

Inside Sports: Our Lady of Mount Carmel School freshman brings joy to sports teams



Robbie Long, a freshman with autism at Our Lady of Mount Carmel School in Essex, plays varsity baseball and other sports. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

By Elizabeth Lowe

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ESSEX - Watching his son, Robbie, sit in the dugout and talk to his teammates through all seven innings of a recent baseball game was affirming for Rob Long.

"In less than one year he's gotten that comfortable with people," he said. "It's proof there are no accidents."

Robbie, a freshman at Our Lady of Mount Carmel School, has autism, a developmental disability that can cause social, communication and behavioral challenges, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. April is Autism Awareness Month.

"I didn't think my son could go here," said Long, whose other child, Stephania, is an eighth-grader at the school. "I didn't think Mount Carmel would consider (accepting) Robbie."

Students and faculty have embraced the 15-year-old, said Michael Naunton, the Essex school's assistant principal, athletic director and varsity baseball coach, who noted Robbie is currently the only autistic student there, but not the first.

Watch a video on Robbie.

"He helps put things in perspective," Naunton said. "He brings out the best in everyone."

"All you have to do is look at Robbie and he smiles at you," said Christopher Ashby, principal of Our Lady of Mount Carmel's middle and high schools. "Robbie makes our school better."

Ashby described Robbie as a typical high school student.

"He notices all the things teenage boys notice," he said.

Robbie's smile and attitude carries from the classroom to the sports field. He is a

three-sport athlete.

Robbie had some plays as a lineman for the Cougars' varsity football and he participated in some wrestling matches, Naunton said. Now, on varsity baseball, he has been at bat and reached base.

Robbie attends practices and games, but his participation in games is limited for his safety, Ashby said.

"He's as involved as we can get him," Ashby said.

During a team meeting following practice April 15, Robbie sat on the floor, flanked by his teammates, and grinned. At the end of the meeting, Robbie and his teammates cheered, "One, two, three ... Cougars!"

Darius Jelen, a freshman at Our Lady of Mount Carmel, smiled as he recounted the day he met Robbie, on the first day of football practice.

"It's fun hanging out with him, being there for him," said Jelen, 15, who is also on varsity baseball. "He's a really good teammate."

Robbie is a cheerleader for his teammates. He said he enthusiastically yells "let's go teammates, let's go" when they are at bat.

"I really appreciate him being here," Jelen said. "He completes the (high school) experience."

Chris Ashby Jr., the principal's son, was on the football and wrestling teams with Robbie, and now plays baseball with him.

"He brings a lot of spirit (to the team)," he said. "He's enthusiastic about everything."

"He (Robbie) brings joy to things," Naunton said. "He's made an impact on our community as a whole."

Yedda, Robbie's mother, is thankful her son attends Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

"It's been a blessing for him to be here," said Yedda, whose family is Christian. "The whole community has been open him. It's like being a part of a family."

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