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The Chronicle 1905
A CENTURY OF NEWS AT DUKE 2005

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SPORTS

March 02, 2004

But Now I See

by Mike Corey

It's the week before the Super Bowl, and all that Gregory Parrish can think about is the big game. He's wearing his Carolina Panthers sweatshirt--"They're going to win because they'll keep the Patriots from running the ball"--and he's not ashamed of his take on the contest. But what about New England's momentum, Greg?

"None of that matters in the Super Bowl," he humbly explains. "It's a new chance for both teams--that's why it's fun to watch."

But Gregory isn't completely invested in the matchup because he's a New York Jets fan at heart--he grew up in New Jersey with his family before moving to Wake County a few years ago.

So Gregory has more important things on his mind. Like N.C. State basketball.

"When Duke comes to N.C. State, we'll be ready," Gregory affirms of the team that has taken him under its wing. Head men's basketball coach Herb Sendek and his players have brought Gregory along for road trips and provided him and one of his parents with courtside seats. Needless to say, they've made quite an impression.

And unlike his Super Bowl prediction, Gregory was right about N.C. State, one of only three teams to beat the Blue Devils this season. Of course, Gregory was there, blanketed in Wolfpack red with an immutable smile gracing his face.

But on this day in late January, Gregory's mother Charlene is doing the cheering. Sitting beside the court where Gregory plays with Hoop Dreams coach Mike Zeillmann, her eyes and her thoughts are fixated on Gregory's every move, every fist pump and every attempted shot.

Gregory suffers from brain tumors that have rendered him nearly 90 percent blind. Diagnosed at two years of age, he has a conspicuous scar from a previous surgery on his scalp where his hair is still growing back into place. And unlike many of the other children in Hoop Dreams, Gregory's cancer is not yet in remission.

But no matter--Gregory just wants to get back on the court.

"This is great because he had to basically give up sports," Mrs. Parrish says. "When he was little he played tee-ball, and he did a basketball clinic back in New Jersey. But once he lost his vision he kind of had to give sports up, so this has been great."

And though Gregory is unable to navigate the court by himself, he is beginning to master the essential skills of the game: dribbling and shooting. Zeillmann instructs Gregory how to dribble by bouncing the balls in front of him first, letting him hear the rhythm of the rubber as steady as a heartbeat, and then asking Gregory if he's ready to take the reigns. Gregory nods firmly, as Zeillmann gradually directs possession to him. At first, he can only maintain control for a few moments before losing his feel for



gregory parrish loves sports, a passion that has not been hampered by the brain tumors that have rendered him 90 percent blind. now the 10-year-old can participate in athletics once again, and he can do so with peers that have already traversed the path he treads.

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Gregory Parrish poses with his father at the Duke-N.C. State game in Raleigh.

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the ball. But after four or five tries, Gregory dribbles at least 10 consecutive times, his brow pursed in concentration, his hands moving smoothly over the ridges of the ball as if he were reading a message written in Braille.

He forgets about his new pinnacle so he can jump up and down, as he is prone to do in moments of elation. He extends his right hand above his head for an anticipated high five from Zeillmann, who stands before him beaming.

"He's amazing, isn't he?" Zeillmann says. "He's just a phenomenal kid." Next up is shooting. Zeillmann leaves the court for a moment and returns with a special hoop that hooks onto the regular 10-foot rim, thereby creating a basket that is around seven feet off the ground. That was the easy part.



JENNY MARRON/THE CHRONICLE
Mike Zeillmann offers a dribbling tutorial to Gregory Parrish, a 10-year-old blinded by brain tumors.

"I kind of line him up and he shoots it and I tell him right or left," explains Zeillmann, who claps by the rim and tells Gregory after each shot exactly what the ball did--too far to the right, too hard off the center of the backboard--so the next one he takes can have a better chance of going in. Gregory's shot is remarkably smooth for someone that cannot even see his own form, as he tucks his elbow in and flicks his wrist just as well as any other 10-year-old.

It should come as no surprise then that Gregory is a streaky shooter. He can reel off a dozen shots in a row, become misaligned or misjudge his distance from the hoop, and then miss several consecutively. But every miss requires another attempt, and every swish results in a huge smile and a few celebratory hops. And then he tries again.

His mother applauds on the sideline, her three-year-old daughter sitting wide-eyed in her lap.

"I don't think he was nervous," Mrs. Parrish says of Gregory's first day of Hoop Dreams. "He just loves sports so much that he just plays." At the end of the session, Zeillmann leads Gregory off the court and over to his mother, who greets him with a kiss on the forehead and an all-encompassing hug. Gregory notes that his favorite part of playing basketball with Zeillmann is that his coach is "cool" and that he has now learned to "bounce two balls at one time and shoot the basketballs in the net."

An impersonation of Dick Vitale follows--"Get a TO, baby!"--as he tugs on his 13-year-old brother's sleeve to join him back on the court. His brother, an avid baseball player himself, concedes to a little one-on-one.

His mother sits back down, returning her attention to the court. She watches as her oldest son pretends to play defense, all the while positioning Gregory in front of the hoop to take an uncontested layup. He bends both knees, leans forward, pulls the ball up to his chin and snaps his wrist like a catapult. The ball caroms off the backboard and into his older brother's hands. He then drops the ball back into Gregory's possession. "Try again!" Gregory insists of himself.

His mother grins and whispers.

"He loves this so much."

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