

SPEECH FROM Jim Abbott,
one-handed famed professional baseball pitcher

It Is Not What's Gone - But What's Given

Not too long ago a little girl in my neighborhood was born without a hand. She was born just after my own second daughter Ella was born. Her parents were obviously shaken up. About a week later, I saw them at a neighborhood function and they came over to me and asked what my thoughts were, if I had any advice, for them and for their daughter. My advice? This is their daughter's life and they were asking my advice? Talk about humbling. What do you say? I had nothing very smart to say.

I told myself I wouldn't let that happen again. That it was important that I could share what I have learned.

I've learned that there are millions of people out there ignoring disabilities and accomplishing incredible feats. I learned that you can learn to do things differently, but do them just as well. I've learned that it's not the disability that defines you, it's how you deal with the challenges the disability presents you with. I've learned that we have an obligation to the abilities we do have, not the disability.

I was born without my right hand. I have never felt slighted. As a kid I was pretty coordinated and growing up I loved sports. I learned to play baseball like most kids, playing catch with my Dad in the front yard. The only difference was that we had to come up with a method to throw and catch with the same hand. What we came up with, is basically what I continued to do my whole life. I used to practice by pretending to be my favorite pitchers. I'd throw a ball against a brick wall on the side of our house, switching the glove off and on, moving closer to the wall--forcing myself to get that glove on faster and faster. I imagined myself becoming a successful athlete.

Growing up, sports were my way of gaining acceptance. I guess somewhere deep inside I was thinking if I was good enough on the field then maybe kids wouldn't think of me as being so different. Honestly I hid behind sports. I wanted the attention that comes from being successful, but I was very reluctant to draw any attention to my disability. You know it's funny, there was an article in the L.A. Times recently about a high school pitcher who has been doing very well---despite missing one hand. He mentioned my name as an example but went on to say he didn't want to be like me, he wanted to be like Randy Johnson. At first my feelings were hurt, but then I understood. That's exactly the same way I felt growing up. I didn't want to be defined by a disability. Focus on my pitching and not my hand.

I loved throwing a baseball. It is so important to find something in life you feel crazy about. Because you are so passionate you naturally practice, the hard work that it takes to do something well will come easily.

You know how it worked out. I got to play baseball at the University of Michigan, 2 United States teams The 1987 Pan American team and the 1988 United States Olympic team. Even though I played in the major leagues for almost 10 years the Olympics are still one of my favorite memories.

You know in my career I once won 18 games in a year, I also lost 18 games in one year. I was fortunate enough to go straight from the Olympic team to the major leagues. Never spending a day in the minors. I was also sent down to the minor leagues after 8 years in the big leagues. In 1996 I went 2-18 with a 7 run era . I couldn't get anyone out. I was in the first year of a long term contract with a team near my home. It was supposed to be easy. That following year I was fired. Drove back to California, crying all the way. I spent that summer up in Michigan hurting and wondering if my career was over. Somewhere deep inside I wasn't sure. So I called the Chicago White Sox for a try out.

They gave me a chance to pitch again. I would watch the major leagues on t.v. with the rest of those kids and it felt like a million miles away. That had been my life. I was away from my family who I know thought I was crazy. Then I got the call I was going to Chicago back to the show. That was the good news, bad news your facing the Yankees Sat. night. They were about 100 and 15 at the time. I went on to win that game against the Yankees that night. In fact I went 5-0 the rest of that Sept.

I would like to tell those parents back in my neighborhood how wonderful my own parents were, and are. They encouraged me to participate, but didn't dwell on every move I made. I don't ever remember a concession to the fact that I had one hand. Maybe even a little more was expected. I will always be thankful that they never allowed my hand to be used as an excuse.

I would like to tell that little girl, "Go out and find what it is that you love. It may not be the most obvious choice or the most logical but never let that stop you." Baseball was hardly the most the most logical choice for someone with one hand, but I loved it, so that's what I pursued. No matter where the road takes you don't give up until you know in your heart you done everything you possibly could to make your dreams come true. You owe nothing to disability, ignore it. When you fail, get back up and try again. Leave no room for an excuse. Don't listen to what you can't do. 99% of the time I never think of missing a hand. I have never been envious of someone with two hands. Listen to that voice deep within you, it knows, when you've done your best.

Somehow when things are said and done there will be some accountability imagine someone coming up to you at the end of your life and saying "you've been given these talents what did you do with them." There is a certain potential we owe it to ourselves to live up to. Work hard, don't look back, celebrate the blessings in your life.

- Jim Abbott

For more information on Jim Abbott, and to bring him to do a speech at your event, email: Lilly@aboutonehandtyping.com, or call 909-398-1228