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Ball control

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He put up 800 shots every day, a real gym junkie. No matter if rain was falling from the sky or snow or anything in between, Jake was out there.

Basketball had always been his dream. Sold-out NBA arenas, teaming up with the best players in the world and taking his basketball ability to the next level like every young basketball player aspires to do. For former Cyclone basketball star Jake Sullivan, that dream bordered on reality until an unexpected injury caused it to veer out of his control.

Rewind three years and Jake was a 6-foot-1-inch ISU freshman guard from Oakdale, Minn. Like many Minnesotans from the Twin Cities suburbs, Jake grew up watching the University of Minnesota Golden Gophers. Playing for the Gophers was always a dream of Jake’s, but it all changed when news broke in 1999 that academic violations had occurred among the players. Amidst the controversy, Jake decided Iowa State would be a better fit and Ames, Iowa became his new home.

“TI knew I could come and play [at Iowa State] right away,” said Jake. “I wanted to come in and play, and Iowa State gave me the best opportunity to do that.”

His parents are the first to say he wasn’t the most athletic player on the court, but his headstrong attitude made up for what he lacked elsewhere. That and his three-point shooting. His 270 career threes is the most in
Cyclone history.

The temperature flirted with zero degrees and No. 6 Kansas was in town. The Jayhawks came ready for a grudge match with No. 7 Iowa State in hopes of avenging the 77-70 Cyclone victory in Lawrence, Kan. earlier that month. But Jake had a different agenda.

Six threes and 22 points later, Jake helped Iowa State complete the season sweep.

“That’s the game that I really recognized that he was going to be able to compete at that level,” Jake’s father, Bill Sullivan said. To this day, his son’s performance that night still puts a smile on his face.

Growing up, Jake wasn’t like a lot of kids his age.

According to his mother, Jane Sullivan, when most kids his age were watching the Berenstain Bears or the Smurfs, Jake was catching up on all the current sports headlines. As early as his kindergarten days at Eagle Point Elementary in Oakdale, playing basketball was all he thought about. Even his early teachers caught on.

“This child will be in the NBA,” his mother recalls Jake’s kindergarten teacher telling her. “He played ball; that’s what he did,” Jane added.

Throughout middle and high school, he began playing for the Minnesota Magic AAU basketball team. Once he enrolled in high school, he took his talents to Howard Pulley, the Nike AAU team where players such as Harrison Barnes and Royce White played as well.

After a successful high school career culminating in a nomination for Minnesota Mr. Basketball, Jake chose to further his playing time as Iowa State. Once again, Jake was in the driver’s seat.

THE BEGINNING

Jake met his future wife, then Janel McVey, their freshman year of college in 2000. They began running into each other at the bus stop and just about everywhere else on the bustling campus.

“It was laughable because we just felt like God kept putting us in these places where we were the only two there,” Janel, now Janel Sullivan, said with a laugh.

Jake’s forward personality was a polar opposite from Janel’s shy and quiet demeanor. It comes as no surprise that Jake was the one to “start flirting first,” as Janel puts it, and by the spring semester, they were dating.

As the relationship progressed, Jake and Janel began attending Cornerstone Church of Ames. Salt Company, an organization through Cornerstone where college students
gather on Thursday nights to profess their faith, also became a major influence in Jake’s life. But he wanted more.

One fall Sunday in September 2008, the couple was sitting in church listening to a presentation on Zambia, Africa. Cornerstone sponsored a children’s center there, where orphans could come and eat a free meal every day and adults could receive pastoral teaching.

The clip was no more than three minutes long, and it wasn’t pushing for donations or service. Rather, Cornerstone wanted to give its members an update on the center’s progress.

At the time, Jake and Janel had been married four years and had two children of their own, JJ, now 6, and Jayla, now 4. But something hit Janel while she was watching the video, and the tears began running down her face.

“I literally thought I was crazy, because nothing like this had ever happened to me before,” Janel says.

As the two of them were leaving Cornerstone’s 1,500-seat auditorium, Jake was just as surprised as his wife.

“I’m thinking ‘Oh my gosh, what did I do, what did I say, what was I looking at?’” Jake said with a chuckle.

Janel felt they were supposed to adopt.

Adoption hadn’t even crossed their minds prior to that day at church, but that didn’t matter. A couple days later, Jake and Janel began looking into the process of adopting and sent the $25,000 to the adoption agency to start the process. A new chapter of their lives was about to begin.

**LOSING CONTROL**

When Jake was finishing up his career at Iowa State in 2004, injuries started to take a toll on his body.

