

Shae Stelly is part coach, part inspiration — and a pivotal member of the Cecilia baseball team



Advocate Photo by BRAD KEMP Honorary member of the Cecilia baseball team Shae Stelly who is wheelchair bound with Congenital Muscular Dystrophy talks to player Micah Huval before baseball practice at Cecilia High School Monday April 6, 2015 in Cecilia, La.

By Raymond A. Partsch III

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CECILIA — Shae Stelly is like any other baseball player at Cecilia High School.

The 17-year-old senior cuts up with teammates during batting practice, gives pregame and postgame speeches and, after home games, rakes the infield and

home plate. And just like any other player wearing green and gold, Stelly can be heard cheering on his fellow Bulldogs from inside the dugout.

Stelly loves nothing more than being a Bulldog.

“I just like being out there with my friends and enjoying the sport,” he said. “When I am out there, I feel like everybody else.”

Unlike his teammates, Stelly doesn’t know what it feels like to pitch out of a bases-loaded jam or lace a double into the gap in left-center. Stelly has never stolen a base or been mobbed at home plate by teammates after scoring the winning run.

Stelly was born with congenital muscular dystrophy, a disease that progressively weakens muscle tissue, meaning he has no real physical movement. He is relegated to his electric wheelchair.

Stelly does not want pity or sympathy about his disability — and he definitely doesn’t want to be treated differently. In fact, Stelly is the one who requested he be given the on-field responsibility of raking the field. To get that done, coaches attach the rake to the back of his wheelchair.

“I (asked) last year if I could have a responsibility like everybody else on the team,” Stelly said. “Because I feel like I am like everybody else and I need a responsibility. I enjoy it.”

Stelly’s desire to be treated like anyone else is rooted in how his parents, Dana and Shane, raised him. After getting past the initial shock of having their son diagnosed at 8 months old, the Stellys made a decision.

“I raised him like he was a normal child and to not let his disability get in his way,” Dana said. “I did not let him use his disability as a crutch.”

Longtime Cecilia baseball coach Jaime Calais got to know Stelly during football season four years ago, when he helped Calais coach the running backs. Stelly’s knowledge of baseball impressed the coach so much that he wanted Stelly to help him coach pitchers in the bullpen the next spring. Stelly just needed to get permission from his mom.

“He came up to me and told me he wanted to do baseball,” Dana Stelly said. “And I said, ‘Shae, how are you going to do baseball?’ He said, ‘I talked to Coach Jaime, and he said I could join the team.’ So I said, ‘All right, you can do baseball.’ ”

That first season, Stelly attended only home games, but by the time his junior season rolled around, he was attending all games — unless he had to miss it because of a procedure or therapy. Even though he can't do the physical things that his teammates do naturally, like shagging fly balls or swinging a bat, he has become a vital role player within the team's dynamic.

"Shae means everything," Calais said. "We have to have him there. There are some games he can't make. When he's not there, the air is not there. When he is there, you can feel and see the energy in all the other kids.

"He especially helps me out when I start to go crazy by getting on one of the kids. Shae kind of settles me down."

Stelly reciprocates those sentiments.

"It has meant the world to me," he said. "I mean, I grew up with these guys. When I am here, I am not treated any different. I am just treated like anyone else, and that's how I want it to be. I want to be like everybody else, and that's what they do."

"They don't see his wheelchair," Dana Stelly said. "They just see him."

Stelly has become an inspirational figure to the players who can be on the field on game day.

"If he can come out here on a normal basis when he can only sit in his chair, then why can't we?" junior Sonny Angelle said. "I really look up to him. He wishes he could be like us. He is in a chair and witnesses all of our given ability, and he would love to do that. He sits there in the dugout and always pumps us up. It has definitely humbled me. I love Shea."

"He is a real motivational person," said junior Micah Huval, Stelly's cousin. "He will talk you up; he will tell you what you did wrong, almost like a coach would. He always gives you words of encouragement."

Providing words of encouragement seems to come naturally to Stelly. The honor student with a 3.8 GPA is planning on attending Louisiana-Lafayette in the fall and also will help coach the Cecilia baseball team next spring, with hopes of one day becoming a full-time coach.

"If I see something that somebody else doesn't see, I will address it to that player," he said. "I just coach them up and give them positive feedback. I feel like, even though I am not out there on the field and I am not out there swinging a bat and

all that stuff I wish I could be doing, I am definitely doing a lot behind the scenes. I feel like I contribute a lot that way.”

His teammates aren't the only ones who have received Stelly's positive coaching style. His 4-year-old brother, Sean, has taken up baseball and is gearing up to play T-ball this summer.

Stelly has relished the time spent teaching his younger brother the game he loves.

“It is one of the best feelings ever,” he said. “You know I can't do it ... so to be able to live through him and teach him the game feels good. I love it.”

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