

Life's Curveballs *by Kathy Smallwood*

Famed Brooklyn Dodgers pitcher Carl Erskine credits baseball great Jackie Robinson and Special Olympics with son Jimmy's acceptance

Talk to an elite athlete like Carl Erskine, and you may find the conversation less about technique, strategy and statistics (he's got 'em) than about his teammates, his family and his life—all deeply interwoven. And when it comes to curveballs—both professional and personal—Erskine is an expert.

“Oisk,” as he was called (a Brooklynese nickname), a pitcher for the professional baseball team, the Brooklyn Dodgers¹, from 1948-1960, helped the New York (USA) team reach its pinnacle of success, pitching in five World Series (the team won six National League pennants and one World Series during his tenure) and played alongside baseball legend Jackie Robinson, the first African-American player in major league history. It was teammate Jackie Robinson, and his grace under tremendous hardships in a segregated America, that ultimately taught Erskine an important lesson that paralleled an event in his own life just after his retirement from professional baseball.

In 1960, his son, Jimmy, was born with Down syndrome. “I had three healthy kids, 10, 8 and 5, and Jimmy was a huge surprise and shock,” Erskine said. “Society called people with Down syndrome ‘Mongoloids’ in those days—a harsh term that almost suggested how society looked at people who were different.”

The Erskines brought Jimmy home with them as part of the family. “The best doctors at that time advised people who had children with intellectual disabilities to put them in a facility where they would be well cared for and wouldn't disrupt the family. Society was not ready for their acceptance,” Erskine explained.

“When Jimmy was about 12, along came special education, and about the same time, Special Olympics,” said Erskine. “Being a sports guy, and having played for the Brooklyn Dodgers for 14 years, with a lot of gifted players, I wondered how Special



(From left) Carl and Jim Erskine with Tommy Lasorda (Los Angeles Dodgers manager from 1976-1996) at Dodgertown, the Los Angeles Dodgers Adult Baseball Camp in Vero Beach, Florida. (Photo: Courtesy of Carl Erskine)

Olympics was going to work. I thought these people aren't gifted. Well, we all got a big surprise. Special Olympics athletes have every bit as much intensity, enthusiasm and self-esteem from the sports they compete in. So Jimmy not only got to go to school, but he got to compete in track and field, aquatics, bowling and golf,” stated Erskine.

“When I see a young Special Olympics athlete make an effort to win a 50-meter dash, I see every bit as much intensity and effort and commitment as a professional athlete. When people see that they say, ‘If someone can do that with the limitations they have, then I ought to be better at what I do.’”

Carl Erskine, Brooklyn Dodgers pitcher (retired). Inducted into the Brooklyn Dodgers Hall of Fame in 1979





(From left) Michael Mack of the Indianapolis Police Department, Betty and Carl Erskine at the 2006 Special Olympics Indiana Summer Games. Carl Erskine and his wife, Betty, served as the Honorary co-Chairs of the Games. Their son Jimmy competed in bowling and athletics. (Photo: Paul Sepaniak/Courtesy of Special Olympics Indiana)

“He is also privileged to be working at an Applebee’s restaurant. So it has been a marvelous turnaround from the tragedy that seemed to befall us in 1960. Forty-seven years later we revel in the beautiful experience of seeing Jimmy with his limitations in society, with his early rejection from society, have a happy life, and what seemed to be a huge disadvantage to our family became a real blessing,” Erskine declared.

“I just wrote a book titled, *What I Learned from Jackie Robinson*. This book is about a parallel story. It’s about the barriers that Jackie Robinson, as a black athlete, faced in a segregated America in the 1940s. I played with Jackie for nine seasons in the big leagues and learned to appreciate the way he handled this huge challenge for society to change and to accept. Jackie broke down a lot of barriers by performing as an all-star on the field, and, in his private life, pursued the breaking down of barriers because he couldn’t eat with his us [Dodger teammates] or stay in the same hotels with us in the early years. As time passed, many barriers did come down,” said Erskine.

“That, in a way, created some momentum, I believe, so when Jimmy wins a medal in Special Olympics, I think Jackie Robinson had something to do with that. He began to cause America to look at itself in a different light and begin to see that everyone deserves dignity,” remarked Erskine.

“Professional baseball was a beautiful stage to present Jackie and show that he did belong, just as Special Olympics is a beautiful stage to show that

people with intellectual disabilities are capable and determined. People appreciate effort, and when the Special Olympics athlete who comes in last gets the loudest applause, it shows we’ve come a long way in our own acceptance,” Erskine contends. “We are a sports nation, by and large. When Special Olympics athletes compete, society gets a new look. It is thrilling to watch a person who does not have all the skills, but gets the most out of what they have; that’s the best lesson in life.”

Erskine credits Special Olympics with providing a lot of interaction so athletes can make friends. “It is the perfect speech therapy for Jimmy and others,” he said. “Special Olympics also has enhanced Jimmy’s social skills, not to mention the self-esteem that comes from winning a medal or ribbon.”

Erskine believes the fact that Jimmy has worked at Applebee’s for seven years is another huge milestone for him—being in a real workplace. “It’s another sign of how society has embraced a person like Jimmy. He has his limitations, but he’s industrious, he loves his job. Jimmy’s manager told me once, ‘The whole staff interacts better when Jimmy’s here.’”

Erskine has watched a society go from warehousing people with intellectual disabilities to job opportunities, group homes and public education. “It would be great if there was total community acceptance; for mainstream people not to have a fear of people with intellectual disabilities and to be more embracing,” he asserted.

“The challenge that Betty [Erskine’s wife] and I have is whether Jimmy will outlive us, who will take care of him and what kind of life will he have? All that has happened in the sports side of Special Olympics is far bigger than just traveling, having fun and competing; it has prepared athletes to live in the real world, even independently. What I see for Jimmy is a brighter future than was originally predicted for him.”