“At some point in time, I was concerned that we were going to watch him go down on the court and not be able to get up,” Jake’s father said.

The injuries were always ankle-related. As any athlete knows, once an ankle gets sprained or broken or anything in between, the odds of it happening again increase dramatically. En route to becoming one of the best guards to ever don the cardinal and gold, Jake’s ankle had slowly deteriorated any remaining tendons.

Once his senior season rolled around, Jake knew his basketball career was coming to an end. Several surgeries on his ankle could only do so much and as a result, he made the call to forgo a redshirt and play out his senior year.

At the same time, Janel says Jake’s longtime battle with obsessive-compulsive disorder was flaring up, inadvertently helping them grow closer to each other.

“I saw him in a more vulnerable way, but he’d always been the strong one, so I saw those little pieces of his personality. I think when the layers come off and you start really seeing a genuineness in people, that of course is going to drive you closer,” Janel said.

While it was at a high point during this time, obsessive compulsive disorder, or OCD, had been something Jake had battled since his youth. An anxiety disorder which includes undesired thoughts, uneasiness, fear, or worry, OCD is known for producing repetitive behaviors, or compulsions, aimed at reducing those obsessive feelings. “I always knew there was something different, I just never knew what it was,” Jake says.

Just before his senior year of high school, Jake was diagnosed with the anxiety disorder. His doctors had him on maximum medication, but even that couldn’t stop the urges. From his counting routine every time he encountered a 90-degree angle to the necessity to pick up any shard of white-
colored paper around, OCD was a major factor in Jake’s life.

“I could be having a conversation with you and pick up every piece of white paper around us and you would never know,” Jake recalls.

Jake still managed to average more than 14 points per game and connected on 38 percent of his three-pointers during his final year as a Cyclone. When it came time to hang up the shoes at season’s end, he went in for one more surgery. But it was too late.

 “[The ankle] was just too shredded,” Jane says.

Jake’s surgeon was Dr. Thomas Greenwald, the head orthopedic surgeon at Mary Greeley Medical Center in Ames. As he came out to speak with the family, Jane, Bill and Janel were all eager to hear what news the man in the white coat had for them.

“His surgeon came out and told my husband and I and [Janel] that he couldn’t fix it and if he doesn’t fix it, he can’t play basketball,” Jane said.

The three of them sat in the waiting room and made the decision that the surgeon would close up Jake’s ankle. Jake’s dream of playing in the NBA throughout his childhood ended at Mary Greeley.

For one of the first times in his life, Jake didn’t have control. But he would never lose the basketball, or faith, inside him.

START OF SOMETHING NEW

Growing up playing for Minnesota AAU programs such as Howard Pulley and Minnesota Magic, Jake faced serious competition.

He didn’t realize until later, though, that not all states are created AAU-equal until he came to Iowa and started All Iowa Attack with Dickson Jensen in 2004.

“I realized Iowa was probably 8 or 10 years behind maybe a state like Minnesota in terms of development and youth basketball and organizations and opportunities,” Jake said.

Before All Iowa Attack, there were no similar youth basketball organizations in Iowa for ages of 8-18 that gave players a chance to play at the highest level. The organization started out in 2004 as a couple teams and has grown to 17 boys and girls teams from grades 3 through 11. But in 2008, Jake decided it was time for a change.

With that, Kingdom Hoops was born.

“I felt that God was calling me to do something different and really become an organization that was not only about basketball but was really about Christ and what he had done in my life,” Jake said.

The idea was to get closer to the inner city and become not only an organization that groomed better basketball players, but better leaders and Christians as well. But with starting an organization from the ground up comes a lot of uncertainty. Janel said that was the toughest part.

“There were so many unknowns and we really had to learn how to rely on God through that. We couldn’t fall back on people anymore,” she said.

Kingdom Hoops began renting out an indoor basketball complex off SE Delaware Avenue in Ankeny. The multiple-court location provided a place for players to attend camps, practice with their teams and receive one-on-one instruction from Jake and Drake alum Ryan Sears.

Ultimately, the organization grew much faster than expected and at one point was composed of 450 kids. This led to Jake and his team deciding to shrink the organization down to 250 to ensure Kingdom Hoops provided more than just a place to practice.

“We wanted to know every kid, every family,” Jake said.

GO BIG OR GO HOME

When it comes to anything Jake does in life, he’s never settled for anything less than the best.

“He does nothing little. He does everything big,” his mom says confidently. For him, just creating a Christian basketball organization wasn’t enough.

