Heart of a Champion

After losing his hands and feet four years ago, 12-year-old quadruple amputee Mikey Stolzenberg continues to defy odds on the lacrosse field

By Walter Villa

Perched atop two prosthetic legs and missing both his hands, Mikey Stolzenberg uses the crook of his left arm to secure his stick, pushing and controlling it with his right arm. “It’s not as hard as you think,” he says.

Except, of course, that it’s ridiculously hard. Mikey, 12, just makes it look easy. He doesn’t wear prosthetics for his hands because he can do more without them, and other than needing help to snap on his lacrosse helmet, he is completely independent on the field and in the classroom.

All Mikey asks is that you treat him like who he is — just one of the guys, which helps explain why he loves lacrosse.

“It’s a weird answer,” Mikey says, “but I like getting hit. It’s like a shot of adrenaline. It just makes me try harder.”

‘All I Want is All You Got’

It started with a bug bite. Playing football in the mud in July 2008, Mikey felt an itch on his abdomen. He scratched it, allowing soil into his bloodstream through the open wound. After he started to feel sick a couple days later, Mikey went to a doctor, who prescribed antibiotics. When he didn’t feel any better the next day, his mother Laura took him to a hospital.

“Within an hour of arriving, he was on a respirator fighting for his life,” Laura Stolzenberg says. “We found out that Michael has a rare immune deficiency [called Chronic Granulomatous Disease], and there are certain bacteria his body can’t fight off. We didn’t even know if he would survive the night.”

Mikey went into septic shock, spent two weeks in a medically induced coma and 51 days in the intensive care unit. He was on a ventilator and received continuous dialysis. Even as her then 8-year-old son lay in a coma, Laura implored him to survive. “All I want is all you’ve got,” she said repeatedly.

After a few weeks, Mikey’s limbs turned purplish black due to a lack of oxygen. Doctors had no choice but to amputate his hands and feet. But he survived the episode.

“I was grateful that I still had my Michael,” Laura says. “We had him, now we just had to rebuild him.”

Three months after receiving prosthetic legs, Mikey was skiing.

“Michael embraces his difference,” Laura says. “We told him, ‘Your hands and feet do not define who you are.’”
Mikey Being Mikey

Mikey’s favorite athletes are Tim Tebow and Dwyane Wade. He has met them both. Wade came to his house in Weston, Fla., and gave him a voice-activated touchscreen computer. Wade also invited Mikey to a Miami Heat game and gave him his jersey afterward. Mikey’s reaction at the time? “It smells,” he said.

He has done play-by-play and served as the announcer at Pine Crest High football and lacrosse games. “Guuuuu-terrez,” Mikey says, pronouncing a name when asked to show off his skills on the mic.

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Pockets & Sockets

Jennifer and Andrew Bolger met Mikey about 18 months ago. Harris played on the club team Andrew coaches, the Florida Swashbucklers. Jennifer could not keep her eyes off Mikey as he ate a taco.

“I can barely eat a taco with two hands,” she says.

Prosthetic sets cost anywhere from $10,000 to $100,000 and are not covered by insurance. Because he is still growing, Mikey must be refitted for new prosthetics twice a year. The Bolgers and Stolzenbergs founded Pockets & Sockets to help offset those costs. More than 30 teams and 300 players participated in last year’s inaugural tournament, which also marked Mikey’s return to the sport.

He played for the Florida Snipers. This year’s tournament will be May 12-13 at Delray Soccer Complex. More than 50 teams are expected.

The event raised $30,000 in 2011. Organizers hope to double that figure this year. Proceeds go to the Michael Stolzenberg Rehabilitative Trust, which will help the family purchase superior prosthetics so he can continue to participate in physical activities. Eventually, the families hope Mikey can receive a double-hand transplant.

“Hopefully he will get the hands of a great athlete,” Shanahan said.

That would be fitting for Mikey, who already has the heart of a champion. LM