



Jim Johnson's "A Coach and a Miracle"

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On the night of February 15, 2006, the bleachers at Greece Athena High School near Rochester, New York, were packed with students who had just begun cheering wildly and jumping up and down. During that same moment, I collapsed into my seat as tears welled in my eyes.

Never before had I made a coaching move with such impact. Never had I felt such emotion in my career. You'd think we had just won a championship. It wasn't a buzzer-beating basket; it wasn't a heave from half-court that made the place go nuts. In fact, it wasn't even a specific play. All I had done was turn toward the player with uniform number 52, point my index finger at him, and say "J-Mac."

Up bounced Jason McElwain. In giving him some playing time, I enabled him to realize a lifelong dream. It was the last home contest of his senior year, and Jason was seeing his first varsity action.

Now this might seem like a fairly ordinary moment, but Jason wasn't your ordinary basketball player. He was small and skinny. He stood all of 5 feet, 7 inches and weighed only 120 pounds, and his blond hair was partially covered by a head band.

Jason—or J-Mac, a tag I had hung on him two years earlier when he first managed for us—was so excited to enter the game that he started right for the basketball court without first checking in and had to be redirected to the scorer's table. But very few people noticed that; they were just so happy to see him get in the game.

Why? Because Jason is autistic and learning-disabled. Knowing his limitations, the crowd was moved and so was I upon Jason entering the game.

Throughout the night J-Mac—and the increasingly impatient spectators—had wondered if I was ever going to play him. Finally, with 4:19 remaining in the game, a large lead and all my other substitutes having seen action, J-Mac ascended his stage with the fanfare of a rock-and-roll star. In fact, many fans had brought blow-up photos of Jason attached to wooden sticks, and they began furiously waving the placards upon his grand entrance.

My simple reason for playing Jason was because I loved the kid and wanted to give him the shot he deserved. I didn't do any of this for hype, but what a beautiful scene nonetheless. That was enough reward right there for me.

When play resumed Jason promptly launched an air ball, and I put my head in my hands. Prayer supposedly isn't allowed in public schools, but I started praying for all I was worth: "Please, God, let him make just one basket."

He then missed a layup. I started praying harder.

Fortunately, God must be a basketball fan. And he apparently had a message to deliver to the rest of the world that night. In fact, I believe it was nothing short of a miracle. Jason soon rattled home an historic three-point basket, creating complete bedlam. And that was just the beginning.

If his making one basket was a shock, there are no words to describe what happened afterward. With his teammates looking to pass him the ball at every opportunity, Jason launched 13 shots in all and made seven—including six three-pointers. That's 20 points in half a quarter, making him the game's high scorer, as we won 79-43.

As the game's final seconds ticked off, I got a tap on my shoulder and it was J-Mac's

mother, Debbie McElwain in tears. She said, “Coach, this is the nicest gift you could have ever given my son.” She then bent down and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

It was a story that had all the makings of a major inspirational event even if J-Mac hadn’t scored, or if he had just nailed a three-pointer and then come right out of the game. But scoring 20 points in the game’s last 3:11? A high-school team can’t score at that pace. Projected over an entire 32-minute game, that’s a ratio of about 200 points per game.

However, there was a lot more going on than a scoring rampage if you look closely at the video. You see Jason’s teammates passing to him exclusively. All the players going crazy on the bench for each shot that fell.

Jason being engulfed by players and fans after swishing in his last shot at the buzzer, from NBA range. Students hoisting Jason on their shoulders as he raised a basketball high above his head in triumph. It was a complete celebration of humanity. They’re actions that elate me, based on the life lessons I’ve tried to teach during my career.

In just a few minutes’ time this diminutive 17-year-old had turned the tables on a lifetime largely filled with social isolation due to his autism. Beginning the next day, J-Mac and I were thrust onto the national stage in ways that almost never happen in high-school athletics.

Thanks to some amateur video by a student volunteer and the power of the Internet, this story was picked up by major media outlets around the world. Jason and I subsequently appeared on all kinds of talk shows and newscasts.

Reports continue to live on today through various YouTube postings (including my personal favorite, an ESPN feature that reveals just how deeply J-Mac’s big night moved me. I show that piece at all my public-speaking appearances and still get choked up looking at it.) I’ve also received several hundred letters, phone calls, and e-

mails praising me for giving J-Mac a chance and remarking on how deeply inspiring the event was.

I've read and heard, many times over, the Gospel accounts of miracles performed by Jesus. These acts typically involved common, everyday folks. Some of them had disabilities. All had faith, and they became a positive example for others.

Therein, to me, lies the meaning behind the miracle of February 15, 2006. As it turned out, I'd say J-Mac and I were just the kind of people God might employ to send a message of hope to the rest of the world in the form of a timeless, feel-good story.