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Perseverance pays for Bellevue player

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by [Greg Johns](#)

Journal Columnist

BELLEVUE-- All Robert Vasen wanted was to play basketball. Be part of the team. Live the dream he'd envisioned since his youth, when he shined in every sport he tried.

But things don't always work the way we want.

Vasen's knee, for example. Darn thing doesn't work quite the way the Bellevue High senior wants. Not since a life-threatening staph infection invaded his right leg prior to his freshman year, sending him to the hospital for six weeks and to the sidelines for three years.

We hear a lot about the star athletes, the kids who lead their teams to state tournaments and score lots of points and entertain scholarship offers.

Robert Vasen thought that might be his story, too. Until the infection came out of nowhere.

Now his parents are thankful their son is alive. Thankful he didn't need to have his leg amputated. Thankful the infection didn't get into any of his vital organs.

And Robert is thankful, too. But mostly for finally getting the chance this winter to play varsity basketball. To be part of a Bellevue team competing now in the 3A Sea-King District playoffs. To be back on the court with his life-long friends.

It's been a difficult journey for a youngster who excelled for the Premier Eastside FC soccer team as well as Bellevue Select basketball programs prior to his illness.

"Initially, the doctors didn't think I'd be able to run again," said Vasen, who has undergone three surgeries to battle an infection called osteomyelitis. "No one ever thought I'd be able to jump. But since then, the doctors have been pretty amazed at where I've been able to get."

Where he's gotten is to a place on the bench of a solid high school team. He longs to play more than his few minutes a game. But he has learned that while life doesn't always deliver perfect story lines, there is pleasure in being part of the tale.

"The biggest thing is just being on a team," Vasen said. "I haven't really been able to get back out and play like I can play, show what I can do. But the best part is just being with my friends and being able to compete at a level I should be.

"It's been a big road," he said. "But it's definitely rewarding to be able to do the things I love."

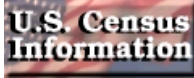
Those around him marvel at the energy Vasen devoted to getting back to this point. A year ago, his comeback was thwarted when he was cut during tryouts for both the varsity and junior varsity teams.

"That was a blow we thought might crush his dream," said brother Dave Vasen, a student at Stanford University.

Instead of recoiling, Robert recommitted. He worked harder. Lifted more weights. Played ball every chance he got. Endured more physical therapy, five days a week, in order to strengthen and improve the flexibility in his knee.

Foreclosures





This winter, he was back at it, trying to make the Bellevue varsity as the ultimate longshot, a senior who'd never played in the program or the summer leagues.

"I could tell how much it meant to him, but I was going to cut him," said first-year Wolverines coach Bob McDonald, who had worked with Vasen in the Bellevue Select program in 6-7th grades. "We just had so many seniors I couldn't figure how I'd get him any playing time."

When cutdown day arrived, McDonald informed Vasen he hadn't made the team. Then the coach went home, thought long and hard, and called Vasen on the phone.

"The kid gives new meaning to what hard work and perseverance means," McDonald said. "I decided if he was willing to put that in, I'd keep him. And he's been a great teammate. He doesn't get the playing time, but never complains. Everybody on the team loves him."

Funny thing is, he's developed into a valuable role player as well. In the Kingco Tournament, trailing by 14 in a loser-out game against Sammamish, McDonald summoned Vasen off the bench with about four minutes to go.

"No combinations were working," said the coach. "So I put Robert in and he made a critical basket and steal and got us going. He caused us to win that game. Then against Bainbridge last week, he played 12 minutes and had four points, two assists.

"Despite the fact he can barely bend his leg, he's a very strong defensive player. I wouldn't be afraid to put him on the other team's best offensive player. He's getting better all the time. I'm amazed at what he's done."

This is a youngster who used to lie in bed with a machine that bent and unbent his knee over and over throughout the night in order to increase his limited flexibility.

"I learned to live with that thing. I also learned how to take it off," Vasen said with a chuckle. "I definitely appreciate the sleep now that I don't need that any more."

He still can only bend the leg part way. That range of motion has largely affected his range of emotions.

"There's been a lot of lows the last three years, just not being able to compete and be with my friends," he said. "Sports are the biggest part of my life. Seeing my friends and not able to do things with them ... I'd always get those feelings. But my family and all my friends have been there for me. I've had things help me through it."

And in turn, he's provided inspiration to those who've watched him battle to regain a role in his beloved world of sports.

"After all he's been through, it's amazing to look at him now," said his mother, Evy Vasen. "To me, it's a miracle every time I see him on the basketball court. I take a deep breath and am so thankful every time he goes in. He's playing with his buddies. What could be better?"

Vasen also made the varsity soccer team last spring, starting every game for the Wolverines. But he acknowledges this basketball season has taken such a physical toll that soccer may be out of the question this year.

Compensating for his leg problem has created back pains. His mom says more surgery may be in the future.

But right now, Vasen is having the time of his life. He's on a varsity basketball team playing in the district tournament. He's competing. He's contributing. He's soaking it all in.

"These are memories I'll definitely keep forever," he said.

But first, another game. Bellevue needs to win three straight now to qualify for state. It's a tough road, but Robert Vasen knows a thing or two about overcoming long odds.

Not to mention appreciating the moment and not taking sports and teammates and precious games with life-long friends for granted.

"These are loser-out games now," he said. "There'll be a little urgency. Hopefully

the team will sense that. I know I do."

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PHOTO by Steve Shelton/Journal: Bellevue's Robert Vasen sits on the bench during his team's game against Issaquah on Jan 14. Vasen overcame a knee injury to make the team.

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