On that September 2008 day when Janel felt they were being called to adopt from
Africa, the couple could have pushed it off and kept on with their everyday life. But that’s not what Jake does.

Two years later, the Sullivans were in the city of Larteh, Ghana, adopting their son Justice, now 10. While there, Jake developed the idea to start a basketball program as a way to keep them coming back. Jake soon realized, however, that a place to shoot hoops was the least of the villagers’ concerns.

“It was a great idea, it was a very Americanized idea at the time, but when we actually got over there, we just tried to meet basic needs,” Jake explained.

When he was visiting the village of Asikuma, the villagers asked Jake to look at a young boy’s arm, in hopes he would be able to provide a cure.

“What am I going to tell him?” Jake thought.

The boy had suffered a compound fracture. The injury was so severe the bone was jutting out of his skin and infection had taken over the whole arm.

“How long has it been like this?” Jake asked the boy.

“A year and a half,” he replied.

Jake said there’s another 25 stories like this. The basketball complex was quickly pushed aside and Jake and Janel quickly began working on raising money to get the boy medical assistance. Jake sent an email out to the Kingdom Hoops families and told the story of the boy and how he needed help. Within an hour and a half, the $4,000 needed had already been raised.

Since then, Kingdom Hoops has raised between $300,000 and $350,000 with the help of Cornerstone Church of Ames, Living Word Fellowship in Knoxville, Iowa, and individual donors.

In addition, Jake and Janel were able to partner with CompAfricare and the Ghana Medical Association to build amenities such as an orphanage, new medical clinic and new classrooms that extend beyond the basketball court. Before they knew it, Kingdom Hoops had become Kingdom Cares International, a non-profit religious charity organization focused on mission work in West Africa.

“Nothing was necessarily planned, it was just like ‘OK, God, you’re calling me and I’m going to follow,’ and we just kind of made changes as time’s gone on,” Jake said.

It’s no secret that Ghana, isn’t the only country in need of help. It’s also no surprise this isn’t the end of the road for Kingdom Hoops and Kingdom Cares International.

On the South Sudanese and Ethiopian border lies a town called Jikow that is currently facing a major epidemic. Of the entire Jikow adult community, 50 percent suffer from AIDS. Poor location limits most organizations from being able to help.

“You’re talking about one of the most dangerous places in the world,” Jake says.

The idea to help came from a mom in the Kingdom Hoops organization. A Jikow native herself, she asked Jake and the Kingdom Hoops staff to help. The project is still in its early stages, but Jake said in addition to working on improving the AIDS issue, the group plans to build an orphanage, school, church and medical clinics.

Jake plans to go to Jikow in the summer of 2013 to work. Without having been there to see the situation firsthand, the uncertainty that loomed before the couple’s first trip to Africa is back.

But this time, Jake is eager to continue to grow Kingdom Hoops International and spread his faith to another new location.

“Who knows what that’s going to look like over the next couple years? But hopefully we’ll build some pretty cool stuff,” he said.

“... the thing I’ve learned about ministry work is you’ve got to really trust where God is leading you and what he’s doing in your life and a lot of it you don’t have control over.”

-Jake Sullivan
Just a few months ago, Jake and Janel brought home two new additions to their family. With the help of CompAfricare and Adoption Advocates International, the couple was able to adopt two half-sisters from the Kwahu Orphanage: Jasara, 2, and Jennifer, 5.

What was once a family of four has turned into a party of seven. Even though his playing days are long gone, Jake still uses what he learned playing the game he loved to help him do something he loves. He always expected the best from himself on the basketball court, and learning how to make mistakes played an essential role in his success.

“The thing that basketball taught me the most in terms of running an organization and coaching youth and doing these different things is you’re going to fail,” Jake says. “There were always bumps in the road with good individuals you played against or times you’d fail and stumble and pick yourself back up but the thing I’ve learned about ministry work is you’ve got to really trust where God is leading you and what he’s doing in your life and a lot of it you don’t have control over.”

Because faith became an influential part in Jake’s life once he got to college, he said it wouldn’t have changed had he gone to the NBA, overseas or anywhere else. Nevertheless, the demanding schedule of a professional athlete likely would not have left enough time to adopt three children from Africa or start a Christian basketball organization and non-profit either. Considering all of those positives came out of an ankle that couldn’t be repaired, Jake says it was a blessing in disguise.

“We plan to do all this stuff and usually God leads us down a completely different plan that we would have never seen coming,” Jake said. “From the ankle injury to the split with All Iowa Attack to now the move to a new facility, all of these things that have happened, no one necessarily planned it. It’s just happened.”