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PARENTING

Skates, Sticks and a Little Support

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GARDEN CITY

IT was Saturday night, so Brian Collins and his 13-year-old son, Danny, were getting ready for Danny's hockey game. They opened Danny's hockey bag to make sure everything was packed. For Christmas, Santa had brought Danny new hockey suspenders, new pads, a new helmet and new skates, and they checked to be sure everything was inside. Last practice, Danny forgot his socks and had to wear Matt Pope's extras. "Where's your white jersey?" Mr. Collins asked, and Danny held it up. "No. 5," Danny said.

"He knows everyone's number," said Mr. Collins, who was trying to move things along; Danny has Down syndrome, and getting him dressed in all the equipment at the rink can be slow going. Mr. Collins reminded him they had to be on the ice in 45 minutes.

"Brian Irwin, 45," Danny said.

Danny's Mom, Jenny, came into the kitchen and said, "Fill up your water bottle."

"I want Coke," Danny said.

"No Coke," said his dad. "Water in the water bottle."

Danny held the empty bottle out to be filled and his mom said: "You can do it yourself. You're 13."

"Thirteen, Joe Burdi," Danny said.

When Danny was born, a relative who had a child with cerebral palsy said something that made things easier for Mr. Collins. She said no matter how many years passed, when Christmas came around again, Danny would still believe in Santa Claus, and Mr. Collins thought, "I can live with that."

He is reminded of this daily. Routine is important to children with Down syndrome, and every night before Danny goes to bed, he insists that his dad read him "The Night Before Christmas" — even in July.

Mr. Collins started the van, and Danny immediately began grousing. “I know, I know, hold on...” Mr. Collins said. “We have to put on ‘High School Musical,’ ” he explained, slipping in the CD. When “Start of Something New” came on, Danny began singing, not quite to himself, and he sang all the way to the rink.

Mr. Collins, a civil engineer, coaches his younger son, Michael, in football and basketball, but knew nothing about hockey. Hockey was Danny’s idea. Four years ago, Danny brought home a flier from school announcing the formation of the Long Island Blues, a team for kids with disabilities like Down syndrome, autism, attention deficit disorder, Tourette’s syndrome and cerebral palsy. Ms. Collins was going to throw it away, but Danny said: “No! Hockey me.”

“You don’t skate,” said Mr. Collins.

“Hockey me,” Danny said again, and once he fixates on an idea, he’s tough to dissuade, as anyone knows who has ever tried driving him anyplace without playing “High School Musical.”

So hockey Danny it was. They went to the first practice with a pair of rented skates and a bike helmet and were one of eight families that year. Today there are 55 players, as young as 5 and as old as 25, mirroring the nationwide growth in the American Special Hockey Association. In the last four years, the association has gone from a dozen teams to more than 50, including teams in Westchester (New York Raptors), Connecticut (Southern Connecticut Storm) and New Jersey (Daredevils).

“We look like no other hockey you’ve ever seen,” said Jon Schwartz, who is the national association vice president and coach of the Daredevils — Long Island’s opponent at Cantiague Park in Hicksville last weekend. Conventional rules like offsides and icing are not enforced. Lines are pitted against each other according to ability, and sometimes 5-year-old Shane Sullivan plays beside Max Graney and Alex Butler, who both have beards.

As in regular hockey, there are generally six players on the ice, but there can also be a few extra “floaters” who just skate in circles. Nicholas Russo, 10, the son of the Blues’ head coach, Mike Russo, can’t skate on his own, so Kathleen Gallagher, a parent, leads him around the ice, staying as far from the puck as possible.

Still, it is unmistakably hockey, with players skating up and down, frenzied banging of the boards when a goal is scored, and uniforms that are every bit as fancy as the pros’. Though many of the players have clear disabilities and have trouble walking on land, on ice they seem to float.

Bill Ackerman, a Blues assistant coach whose 14-year-old daughter, Rebecca, has Asperger’s syndrome and is a member of the team, believes the uniforms and equipment play a crucial role: the helmets focus the players and block out distractions; the sticks are like third legs, providing

extra stability; there's so much padding, falling doesn't hurt; and when they pull down their masks to play, every one of them looks like the Islanders' Mike Comrie.

Coaching the Blues has its subtleties. As one line came off the ice, Mr. Ackerman made sure a boy with Tourette's wasn't sitting by the girls on the bench. "Things come out of his mouth — I don't want them to hear it," he said.

It took Danny three seasons to master skating, and now, when he makes his way down the ice to the offensive end, he's so happy to be there, he doesn't want to leave. "He loves being near the goal," says his dad. "When we sub, it's hard to get him off the ice."

The parents appreciate that so many other adults get to know and understand their kids. At one point, Danny skated over to the bench and yelled, "Outback!" Danny slurs his words and can be hard to understand, but Neil Robbins, a coach, knew exactly what Danny meant. "He wants to go out to eat," he said.

"Danny, the game's not even half over," Mr. Robbins told him. "Get back out there."

When he had skated off, Mr. Robbins said, "Danny's a big French-fry guy."

After the game, the small dressing room was crammed with players and their fathers, who were helping them take off their equipment and get back into their street clothes. Usually on the way home the Collinses go to the drive-through at McDonald's and order fries, but tonight there was a team party, and Danny ate pizza — he's a big pepperoni guy, too — rubbing his hands in delight before each bite.

In the van, he grouched until Mr. Collins put on "High School Musical" and then sang out loud to himself the whole way home. Though it was 10 by the time they got back to Garden City, well past Danny's bedtime, Mr. Collins read him "The Night Before Christmas," said good night and then, as he always does, sat in the dark watching until his son fell asleep.

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