

Playing his way

Faced With A Birth Defect To His Right Hand, Goaltender Joe Rogers Has Refused To Let Anything Get In His Way --On The Ice, Or Off

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STRATHROY, Ont. -When Joe Rogers was born, a nurse said the four words no parent ever wants to hear: "We have a problem." Rogers' father could not understand what was wrong. After inspecting his son, everything seemed to be in working order. He had counted 10 fingers and he had counted 10 toes and that was good enough for him.

"Look again," the nurse said. "It's his hand."

It was then that Scott Rogers noticed something was different. While his son appeared to have four fingers and a thumb on his right hand, the size and shape did not quite match the other hand. Doctors called it a random birth defect that occurs in 3% of newborns.

But Rogers and his parents refer to his malformed hand as something else entirely.

"I think it's kind of a blessing," said the 17-year-old goaltender, who recently earned a roster spot with the Junior B Petrolia Jets of the Western Ontario Hockey League. "So far, it's worked out well."

While others may question how Rogers can catch a puck without a fully functioning hand, the native of Marysville, Mich., has found a way to succeed in just about everything he attempts.

On the diamond, Rogers was the captain of his junior varsity high school baseball team, where he batted .486 and had the most stolen bases. On the ice, he recently led his Triple-A hockey team to the Under-16 U.S. National Championships, where they defeated Shattucks-St. Mary's prep school 2-1 in the final. And in the classroom, he has maintained a near-perfect 3.97 grade-point average.

"My parents have always encouraged me to be positive and deal with what I've been given," said Rogers. "I don't look at this as a disability at all."

With a partial hockey scholarship to the University of Notre Dame waiting for him in 2009-10, Rogers' right hand has been anything but a hindrance.

After beating eight others for the starting job with the Jets, Rogers and his family travelled 45 minutes to train with Maple Leafs goaltending coach Steve McKichan this week. On Tuesday, he realized a boyhood dream by sharing the net with Toronto

goaltenders Andrew Raycroft, Justin Pogge and Scott Clemmenson, while Anaheim Ducks Stanley Cup forward Andy McDonald took shooting practice.

Once the one-hour session ended, Rogers took off his catching glove and introduced himself to the unsuspecting players. With a grin on his face, he offered a hand that more resembles a baby's foot.

"I like shaking hands after games," Rogers said. "Sometimes they'll pull back their hand and I'll just look at their face and there's utter surprise and shock. It's kind of funny."

Rogers may be the first to joke about his unique abnormality. But he is hardly the first one-handed athlete out of the state of Michigan.

Former major-league pitcher Jim Abbott, who threw a no-hitter with the New York Yankees in 1993, was also born with the same defect. The only difference between the two is that Rogers had two surgeries when he was younger to insert a bone from his toe into his thumb.

Rogers, who recently met Abbott and e-mails him regularly, said having a thumb makes all the difference. It allows him to type, tie his skate laces "really tight" and to balance a plate full of food at a buffet restaurant.

"He operates like a waiter," jokes Rogers' father. "Sometimes I look at him and think, 'Man, you're brave.' "

When a nine-year-old Rogers first told McKichan that he wanted to be a professional goaltender, brave was not the first word that came to the coach's mind. It was crazy.

"I thought there's no way a guy's going to be able to play at a high level who doesn't have a hand," remembered McKichan. "So I did have reservations at the start."

Rogers' parents had the very same concerns when their child was born. They figured he would struggle with even the simplest chores, such as buttoning his shirt or eating with a knife and fork. And to prepare for the challenges they believed he would face, they tried to put themselves in his shoes.

"Usually we would practise ourselves and try to imagine the same situation," said Rogers' father. "And what we learned early was that no matter how long we anguished over trying to figure out how to do it, it would take him about 10 seconds, because it was natural."

For most of Rogers' detractors, it often takes seeing the budding goaltender in action to be convinced that he can stop shots.

"A kid with no fingers?" Jets general manager Ray Giffen remembered asking on the first day of tryouts. "How the heck does he hang on to the puck?"

As with Abbott, who effortlessly caught and threw a baseball with the same hand, Rogers has developed his own style for catching.

Using a glove that was specially designed by equipment manufacturer Vaughan, Rogers does not so much snatch pucks, as he lets them fall into his trapper. The glove has an extra strap that fastens around his wrist and extra webbing has been sewn into the trapper, which prevents the puck from squirting loose.

The only thing giving away the fact that Rogers has one hand is that after each glove save he brings his right arm into his chest to avoid any accidental rebounds. Even then, his technique, like everything else he does, seems natural.

"I was born this way, so it's all I've ever known," said Rogers. "I've adapted from Day 1, basically, so it's second nature."