

Feature story: Brandon Beigel

It had the appearance of any other practice, but this one was anything but ordinary for Brandon Beigel.

The St. John Fisher baseball team was reviewing first-and-third situations on the turf of Growney Stadium. A sophomore at the time, Beigel took a few steps from the third base marker as a pop-up sky-rocketed into the autumn air. He studied the catcher's movements and soon saw he was only a few feet away from the player.

“Oh, crap, I thought. That ball's going to hit me,” Beigel recalled.

He dived out of the way, but he slammed hard into the ground in an awkward position.

“At first, I thought it was a pulled muscle,” he said. “It was hurting; it just didn't feel like a tear or anything like that. The next day we had a scrimmage, I threw an inning and right there I could tell something was wrong. I had no velocity on the ball.”

He made a brief return to his hometown of Colerain, Ohio, just outside of Cincinnati, shortly thereafter. He tried playing catch with his father.

“I was warming up, just throwing like 20 yards, but again I had no velocity on the ball,” he said. “That's when my dad was like, ‘Brandon, we need to get this checked out.’”

He had an MRI done. It was a labral tear, a shoulder injury devastating to his future.

Beigel was forced to make big-time decisions. His doctor gave him an ultimatum: have surgery to repair the shoulder or perhaps lose its strength permanently. He had the surgery performed on May 2, 2006.

The former high school tri-athlete (baseball, basketball, football) then had to decide what to do sports-wise. His positions on the baseball team, outfielder and part-time pitcher, were risky to return to after the injury.

“I contemplated giving up sports altogether and just focusing on school,” he said. “I talked to numerous people about it, people done with sports, other people who had injuries. They said if I gave up sports, 10 years down the road I'd regret every second of it.”

He decided to try out for the Fisher basketball team. His identical twin brother, Justin, was already on the team – in fact, a regular starter.

The only problem was he hadn't played basketball since his junior year of high school.

“(His switch to basketball) was kind of questionable to me,” his brother said. “He hadn't picked up a ball in years. I didn't think he could make the switch.”

Rob Kornaker, head coach of the men's basketball team, admitted being unsure about the idea when Brandon initially approached him.

“There was a little bit of apprehension on our part,” Kornaker said. “Here's Justin's brother, who hasn't played basketball in years, and all of a sudden wants to play on our team - and we're pretty good. I figured it would be hard for him.”

After several conversations, Kornaker agreed to give Brandon a chance on the team.

He ended up playing in 11 of 30 games this past season, averaging 3.5 minutes per game. He shot 4-for-10 from the field, went 5-for-9 from the free throw line, grabbed 11 rebounds, picked up nine fouls and also tallied an assist, turnover and steal. He finished with 13 total points.

It may not sound like much, but to all parties involved, it was a success.

“I took the opportunity and just ran with it as far as I could,” Brandon said. “I got some playing time this year, but the goal now is to get into the weight room and get prepared for next year.”

Brandon exceeded the expectations of both his brother and coach.

“I was really impressed,” Justin said. “He did 100 percent more than I ever expected him to do.”

“It worked out great,” Kornaker said. “He really surprised me for someone who hadn't picked up a basketball in a long time. He was fine out there with us. He competed with us, he fit in.”

“If he spends the summer with a ball and develops his skills a bit more, I think he's got a chance to push some of those guys ahead of him to be a player out on the floor next year,” Kornaker added.

This past season, Brandon was able to share a team with his brother for the first time since their senior year at Colerain High School, when they played football together. He also got to see Justin start in all 30 games, finishing third in scoring on the team (11.8 points per game) and second in rebounding (6.3 rebounds per game). In addition, he was able to give him some pointers.

“We're each other's coach on the court,” Justin said. “Our dad used to coach us, so we learned a lot from him and it's carried over. We've grown up and matured together, and we know each other best.”

Brandon said his biggest motivation to succeed is his family and both of the Beigel twins said their father, Gary, has had a huge influence on them with sports. On top of coaching them for several years, he was nearly drafted by professional baseball, if only he hadn't suffered a career-ending injury, ironically similar to Brandon's.

Like the twins' relationship with their father, Gary has had a special relationship with his father, a World War II veteran. That's what made a September day in 2005 so difficult for both Brandon and Justin.

"I knew my grandfather was going to have tests done that day, but I didn't know what was going on," Brandon said. "So, I had to walk out of my math class to find out. I knew Coach Kornaker at the time through Justin, called him and asked if he had heard anything from my parents. His reply was simply, 'why don't you come to my office?' Of course, that didn't sound good."

Kornaker broke the news to Brandon that his grandfather had been diagnosed with lung cancer.

One of the first things Brandon thought of was Justin. He called his cell phone, but there was no answer. He tried again, and again, and again.

"With him, he knows if you keep calling that something's wrong," Brandon said. "He came down and it was a very emotional moment for both of us. First, being so close to our grandfather, but also being eight hours away and unable to be with our family."

Kornaker had to take a deep breath before recalling that day's events.

"Man, that was tough, really tough," Kornaker said. "What can you say, what can you do? You give them a hug, tell them you're there for them, whatever they need. Let's get you home, whether we fly you home or get in the car and drive back, let's be calm, that kind of thing."

Later that week, the twins had a chance to visit their grandfather, who ended up surviving the cancer.

"I'll never forget that day though," Brandon said. "It was the first time I was ever really scared in my life."

From their parents and grandparents to their sister, who recently moved to California, Brandon and Justin said family is a crucial part of their lives. They try to call their relatives at least every other day – "four or five times on game days," Brandon said. But despite being hundreds of miles from home, they do have each other.

"We're best friends," Justin said. "We have this saying - mess with one, deal with the other. We watch each other's back."

"The greatest thing is – after practice is over – not only are they best friends, but they're brothers," Kornaker said. "They really love each other, and you can tell that. They're as close as two humans can be."