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Little Jay and the most heroic try of the year in league

Courtesy of The Daily Telegraph 08/08/2009

Photo courtesy of Troy Bendeich and The Daily Telegraph

NO ONE knows why little Jay Barber stares at the clouds.

Why he doesn't feel pain if his footy boots end up on the wrong feet. Why even now, aged 11, this boy with the mop of blond hair can't read, tell time or scrawl those three letters comprising his name.

"And it's been tough, yeah," mum Debbie shrugs.

"We've seen hundreds of specialists over the years and have been given hundreds of conflicting answers.

"I mean, at 18 months they told us Jay would never walk.

Would never talk. Said we should just be thankful he was alive."

This is how it begins. The greatest league try you never saw. Some 30 seconds of footy that may just save this year of NRL disgraces, Origin controversies and all those uncontrollable parents spitting, fighting and generally destroying the fabric of junior football.

And at its heartbeat is little Jay Barber. This tiny Bulldogs fan, all loose clothes and toothy grin, who fights daily against the physical and mental challenges caused by his rare chromosome deletion. He struggles with speech. Gets scared in crowds. Can still be found playing in the sand pit at school. A boy so small his family recently threw a party to celebrate reaching 20kg.

Already life for this Raymond Terrace schoolboy has been a continuous whirl of ophthalmologists, psychologists and geneticists. His ligaments, says dad Greg, are so lax he "bends like a contortionist". And with only 40 per cent hearing, well, there's an aid tucked behind his left ear too.

"So you can imagine how we felt when Jay told us he wanted to play football," Debbie smiles.

"Greg and I, we talked for weeks about his physical and mental safety. About what would happen if the other boys hated him ..."

And so we arrive at Empire Park, Merewether. Raymond Terrace versus South Newcastle. Little Jay staring up at the clouds. "One of the boys asked me why he does that. Why he looks up at the clouds," Debbie continues.

"I explained it's just his way of having some time out.

"He'll watch the sky for a few minutes, stubbing his boot into the ground, and then go back to playing. If he stays at it too long, Brendan his coach will just quietly bring him off."

Jay, however, never stays at it too long. Rejoining his mates despite those struggles with balance. Limited torso strength. And a muscle growth so poor, even the smallest shoulder pads must be taped in place.

Mentally, too, Jay will withdraw. Like when his teacher was replaced and he stopped eating for days. Or when brother Robert accidentally whacked his jaw fitting a headgear ... he wouldn't return for a fortnight.

And all of this you need to know as, with one minute and 55 seconds remaining, little Jay is passed the Steeden against South.

Then with all the strength those little pipe cleaner legs can muster, running. Running. Running.

Only much later will South coach Scott Hallett tell you the truth. Revealing how three days earlier, his boys had asked if they could let the little boy from Raymond Terrace score a try.

"Having already played against Jay once, they were just so proud of him for having a go," Hallett reveals.

"That's why they decided it should happen. Didn't matter if we were winning or not."

Which is why the South players now trip and lunge. Sprawling unsuccessfully at Jay's feet. Watching as that little boy from Raymond Terrace runs in defiance of every specialist who ever said "won't".

Totally unaware that on the sidelines, two dozen parents stand and cry.

"It ... it was ... great," Jay says today of his effort, clutching a toy dinosaur his mum offered moments earlier to stop his foot tapping repeatedly on the lounge room carpet.

"Easy. I just wish more people could play."

This is the gift rugby league has given the Barber clan. The little things. Like Jay maturing, solving two plus two or holding eye contact when interviewed.

And, sure, some days you can still find him playing in the sand pit alone.

But more often lunches are now spent wandering through the playground, sandwich in hand, to find his Terrace teammates.

"And I only wish we had the money to show those boys what they mean to us," Debbie says.

"Just to say thank you.

"Because Jay, he's started cooking meals in our kitchen. He's thinking about swimming lessons too. I mean, the way these boys have accepted our son ... well, he honestly thinks every footballer takes time out to look at the clouds."



Volunteer of the Year Program

Don't forget to get involved in this Years CRL Volunteer of the Year Program

proudly brought to you by the Holiday Inn Potts Point. Nominations close on the 28th August 2009. So get in quick and nominate a hard working volunteer within your club or group.

Visit www.crlnsw.com.au for more information. The Top 20 volunteers will be selected to attend a presentation night on Saturday 26th September in Sydney with the winner to go onto the National Awards presented by the NRL's One Community.



Development Officer of the Week

Congratulations to all the Development Officers that took part in the Dubbo Small Schools Carnival through the week. Farrer Agricultural School took out the major award- Under 15's Country Cup. Schools from all over Country NSW took part in the day. Other winners from the day included Sacred Heart C.S. Cootamundra, St Joseph's Aberdeen and Warialda H.S.