¹In 1957, the Dodgers left New York to become the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Editor’s note: Carl Erskine was born in Anderson, Indiana, 25 July 1926. When he retired from professional baseball, he served for 11 years as President of First National Bank in Anderson. Erskine was head coach of Special Olympics Indiana’s track and field team at The Seventh International Special Olympics Summer Games in South Bend, Indiana, USA, in 1987.

Planting Seeds of Compassion

by Victoria Colette Reynolds

The tulips are blooming in Idaho, site of the 2009 Special Olympics World Winter Games

Last September, at a “Breakfast with Champions” in Boise to benefit Special Olympics Idaho athletes, Kevin Russell, 14, heard a reading of “Welcome to Holland.” The composition tells the story of travelers who plan a dream vacation to Italy, but due to some mishap, their plane lands in Holland, and there they must stay.

Despite extreme sadness at the loss of their dream, they try to adapt. After all, Holland isn’t a horrible place—it’s just different. So they buy new guidebooks. Learn a new language. Meet new people. They also notice that Holland has some beautiful things, like windmills—and tulips.

When Emily Perl Kingsley composed “Welcome to Holland” in 1967, she wanted to express, in some small part, how parents feel when they learn they have a child with special needs. Her conclusion is that “...if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn’t get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things...about Holland.”

So moved by this reading was Russell that he decided to propagate the theme to cultivate community support for the 2009 Special Olympics World Winter Games to be held in Boise, just five miles from his hometown in Hidden Springs. Serving as student coordinator for a fundraising project he developed, Russell persuaded students and staff at Hidden Spring Charter School to literally “Tulip the Town.”

On 18 September 2006, the school staged a reception to rally community support for the fundraiser. Jim and Pirie Grossman, co-Chairs of the 2009 World Winter Games, spoke at the event, in addition to Russell and Special Olympics athletes. The following weekend, students canvassed the town, planting tulips at sponsoring homes and businesses. Selling bulbs at \$1 each, students raised about US\$4,500 to help support the Games.

“Kevin has always seen the world a little differently. Status quo means change is needed and the world is a canvas to his imagination when it comes to changing it,” says Michelle Russell, Kevin’s mother. “He is deeply moved by things [and]...we are involved in this project because of Kevin’s deep



Special Olympics Idaho athletes and Global Messengers Jeff Wilson (left) and Evelyn Martinez (right), and Tulip the Town creator Kevin Russell (center).

convictions that all people are valuable and have awesome potential.”

Kevin Russell admits that before the fundraiser, he felt differently about people with intellectual disabilities.

“I felt compassion for them, but also a little bit of pity,” he says. “Now, after spending a lot of time with Special Olympics athletes, my classmates and I learned that they don’t want pity from anyone. They want respect.”

Unlike many boys his age, Russell isn’t afraid to show how much he cares.

“I try to encourage my friends to show their true feelings. I believe that if you just be yourself, no one will think you’re a sissy because you care about things,” he says.

Now that seeds of compassion are rooting in his own community, Russell says he’s eager to see the tulips begin to bloom.

“I feel really good about what we’ve done with this project because after knowing people with intellectual disabilities, it’s opened my eyes and really touched my heart,” he says. “When people ask me why I did this, I have to say that I just did what anyone else would do if they feel how I do about Special Olympics athletes.”

Special Olympics Goes to College *by Molly O'Brien*

The Special Olympics North America University Curriculum finds a new home in America's dairyland



As a student, Amber Petersen gained valuable experience with Special Olympics Wisconsin before accepting a full-time position with Special Olympics Illinois. (Photo: Kelly Kloepping)

In 2006, the University of Wisconsin (UW)-Oshkosh, in conjunction with Special Olympics Wisconsin and Special Olympics North America, became the first University in Wisconsin and 15th in the United States to implement the official Special Olympics North America University Curriculum for Training Coaches, Athletes and Competition Management Personnel. The collaboration promises to make an impact and benefit both Special Olympics athletes and students interested in special education.

Through a variety of courses and service-learning experiences, the curriculum will train students and future teachers to more effectively work with special populations and meet Special Olympics educational and training requirements for coaching and games management.

Prior to this partnership, UW-Oshkosh maintained a long-standing relationship with Special Olympics Wisconsin. The University hosts an annual Special Olympics state tournament and UW-Oshkosh students fill approximately 600 volunteer positions each year throughout Northeastern Wisconsin. The new program will strengthen this bond. Students can continue to enjoy the same experiences through a

set curriculum prepared by Special Olympics North America and endorsed by the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation & Dance and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education. It will also provide participating students an edge in applying for paid positions with Special Olympics Programs around the world.

Amber Petersen, UW-Oshkosh alumna, represents a good example of how this program can work. Petersen earned a degree in Exercise Science and Health Promotion with an emphasis in Adapted Physical Education. She graduated in August 2006 after completing her Adapted Physical Education practicum and an internship, both with Special Olympics Wisconsin.

"I knew for years that I wanted to work for Special Olympics because I love sports and working with people with cognitive disabilities," Petersen said. "The hands-on experience with Special Olympics while I was still in school prepared me for my career because it helped me learn more about different disabilities and made me familiar with the organization and its mission."

Petersen was recently hired by Special Olympics Illinois as a Manager of Training and Sports Competition. The new curriculum promises current students a structured opportunity to follow in Petersen's footsteps.

For more information on the program please contact Molly O'Brien at Special Olympics Wisconsin (800) 552-1324 Ext. 202, or UW-Oshkosh's Dr. Robert Weber at (920) 424-1389.

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