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# Hoop dreams

Diagnosed with Spina Bifida before birth, and Lymphoma at age 15, junior Zach Steger has never lost sight of the goal to represent his country at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games.

For fifth grader Zach Steger, being told by his coaches that he couldn't be a part of his school basketball team was one of the best things that ever happened to him. After changing into his uniform on the first day of practice, his basketball coach told Zach that the crutches that made it possible for him to walk were a safety concern.

Now a junior, Zach has worked for the last seven years for the chance to represent his country in wheelchair basketball in the 2020 Paralympic Games in Tokyo, Japan.

"I had been playing basketball with friends for so long, so I was confused and disappointed when they told me I couldn't play on a team," he said. "I had never been rejected before. My parents always told me I could do anything, so it really fueled my fire to be the best."

With an eye on his future goals, Zach overcame the adversity he faced and eventually joined an elite group of athletes.

"I wouldn't have the opportunities to play at the level I am now in wheelchair basketball, especially the chance to play in the Olympics in 2020, if I hadn't been rejected at such a young age," he said.

Zach was born with Spina Bifida, a birth defect in which his spinal cord failed to develop properly in utero, and was exposed through a gap in the vertebrae. In his case, it caused partial paralysis to his lower legs.

"We're all different, so I'm okay with being just a bit different with my wheelchair," Zach said. "If you can't accept who you are, you really can't change yourself, and you can't grow."

His mother, Tracey Steger, found out Zach had spina bifida while having an ultrasound while she was still pregnant. Although they have faced a lot of unknowns since his birth, she said Zach has overcome so much, and

they are amazed every day at how much he has been able to accomplish.

"When he found wheelchair basketball, it opened up his whole world to him," Tracy said. "He could truly compete, and we were absolutely thrilled for him."

Instead of being in class on the second day of school his freshman year, Zach was laying in an exam room at Children's Medical Center in Dallas. He was about to have surgery to fix a problem with his brain shunt – a device most people with Spina Bifida have to prevent a build up of fluid on their brain – when doctors noticed a lump on his neck.

Although they thought it was just abnormal tissue, after having a biopsy, they determined Zach had Hodgkins Lymphoma, a cancer of the Lymphatic system.

"When my mom told me I had cancer, I was completely frozen," Zach said. "I didn't know what to think – I was in a total state of shock."

After more than seven months of treatment including surgery and chemotherapy, he is now in remission.

Although he missed a lot of practice with his basketball team, Zach was determined to play. That season was a breakout season where he was chosen for the All-America team.

"It never crossed my mind not to play," Zach said. "When I'm between those four lines, nothing else matters – all my stress melts away."

Zach said his success has always been about concentrating on the things he has control over.

"I just want to give people hope that they can beat anything they're going through," he said. "I feel like if I share my story, I can help other people gain hope – give them the strength in order to persevere."