The Hockey Player That Can't Stand

By, Robert Creenan

Imagine getting up in the morning and you're not able to get out of bed. Instead of using your legs, you have to have to use a sling to hoist your body out of bed and into a power chair. Then when getting ready in the morning, you have to allot at least two hours to shower, brush teeth, and get dressed. Not to mention that you need someone else to clean you.

Now imagine doing all of that, but now, you're an athlete. That's what Matt Murray had to deal with. Even among the players of a sport designed mainly for disabled people, Murray was in a unique, or unfortunate depending on your point of view, situation.

The Murray home in North Buffalo is decorated with awards Matt has earned. Local and national sled hockey awards and news stories about Matt are dotted around the family kitchen and family room. Matt's bedroom has shelves of the awards he earned in youth sports like baseball, soccer, and golf, along with other memorabilia of the Buffalo Bills, Buffalo Sabres, and Boston Red Sox. The bedroom is right next to the family room, so Matt doesn't have to use the stair lift more than he needs to. The downstairs bathroom was also remodeled in order to fit a shower for Matt.

Matt lives with his father Dan, the chief marketing officer for Lawley insurance, and his sister Colleen, who's working on her personal trainer certification. His twin brother, also named Dan, is in London getting a master's degree in entrepreneurship at Regent's School. His other sister, Bridget, is a fourth grade teacher at St. Mark's school lives in the Elmwood Village. Matt's parents divorced during his first year of college, and his mom, Debbie, a teacher's assistant at the Catalician Center for autistic children, died this past July.

Matt requires constant help from his family and friends to live a normal life. Yet he's still seen as an inspiration to whomever he meets.

Murray has suffered from Duchene Muscular Dystrophy since he was 3 years old. This results in the exons in one of his genes to be defective, where his body doesn't produce the dystrophin protein. This protein is what muscles use to build itself up after a workout in order to get stronger. As a result, Murray, when he could walk, walked very awkwardly. He's been in a chair since he was 11, and his muscles have gotten weaker and weaker. Matt even had to change schools in the fourth grade, from St. Mark's in Buffalo to St. Amelia's in Tonawanda, because St. Mark's wasn't handicapped accessible. It would also be too much of a burden for the school to install an elevator.

Matt had to quit the sports he was involved in because around the ages of 10 to 12, people with muscular dystrophy make the transition from walking to being in a chair. By the time Matt stopped playing baseball, his dad had to carry him out to the outfield where he would do nothing because none of the kids could ever hit the ball that far out.

It was during this transitional period that his mom discovered sled hockey and encouraged Matt to give it a try. Sled hockey, known as sledge hockey in the rest of the world, was created in Stockholm, Sweden as a way for those with physical ailments to continue playing hockey. Players are strapped into a sled and control what direction they go with two small sticks. Upper-body strength is a necessity to move around the rink.

From the first moment he first tried sled hockey, Matt was in love with it. "The only problem was that I didn't have the upper-body strength to push myself around the rink. So I became a 'pusher', where my sled had a handlebar attached to it so my dad could push me around the rink instead."

Matt's primary team was the Buffalo Sabres sled hockey, which had gone through some name changes since it was founded. They were known as the Niagara Challengers and the Buffalo Freeze before they became affiliated with the Sabres in 2006. With the Sabres, Matt would play in various tournaments across the country for the next 13 years. These included a 2011 tournament in Fort Wayne, Indiana, where the Sabres outscored their opponents 29-1.

Matt's sled hockey career ended this past April, when he played his final game for the Buffalo Sabres sled hockey at the USA Hockey disabled festival held at the Northtown Center in Amherst. By this point, at age 22, Matt was 6'2" and 200 lbs.; not to easy to put in a sled compared to when he was 11 at 4'7" and 90lbs. Matt couldn't properly stickhandle the puck, and he himself wasn't happy with how his skills were fading. "This tournament is considered the national championship of the sport," Murray said. 'What better way to end it than here in Buffalo?"

Murray decided on this game, against the Minnesota Wild sled hockey team, would be his last the week before it happen. The messages and support Matt got in response was overwhelming for him. "I guess I made more of an impact on people than I thought," Murray said. "There were people showing up at this game who had never been to a sled hockey game before, and everyone was cheering for me. I'd thought I'd miss it, but knowing that I couldn't play the game anymore helped made that easier."

