Maldonado Finally Gets His Shot

by Briana Tellez

Yearbook Sports Feature

It was never about overcoming a disability, but to learn how to play basketball differently. Junior Michael Maldonado was told he could watch from the sidelines, but they never said he couldn't join the varsity team. Then miraculously after being told he'd never play, he received medical approval.

"I remember when I was told I could play," Maldonado said. "All I felt was joy and excitement."

Maldonado was born three months premature, which caused an emergency C-section. This left the left side of his body weaker than his right side. When he was two months old, they surgically placed a ventriculoperitoneal (VP) shunt on the left side of his brain. A shunt is a thin plastic tube that helps drain cerebrospinal fluid (CSF), saltwater that surrounds the brain and spinal cord, from the brain. This happens when the CSF doesn't drain out of ventricles in the brain.

In the past their biggest concern with him playing a sport was a severe head injury. Unfortunately, that haunting fear became a reality while playing basketball with his friends when he was in seventh grade. The collision left him dazed, and he was soon rushed to the hospital. This fall led to a diagnosed concussion which could've taken his life. This could've been a setback, but his dreams of playing sports didn't diminish.

Maldonado continued to dream about playing basketball, but he never thought his dream could come true. With a courageous and fearless heart, he joined the basketball team in his junior year. Joining the team wasn't about shooting or dribbling, but about challenging himself.

He had to learn a different playing style to assist his left arm. "Coach Sullivan helped me figure out the best way to shoot using my stronger arm," Maldonado said. "It took some work, but I was able to adapt."

Even though his playing field was limited and most importantly a significant risk, he broke through the barriers. He remained focused despite the complications. He specialized his skills, becoming more proficient with his right arm.

“Although figuring out how to play with one arm was difficult, I still found a way to push past the tough times,” Maldonado said.

Staying motivated, Maldonado found ways to continue going when progress felt slow. His shooting style took him longer so he learned to guide his hand and throw the ball.

“I knew each game if I made a shot it would keep me going,” he said. ”I always hoped to make the next basket, too.”

Through all the practices and a whirlwind of frustration, he battled through. Finally, the day came when all the muscle memory he built the past weeks took over. His body maneuvered through the defenders with speed that he didn’t know he had.

Then he finally sank his first three pointer of the season. He shot from the side with a crisp swoosh. The crowd cheered, but all he heard was the rewarding swish.

“This was my proudest moment of my season,” Maldonado said. “I even took a picture of the basketball court so I could remember it.”

His coaches were especially proud of his progress. “I think it is fantastic to see Michael’s passion for playing sports. He worked so hard to be able to play,” Head Coach Bird said. “We are so proud of him.”

Conquering over these hardships helped him face not just the difficulties of living with a disability but has shown him how to stay strong through anything life will throw at him. From being told to watch from the sidelines to starting in a junior varsity basketball game, Maldonado has shown that resilience and faith can turn doubt into determination. Turning obstacles into opportunities and having perseverance speaks louder than any challenge in his life.

“It has meant everything to me to do what I always knew I could. I didn’t stop dreaming, and that made the dream become a reality,” he said.