

SPORTS

THE Natural

Zach Hodskins was born without a left hand and forearm, but that hasn't dampened his basketball ambitions

BY MIKE TIERNEY

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A Conversation
With Zach Hodskins

Hodskins hones his shooting skills at a high school gym in Ohio last August.

A referee's whistle halts play during a recent game at Milton High School north of Atlanta. A foul has been called on Milton senior guard Zach Hodskins, leaving his coach mystified.

"What did he do?" asks Coach Matt Kramer. Hand-checking with both hands, the official says.

"Hey," Hodskins protests, "I don't even have two hands."

Born without a left hand and forearm, Hodskins was once thought even by his family to have a better chance of becoming president than playing basketball for a college powerhouse. Yet the University of Florida, which has won back-to-back national titles in the past decade, has guaranteed him a roster spot for next season.

When people watch Hodskins sink three-point shots and lunge for loose balls, what they notice as much as his missing hand is his drive. He's converted years of slights, perceived and real, into a continual source of energy that he uses to confound opponents. At nearly 6' 4", Hodskins is a strong passer with an amazing ability to sink shots from anywhere. "He doesn't have 3-point range," his coach says. "It's in-the-gym range."

Hodskins, who averaged 11 points a game last season, would be assured significant playing time, perhaps even a starting role, at a lower-level college. But his nature made him accept the Gators. "He has such an extreme desire to prove himself at the highest level he can," his father, Bob, says.

Bob and Stephanie Hodskins didn't know their son would be born without half a limb. They pledged not to treat him differently than his two older sisters. He started playing basketball at age 5 with his dad in the driveway. By third grade, he was hooked.

"I just had to come up with my own style," Hodskins says. "I could catch and pass and shoot all the same and dribbling was fine. It just took a lot of hard work."

In some ways, his disability became an advantage. "It made me want to work harder to overcompensate for things people said I couldn't do."

He never hid his ambition to play in college. To those who doubted him, he said, "Just watch." For every pick-up-game captain who didn't choose him, Hodskins stockpiled motivation. Concern that he was pushing himself too hard tempered his parents' pride. "Dial it back," his father would tell him. "You don't have to prove yourself every day."

In middle school, he went out for cross-country, primarily as conditioning for basketball. He promptly placed second in a meet that left him so exhausted his parents feared for his health. Their son's explanation: "Allowing anyone to beat me was unacceptable."

The family found two basketball coaches who helped Hodskins develop moves, like a crossover dribble between the legs, to minimize the effect of his disability.

4 Million Views on YouTube

A year ago, a scouting service posted a one-minute clip of Hodskins's highlights on YouTube. The video now has more than 4 million views.

Hodskins won't receive a scholarship to the University of Florida, but he's been designated a preferred walk-on, which means he'll make the team.* There was speculation on social media that the Gators' offer bordered on a publicity stunt, but his dad says Coach Billy Donovan told Hodskins: "We're first and foremost recruiting you as a player. You are an inspiration, but you are here because you're a good basketball player."

At the game in which the ref called out Hodskins for hand-checking, an opposing coach shouts, "Make him go left!"—an order intended to take advantage of his missing left hand. Hodskins is unfazed. "I tell them, 'Keep forcing me left.' I get more separation when they do that," he says.

Young people with disabilities or their

Pushing Boundaries

Disabled athletes who've competed at the highest levels

Tom Dempsey

Born without fingers on his right hand and without toes on his right foot, he was a kicker for several NFL teams from 1969-79.

Natalie du Toit

A one-legged swimmer from South Africa, she competed in the 2008 Beijing Olympics without a prosthetic.

Oscar Pistorius

A double-amputee runner from South Africa, he competed in the 2012 Olympics on prosthetics.

Derrick Coleman

A deaf running back for the Seattle Seahawks, he played in the 2014 Super Bowl.



parents have contacted Hodskins—for advice and requests to meet, and sometimes to shoot hoops together.

"I welcome it, more than playing basketball," he says. "Through basketball, I can reach out to those people. It's a very humbling experience."

It's upsetting when he notices young people trying to disguise a disability with clothing or cropped photos on their social media pages. "I've never had that problem," Hodskins says. "These kids need to be themselves, not hide it all their lives."

If Hodskins hid his disability or shied away from a challenge, he wouldn't be able to defy expectations, as he does every time he steps onto a court with people who've never seen him play.

"They don't think I can play, or they don't know what to think, but it's when I hit those first few shots or when I go by them is when they wake up," Hodskins told *USA Today* last year. "That's when they start playing me hard. That's what I love. I know I've just earned their respect. That's all I want." •

Mike Tierney writes about sports for *The Times*. Additional reporting by Patricia Smith.

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