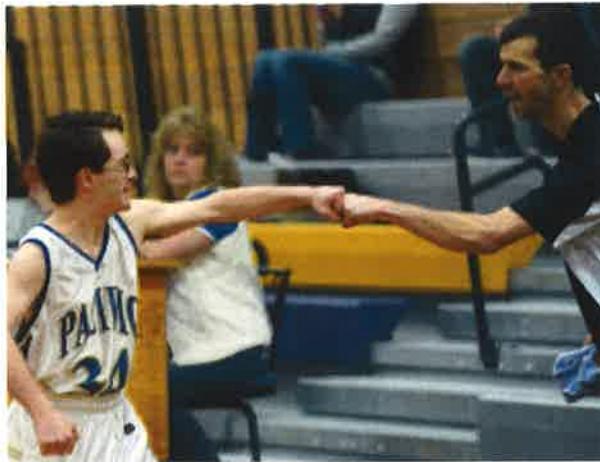


 Coos Bay World

'DOWNTOWN' BROWN

Austin Brown brings joy to JV games at Pacific

JANUARY 27, 2015 12:00 PM • [GEORGE ARTSITAS](#)
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LANGLOIS — Tucked away down the coast, right off of U.S. Highway 101 in Langlois, lives one of the most heartwarming sports stories the South Coast has to offer.

At Pacific High School, the biggest cheers ring out in blowouts long before the varsity teams even take the court. With the Pirates down 10 points with a minute or so left in the game, Austin Brown gets his chance to shine.

Brown has Down syndrome and has been a part of the junior varsity team for Pacific since he was a freshman.

"It makes it what sports are supposed to be about. Fun," Brown's dad Joe said. "What I get a bigger kick out of is the support everybody gives him."

Whenever Brown goes in, the regular flow of the game stops and the focus becomes getting him as many shots as possible. The opposing team is usually privy to Brown's situation going into the game and lets off the gas when he comes in.

The only defense comes from Brown. The opposing team dribbles up next to him and baits him into taking the ball for a breakaway steal. Even the refs will fib a little and say Brown's missed shots were "tipped" by the opposing team so Pacific — and more specifically Brown — can get the ball back and put up more shots.

With his condition, it isn't easy for Brown to explain his thoughts — especially with the adrenaline of scoring two baskets against Camas Valley last Saturday coursing through his capillaries. But the one word he can muster to explain his visceral reaction to the crowd's roar is moving in its brevity.

"Proud," Brown said.

What he can't explain in words he shows with exuberance.

On the court, Brown can't help but have his joy emanate. His smile beams. His arms wave. He gets so excited he jumps up and down.

Brown loves sports and it's been like that his whole life.

He's also a self-described Beavers fan, something his dad (an Oregon State alumnus) kind of pushed on him when he was young. Brown's parents have joked that he flip-flops from OSU to the Ducks sometimes, but his mom assures that they finally "brought him back" to the Beavers' side.

Growing up, Brown always had a ball in his hand — mostly because his family put it there. His family bought him a Lil' Tikes mini basketball set when he was a toddler, and when he outgrew that, the family had to set up a basket in the backyard so he could keep shooting.

"Sports is just what he lives for," Kelli said.

On the court, after the final buzzer sounds, Brown immediately becomes the most popular kid in the school.

During his post game, fans seek him out to give him congratulatory high-fives and offer compliments.

The support has been overwhelming for Brown's family. By the time the game's over, Kelli is usually in tears.

"It's just been great to see. The coaches, everybody is really enthusiastic," Kelli said.

Brown's basketball career kicked off when Pacific's varsity head coach, Ben Stallard, saw Brown shooting hoops in his P.E. class.

Stallard said that back when he played at Powers, his best friend's brother was mentally challenged and made the basketball team too. Stallard remembers one night his buddy's brother finally subbed into a game and knocked down three 3-pointers, sending the small Powers gym into pandemonium. When Stallard saw Brown popping jumpers, he knew he could bring that kind of atmosphere to Pacific.

"It was just an awesome experience for the whole community," Stallard said. "I wish some of our others guy would get in there and shoot as much as Austin does. He can straight shoot the ball. I just thought it would be an awesome experience, which it is."

Brown, by all accounts, is a volume shooter. At practice and in games, Brown camps out on the 3-point line and shoots from long range. It happened so often that his team gave him a nickname.

"Downtown" Austin Brown.

It stuck.

Bob Lemerande has been Brown's coach the past few years and has been immensely supportive in the whole process. Brown only plays in home games, when there's a minute or so left and the deficit for either side is around 12 points. Lemerande has been around Austin since he was in sixth grade, so when Stallard approached him with the idea of Brown joining the team, he was all for it.

"It's not a challenge with Austin at all," Lemerande said. "We're a small school. I guess for a kid where everyone knows him and in our classes all day long, he's just one of the

players. We just look at it that way. He's a player, goes out and does the best he can. We congratulate him for that."

And outside of basketball, Brown has proven to be a solid all-around athlete. Brown is a knockout bowler and competes in Special Olympics. He has collected eight medals (two gold) over the past few years.

But everything pales in comparison to the roar that comes when he steps on the hardwood.

And as cool a scene as it is for the fans on hand, with Brown being a junior, the impermanence of the moment makes each game that much more meaningful to his parents.

"You don't get these moments forever," Joe said after his son sunk two shots. "You have to savor these."

