

Disability doesn't slow Marcus Morgan

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 11 December 2011 23:15 - Last Updated Sunday, 11 December 2011 23:36



Marcus Morgan is a polite young man who calls people "Sir," smiles freely, enjoys his classes in money management and biology, loves to play basketball, believes strongly in God and certainly does not feel sorry for himself.

"He's one of the nicest kids to be around," says Dan Rhine, his coach on the sophomore basketball team at Cedar Rapids Washington. "Very positive with his teammates."

Marcus plays basketball with one arm, essentially. And he plays it well, with passion. His left arm is not fully formed and is bent permanently at the elbow, a nerve-related birth defect that hasn't prevented him from succeeding on the court.

"I love basketball," he says simply. "I just don't let anything keep me down."

Marcus had two operations when he was younger in an attempt to improve his physical condition, but neither operation was a success. "After awhile I was like, 'Mom, God made me this way for a reason. Let's just keep it like this.'"

Marcus says his parents, Steven and Labetta Morgan, encourage him to try anything he wants, including basketball.

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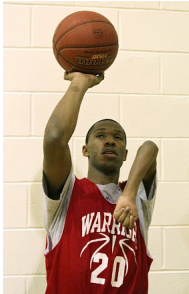
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Marcus has been playing basketball since he was in the third grade. He's now the sixth man for the Washington sophomores, a 5-foot-9 guard who handles the ball well with his right hand, makes good passes, plays defense and brings a spark to the team with his quickness and attitude.

"He's remarkable for having the handicap that he does," says Rhine. "His dribbling and some of the passes he comes up with, you'd never guess that he would be able to make those kind of plays.

"I think his strength right now is defense. He's so aggressive and he's so good at slapping at the ball. And people just don't take him as seriously as they need to.

"Offensively, he gets going a little too high speed. He gets a little out of control, but he's soon going to learn how to handle both ends of the court."



Marcus wants to be treated like everyone else. No better, no worse.

"I actually hate when people kind of feel sorry for me, because I feel like I'm regular, like they are," he says. "I happen to have this arm, and that's about it. I look at it like God put me this way for a reason."

He enjoys proving people wrong, especially people who don't think he can play basketball with only one good arm. "Yeah, I love doing that," he admits.

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To his teammates, he's just Marcus. They know how good he is and what he can do, but there's usually an element of surprise from other teams and their fans. He's heard people say "wow" or go "oooh" when he does something they don't expect.

"Some people after a game come up and say, 'You really inspire me,' or 'Man, you're really good, keep it up.' It feels great."

Marcus quotes a bible verse from Philippians when he's talking about his arm and his determination to succeed in all walks of life, not just basketball. "I can do everything through him who gives me strength," he says from memory. "That keeps me going every day."

Marcus cradles the ball to his body when he catches a pass, using his left arm for support under the ball. He's learned how to shoot with years of practice, although there's at least one thing he cannot do.

"We do a drill where you have to shoot a left-hand layup," says Rhine. "So he looks at me and goes, 'Not me, right?' Not you, Marcus."

Basketball players are taught to use their off-hand to support the ball when they shoot, but Marcus has learned to shoot his own way. "I don't even think about it. I just shoot it," he says. "It's like a routine now."

He can score, dribble, set up teammates for baskets, grab a rebound, play defense. "I can do all things," he says simply. "It depends on what I need to do to help my team."

Marcus does not play any other sports at Washington, but not because he can't. "I try to focus on basketball, because that's what I want to do when I grow up," he says.

He plans to play for the varsity at Washington next season when he's a junior. "Yes, sir," he says without a hint of doubt.

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"He definitely has a chance to play varsity ball," says Rhine. "I think there would be a team that would be very happy to have somebody like Marcus on their team.

"He is a legit player. He is a legit person. He's just a darn nice kid to be around."

Marcus says he likes basketball for another reason, aside from playing the game. "Because I can inspire people," he says. "Through God, I can inspire anyone."

He thinks he was given a birth defect for a reason. "I would say God picked me. That's all I can say. Things happen for a reason.

"You have to trust in God and let him do his work."