Matt is still involved with the program, but with more administrative duties now. He schedules the team's games and ice time, registers them for tournaments, organizes the hotel arrangements for out of town games, and gets the word out for whatever fundraisers the team has. This is all volunteer work, and even if it were a paid job, Matt wouldn't want to take the money anyway. "I get a lot of joy out of the work that I do," Murray said. "I would rather have that money going towards buying a sled for someone else. I even gave my sled back to the team for someone else to use it. Now it belongs to a girl on the junior team."

As a result of his illustrious career and dedication to the sport, Murray was nominated for the USA Hockey disabled athlete of the year. He had no idea that he was nominated, even though the three people that were required to secure nomination were his sister, brother and the mom of one of his teammates. "One day," Murray said. "The USA disabled hockey chairman, JJ O'Connor, a good friend of mine from Chicago, called me one day out of the blue. We were talking for a while, including him trying to get me to play power wheelchair soccer. Then, he just said, 'By the way, you were selected for this award.' My reaction was 'what?' He said there were 12 other nominees, and I was the unanimous choice."

Matt and his family flew out to Colorado Springs to accept the award at a dinner and ceremony USA hockey held. At this ceremony, USA hockey hands out 6 different player of the year awards. The categories are Men's, Women's, international, goalie, collegiate, and disabled. "Jack Eichel (now of the Buffalo Sabres) won the college player of the year," Murray said, "but he couldn't make it because he was at a combine in Buffalo. It would have been nice to meet him there."

Matt likes to believe that he has broken some of the stereotypes commonly associated with disabled people, such as the need to inspire others all the time and constantly wallow in the sympathy of others. He's still in his 20's, and wants to have fun every now and then. "I still want to go out to bars and hang out with my friends," Murray said. "People often worry about saying the wrong things to me. That doesn't bother me at all. Just because I'm disabled doesn't mean I don't want to do normal things."

People with muscular dystrophy only live till their 30's, as the disease causes heart and lung problems. Murray does have to use a sleep apnea machine to keep oxygen flowing into his body when he sleeps. Since Murray knows death is lurking closer to him than normal people, having a consistent, paying job isn't much of a concern for him. He has applied for various digital content, public relations, marketing, and business jobs, work that can be done from a computer at home, but Matt simply wants to get more out of life by giving back.

Since Matt is living life knowing death is a certainty, his family started a foundation, Miles for Matty, which focuses on giving people with muscular dystrophy an opportunity to cross things off of their bucket list. "It's like Make-a-Wish," Murray commented. "It can be something small, like seeing your favorite band perform live, or something much bigger than that."

As the foundation was named for Matt, he was the first one to be treated. This past October, Matt traveled to London for a week. Aside from the sightseeing, Murray and his family there did three major things. First, they visited Dan at his school. Second, they saw Matt's favorite soccer team, London-based Arsenal F.C., win against Liverpool-based Everton F.C. Lastly, they saw the Buffalo Bills play against the Jacksonville Jaguars at Wembley Stadium. "While we were in London," Matt said. "We stayed at the same hotel that the Channel 7 reporters were staying at. They noticed us after seeing us in our Bills jerseys, so they talked with me for a bit. We did get plenty of word about the foundation out there. (Bills player) Eric Wood later said something about the foundation."

Miles for Matty is currently in the process of deciding the next person that they'll help out is. The leading candidate, Nathan Gavin, is just 11 years old, the age where people with muscular dystrophy go from walking to being in a chair. "Some families that have someone with M.D. are very private about it," Murray said. "They have to be careful about how they approach this. A bucket list might be too scary for some people, since that means for certain you will die."

While Murray still has a few years of life still in him, he plans on doing more traveling. "One of the things I've always wanted to do was go to an out of town Sabres game," Murray said. "I've never been to New York City, I've always wanted to visit Vegas, I have family in California in both Los Angeles and San Francisco, so I hope to visit them someday. I was hoping to do to Ireland when I visited London, cause I have ancestry from there, but my Dad didn't want to go, even though there are cheap flights there. I still hope to go there someday."