johnsons are adamant about their decision.

"I wanted him and his sister to look back on us as parents and go 'I know you guys did everything you could to help me grow,'" Mark said.

"We turned over every rock and did everything we could. And as parents, that's what you do for your kids."

HIGHS AND LOWS ON THE COURT

A junior varsity game against Brea Olinda in Jake's sophomore year became a high and low point all at once.

Jake played one of his best games of the season, scoring 17 points in an overtime victory for Esperanza.

He hit a big shot from the corner late in the game. He stole Brea's inbounds pass with seconds left in overtime.

As Jake grabbed his bag from behind the bench, high-fiving his coach and teammates, an older man in Brea gear came over to the bench.

"Nice game," the man said. Jake prepared to thank him until he tacked

on one more word: "Hobbit."

Jake said he has heard it all throughout his years on the court, from "midget" to "little guy," from players to coaches to fans.

Jake never responds. "I just let my play do the talking," Jake said. "It feels good to go in and knock a couple shots down and then the kids are thinking 'OK, this kid can play.' So size is not a factor."

As the only true point guard on junior varsity his sophomore year, Jake rarely came off the floor. He developed a close relationship with the coach, Brent Willis, who is now his AP economics teacher and wrote him a letter of recommendation for college.

"A lot of people look at Jake and they'll see his height. They'll look at him and see limitations, what he cannot do," Willis said. "I never once looked at Jake and saw limitations. In fact, I see strength."

"I see a kid that would be able to fight through those kinds of obstacles."

'HE'D BE A GREAT COACH'

As Esperanza's starting five takes the floor to play El Dorado in a Century League opener, Jake retreats to the bench, sitting next to Hill and an assistant coach.

Every player who comes off the floor gets a fist-bump from Jake. He plays less than four minutes in the game, a close loss for the Aztecs. He continues to take his father's advice to "just win in practice" to earn more playing time.

"It's hard watching guys come and go on the bench," Jake said. "I always sit right next to the coaches, try to be as involved as I can."

Jake made varsity but played in only a few games his junior year because of a knee injury that required surgery. His season-high in scoring this season is six points.

The physical limitations are more challenging on varsity. Opposing teams can try and post up on Jake. Hill said Esperanza plays a little more zone with Jake in the game to try to avoid mismatches. But he said Jake is an asset to the program.

"He's one of those young men that's going to be successful at anything," Hill said. "I wouldn't wish it on him, but he'd be a great coach, too."

Jake would wish it upon himself, though. He hopes to attend a college with Division I sports, where he'll attempt to be a team manager. It would be the first step to pursuing his coaching dream.

He already has been accepted to a handful of colleges with Division I basketball programs, including Arizona, Kansas and Arkansas. He is still waiting to hear back from UCLA, his dream school, but said it's a longshot.

"If he wanted me to be his assistant, I would be his assistant," Willis said. "Because I would love to coach for him one day."

"He is going to be a tremendous mind in whatever he chooses to do." When Jake travels to Sacramento this February, his growth plates might be closed, the injections might stop and the journey could be over.

But another one is just starting.

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