

Amputation Leads to Athletic Excellence

by Joan D. Bennett

Having his left foot amputated at age nine hasn't stopped Christopher McLaughlin of Gilford, N.H., from doing anything he wants to do. In fact, it has allowed him to be more active.

Born with a clubfoot and shorter left leg, Chris had two operations before age four that did little to correct his foot. Despite his physical limitations, Chris has always loved sports. He played youth soccer, baseball and basketball with a one and one-quarter inch lift on his shoe, but as each game progressed, he often tripped on or dragged his tired foot.

Choosing amputation

At nine, Chris was frustrated that he couldn't play at the level he wished and was bothered by an increasing discrepancy in the length of his legs, which could cause future hip and back problems. Chris and his parents looked for solutions. Leg lengthening surgery or amputation were his only options. After much thought, Chris and his family chose amputation.

Chris's Symes amputation and recovery were not easy, but he was determined to play sports again. Since his fitting with a lightweight, high-energy prosthetic foot at Next Step Orthotics and Prosthetics in Manchester, N.H., which fits amputee children to world-class athletes, Chris has excelled at nearly every sport he has tried.

He was a leading scorer on his junior high soccer team, although after one powerful kick his leg flew off toward the goal, unsettling opponents and his new coach, who had no idea Chris wore a prosthesis.

"My leg has helped me a lot," says Chris. "It's helped me realize that sometimes I can be stronger than other people."

High-flying activities

A friend introduced Chris to skateboarding when he was 12. He still practices his moves nearly every day, executing kick flips, heel flips, 360 flips and variations. He proudly claims he can perform a four-stair jump set and does rails.

"I love skateboarding," says Chris, "and if I hadn't had the amputation, I know I wouldn't be able to skateboard. I don't think I could do a lot of the things I do. I've been a lot more active since I got my amputation."

Chris also snowboards in the winter and wakeboards on a local lake in the summer. His skateboarding abilities transfer well to these high-flying activities.

Now 16 and a junior at Gilford High School, Chris is focused on the upcoming basketball season. Last year he was co-captain and starting point guard of the junior varsity team. Even though he stands barely five feet tall, Chris dribbles circles around opponents, executes perfect passes and often outruns everyone on the court.

"I'm the one opponents congratulate after the game because they're so surprised," says Chris.

A strong math and science student, Chris wants to pursue a college degree that will allow him to someday design and engineer prosthetics. In the meantime, as soon as he gets his driver's license he plans on working with kids at Next Step to show them what is possible with a prosthesis.