



Lowell McLaughlin is in fine form at a baseball clinic at Centennial Park. The determined athlete refuses to let Legg Perthes keep him from doing what he wants to do most – play ball. His family (below), dad Ed, sister, Tess and mom, Brita, say his attitude is an inspiration.

Tracy Holmes photos

Father, son both braced for success

Tracy Holmes
Staff Reporter

Lowell McLaughlin has the best throwing arm on the Astros, his mini-8s baseball team. The blond eight-year-old is also a force to be reckoned with in the swimming pool, recently bringing tears to the eyes of parents who couldn't help but root for the determined athlete in the butterfly during a meet in Crescent Beach. He was in the running for a top spot right up 'til the final five metres.

Not bad for a boy who's worn a cast for the past year – one that's prevented him from walking, taking a bath, sleeping on his back, and getting dressed in the manner everyone else does, among other things. The cast also made him as wide – four feet – as he would be tall. His dad, Ed, explained Lowell's prowess simply: he wants to play sports, and nothing, not even a braced hip-to-ankle cast, is going to stop him. "Lowell is just game to try anything," Ed said,

as the family enjoyed the hot sun on the deck of their Ocean Park home. "He certainly has his up days and his down days. He has just generally not let the cast get in his way." Like father, like son, you might say. Lowell has Legg Perthes, a disease most common in young boys and dogs, and one his dad became all-too-familiar with more than three decades ago. It interrupts blood flow to the top of the femur, causing it to die. His parents, who met the same year Ed got Legg



Challenges inspire others

from PAGE A1

Perthes, in Grade 6, figured out Lowell had it more than a year ago. He started to fall for no apparent reason during hockey and baseball games, and the symptoms rang a familiar bell. Doctors, through a bone scan, confirmed the condition shortly after.

Treatment – virtually the same today as it was in Ed's youth – involves traction followed by casting the legs as far apart as they can be wrenched. It's to take the pressure off the joint and encourage blood flow to return and the bone to re-grow.

There's no question Lowell's endured considerable pain, including a huge needle into his groin muscle to help it relax so doctors could spread his legs wider for casting. Following that, he waited six weeks for his femur to fall back into his hip joint, when even the slightest move or touch was agonizing. He learned to sleep folded in half, and deftly twist his lower body sideways to wheel through doorways. (Safe to say, Lowell's got some of the strongest abdominal muscles on the Peninsula.) His mom, Brita, converted all his waist-down clothing so it could be pulled on over Lowell's head.

On the perk side, Legg Perthes scored Lowell an entire row of seats to himself on a recent flight to Hawaii. He's been in the Canucks dressing room, and every player signed his cast. He even got a call at home from Ryan Kesler, after the centre underwent hip surgery himself.

Words used to describe Lowell have a common theme: "amazing," "real positive," "brave." His mom said he's an inspiration.

"He inspires people to push themselves and to put up with the pits," she said. "I've learned so much from him – perseverance, patience, and what's important in life."

She's certain he inherited a lot of his spirit from his dad, who took on Legg Perthes with similar heart. He clearly finds comfort in seeing how his dad's fared since. Ed, 44, played competitive sports after his cast came off, and today notices only that his hip tires easily during activity. He expects to need a hip replacement down the road. He knows contact sports and long-distance running are not part of Lowell's future.

Their 'medals' are for far greater accomplishments: learning to adapt; empathy for others; a good attitude; and never giving up among them.

"It just makes you think about different options for everything. Sometimes you just can't go from A to B, you've got to do a detour and somehow end up there," Ed said.

Lowell plans to end up on White Rock/South Surrey Baseball Association's all-star team next year. Today, weather permitting, he'll stand tall at the plate in a game at Centennial Park against the Cardinals. The McLaughlins are grateful to officials for allowing Lowell equal opportunity to play this year, even though he can't run bases or dive to catch a line drive. Baseball is his favourite sport.

Association president John Hogg said he didn't hesitate to put Lowell on a team. He described it as a learning opportunity for not just the players, but for the coaches and parents as well. Lowell's got a pinch runner at bat, and a buddy on the field. Parents help out in the end-of-game relay, where players race around the bases, ball in hand, to wrap up the fun. They take turns pushing Lowell on the route in his wheelchair, often taking corners on two wheels, much to both teams' amusement.

"It's had neat benefits for the other kids and families," Hogg said. "That's what Little League should be."

Lowell got his cast off Tuesday. If all goes well, it'll stay off and he'll launch into a year of physical therapy. Worst-case scenario, he has three to four weeks to enjoy the freedom before he's re-casted for up to another year.

He chooses to focus on today, and his family has pledged to follow suit.

They'll endure as long as it takes, Brita said, comforted by the knowledge that, while Legg Perthes may limit Lowell somewhat as he grows older, he will grow older, a guarantee not all other diseases come with.

"The fact he has a disease where he's going to get better, that I can put up with," she said.