

WEIGHTING TO WIN



STAFF PHOTOS / ROB MATTSON

Pacsun Nichols, 2, who has mild cerebral palsy, uses the Miracle Belt to stay balanced. The belt was invented in Sarasota.

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In 2001, Matt Bruback's second pitch in the first inning of a minor league baseball game was a 91 mph fastball.

The batter hit a line drive, traveling an estimated 103 mph, which bounced off the bone behind Bruback's right knee cap.

"I had no time to react," said Bruback, who was pitching for the West Tennessee Diamond Jaxx, one of the Chicago Cubs' minor league teams at that time.

The injury disrupted his pitching rhythm and delayed his move to the major leagues.

But the injury led Bruback to invent a weighted Balance Pro SportBelt in 2004, a training tool that reinforces proper baseball, golf or tennis techniques.

It is helping him regain the ability to be the "consistent strike thrower" that he once was.

A woman in California who purchased the belt to help her with her golf game discovered other therapeutic applications for children with disabilities who have little or no control of their bodies.

Three years later, Sarasota and Manatee county physical therapists who treat children with autism, Asperger's syndrome, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, attention deficit or hyperactivity disorders are using the Miracle Belt -- a byproduct of the sport belt -- and reporting great results with the weighted sensory device that is strengthening sensory disorders.

"In tests on children, they are calm and more focused," Bruback said. "They are reaching new milestones."

Bruback is taking a year off from baseball to help Original Diamond Designs Inc. promote the Miracle Belt for children and the Sensory Belt for adults.

"This is giving me much more fulfillment," said the 28-year-old Sarasota resident. "I get to help children. Everything happens for a reason."

But he has not forgotten about baseball.

"Sometimes you have to take yourself out of the equation and see the bigger picture and the

higher good," he said. "I might go back (to baseball); it all depends on if I'm needed with the company.

"Would I play, or better yet, would I want to play? Yes. Baseball is the best sport in the world."

His grandfather's ballplayer

Bruback began playing baseball at age 8 while living in Italy. His father, Rudy Bruback, was in the Air Force.

He followed in the footsteps of his grandfather, also Rudy Bruback, who "was known as a really good" softball pitcher.

"My grandfather played a big role in my life," Matt Bruback said. "While on his death bed, he told me I was his ballplayer. I could make it. The confidence he gave still carries today."

His father, who wanted to play but who hurt his back, "gave me every opportunity to follow my love and passion," Bruback said.

Bruback graduated in 1997 from a Texas high school and got a full scholarship at Manatee Community College, where he became a star. The family had moved to Sarasota, where his father retired and started a consulting company.

He was MCC's No. 1 pitcher, named to the all-state team as a freshman, and in one of his games had a career-high 16 strikeouts.

The Cubs signed the right-handed pitcher in 1998 after his freshman year.

"I was projected to go to the major league," said Bruback, until the injury in 2001, which caused his pitches to lose velocity, and, because he was leaning left, his weaker side, he lost his control.

He developed bicep tendonitis because his lower body was not absorbing the pressure of the throwing arm.

As time went on, Bruback said he lost the feel for the proper way of throwing the ball.

The Cubs traded Bruback to the Pittsburgh Pirates in July 2003. The next month, he was claimed on waivers by the San Diego Padres. They released him in 2004, then he was signed by the Baltimore Orioles.

"The coaches would say, 'You're doing it wrong,'" Bruback recalled. "They worked with me mechanically. They would say, 'You just don't get it.' I said, 'What do you mean I don't get it?' I thought, 'What do I have to do to get better?'"

"The coaches can tell you and show you, but until you feel it yourself, you will not be able to do it."

While working out at the Orioles training facility, he put a 20-pound sand bag on his shoulders while doing leg lifts and immediately felt the difference.

"Aha, the light came on," Bruback said. He came up with the idea of using weights to give him the feeling of being grounded so he could feel exactly how he was throwing the ball properly or improperly.

He used a belt in the weight room that was used for back support and attached weights to it.

Bruback's mother, Vickie, made the first prototype sports belt with material from Home Depot. His sister, a graphic designer, put together a packet of information for manufacturing companies.

The Miracle Belt became available last year after clinical trials in Sarasota at Community Haven for Adults and Children with Disabilities, said Bruback, who was elected a board member in July. His next step is to market it worldwide.

Easier to take risks

Bruback has many testimonials from athletes, coaches, pediatricians, parents and therapists on how well his product works.

Pacsun Nichols of Palmetto, now 2 1/2, was born with mild cerebral palsy, a neurological problem that effects the muscles. It was difficult for him to walk and maintain his balance, said his mother, DeAnna Nichols.

With the Miracle Belt, "He's much more stable, much more confident and more cooperative because he feels safer" on his walker, said Ouida Wellenberger, his physical therapist.

Before the belt, it was a battle getting him to use the walker. Someone would have to be nearby to keep Pacsun from falling.

Now he turns around, backs up, gets where he wants to go and has picked up speed. "Now he'll chase me in it," Wellenberger said. It is more like a slow run, but to him it is still a faster pace.

The belt centers him. He is beginning to understand how to use his muscles and learn how to use the different sides of his body differently. He is figuring out his movements and is moving less haphazardly.

"It's easier for him to take risks," Nichols said. "He's much more comfortable trying different things. It's taken the fear out of it for him."

Wellenberger said the belt is not for every child. Some do not need to wear it as long as others. "You can use it for so many different things; it is not limited," she said. "You are only limited by your imagination."

INTERESTED?

For more information on the Miracle Belt, access www.miraclebelt.com