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Evanston lacrosse coach a testament to sport's transformative power

By **HEATHER RULE**
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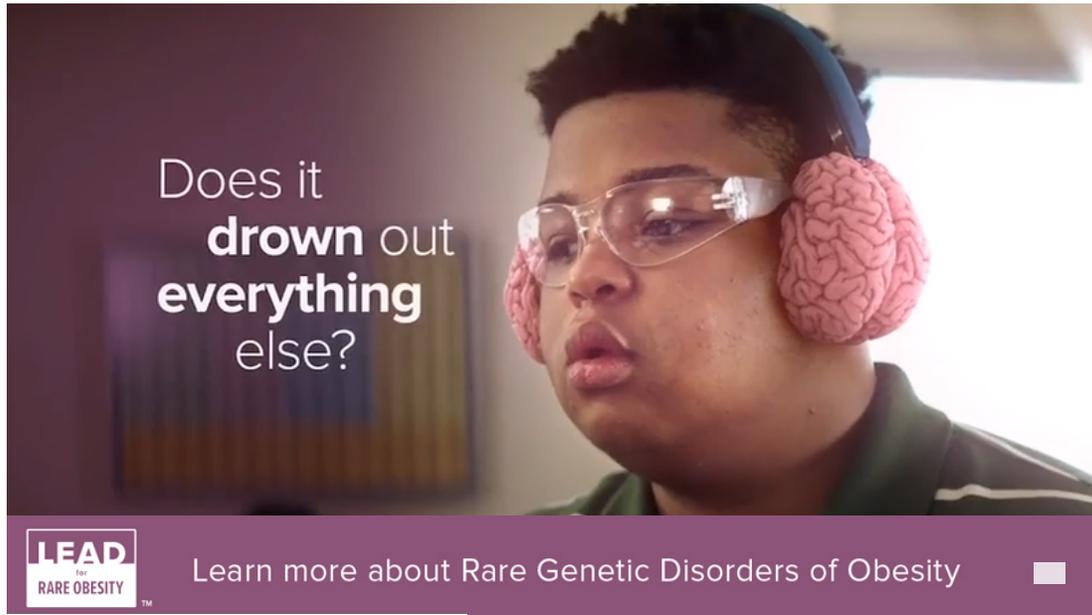
Evanston boys lacrosse coach Justin Porter played for the Rochester (N.Y.) Rattlers in Major League Lacrosse.

Lacrosse changed Justin Porter's life.

"Without the game of lacrosse, I'd be dead or in jail," Porter said.

FEEDBACK

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He got into trouble in school as a first-grader. One day, a teacher turned his trips to detention and in-school suspension into a budding passion for lacrosse. He brought Porter a lacrosse stick and told him he was going to become a ball boy for the varsity lacrosse program.

"I just kept moving up through the ranks," Porter said.

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He ended up playing professionally.

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FEEDBACK

Now 33, Porter is in his second year as coach of the Evanston boys lacrosse team, a program that finished 9-9 last year. They're in rebuilding mode this season, and lost six of eight at one point after starting the year 7-1. Nine freshmen are on the varsity roster.

Midfielder Timothy Brewer, a senior from Evanston, was on JV before moving up to varsity last year and starting this season. According to Porter, he's one of the most improved players on the team.

For Brewer, he's seen Porter get the Wildkits to outwork the other team for 60 minutes, be respectful and play with sportsmanship. Porter helped Brewer change how he thinks about lacrosse, Brewer said.

"The mentality's starting to change, and there are kids that actually want to be good at the sport and want to treat it as a sport and not a club," Porter said. "We need to just keep building on that."

Porter brings plenty of experience. He played in high school, post-grad prep school and college, earning a scholarship to Hobart College, a Division I program. He played for the Rochester (N.Y.) Rattlers in Major League Lacrosse. He also played and coached in Manchester, England.

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"I just think it's cool to have a coach that has actually been there and played lacrosse at the highest level you can," Brewer said.

Porter coached his first game when he was just 14 years old. He was a Big Brother in the Boys & Girls Club. More recently, he was an assistant coach at Glenbrook South and Loyola. He is in the process of building Evanston into a competitive program by changing the mindset. He also started an elite lacrosse program, The Lacrosse School, with teams that travel the country.

Porter, who grew up in upstate New York, is focused on teaching fundamentals, with an emphasis on playing lacrosse the Native American way. Lacrosse was developed by people indigenous to North America. He wants to make his passion and dedication infectious with the players.

"I'm trying to get that old-school, grass-roots feel back and going back to how this game was created," Porter said.

He preaches "tough love" as he coaches his players.

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"He tells me what I need to hear," Brewer said. "And what no one else really wants to tell me."

Changing the process and mentality of the program can be difficult and frustrating, Porter said. It will take some time and patience, he added.

It's not just the high school teams that are building on success. There are probably 25 to 27 eighth-graders coming into the high school program next season, according to Porter.

"The future and the potential of the program is on the ups," Porter said.

Staying humble and hungry could mean a run at a state title in the next couple years, he said. Brewer agrees.

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For Porter, he'll continue to instill that lacrosse is more than a game, it's a lifestyle.

"It just embodies a lot of things that people from the outside might not realize or see," Porter said. "The different characteristics that can shape and mold you and change your life."

Heather Rule is a freelance reporter for Pioneer Press.

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