

Lamar State College-Port Arthur's Evan Sims overcomes stroke to play basketball again

PORT ARTHUR, TX – For Evan Sims, shooting basketball down at the local YMCA was as natural as getting out of bed every morning. He would join his friends, have a few laughs, knock down a few jump shots and prove once again that he was destined for greatness on the basketball court.



On this particular day, though, destiny took a sinister turn. Evan had been to his Houston-area Y plenty of times but today was different. As he shot around with his friends, he was just two days away from leaving to play college basketball at Baton Rouge Community College. It was his dream come true, the result of hundreds of hours of practice and hard work.

Graduation from Cypress Springs High School had come and gone and he had already seen some of his best friends head off to chase their own dreams. That day on the court, as he schooled his friends in hitting effortless short jumpers, Evan was contemplating his own future with a mixed feeling of anticipation for his college career and sadness over leaving his hometown behind.

Then he felt something else. “I was shooting the ball and suddenly I stumbled backwards,” he remembers. “My friend, Leon, caught me and he kept asking me if I was OK. I couldn’t answer him.”

Evan lay back on a nearby bench, unable to comprehend what was happening to him. His mind raced but he couldn’t put together his thoughts. He tried to speak but no words would form on his lips.

Evan Sims, a 19-year-old phenom on the basketball court, was having a stroke. “I knew something was wrong inside me,” he said. “They called my parents and they rushed to me to find out what was happening. I was in the hospital and I still couldn’t say anything.” In the hospital, doctors scrambled to find a cause for Evan’s collapse. “They did an MRI, then they did a CAT scan,” he said.

The answer came like a sledgehammer into the world of a young man just starting his life ... there was a hole in Evan’s heart, there from birth, and that defect had caused the young man to have a stroke. “I was laying there in the hospital, trying to understand what was going on,” he said. “I was supposed to be leaving for college. That was the plan, not this. This wasn’t supposed to happen.”

His friends from high school, some who were going to Baton Rouge CC as well, came by the hospital to check on Evan ... and to say goodbye as they headed off to college. “I cried,” he said. “I was supposed to be going with them.” Instead, Evan lay in the hospital for two weeks and then started the painful journey to recovery. “I didn’t say a word for four months,” he said. “When I did start to speak again, I had to read kiddie books out loud to re-teach myself how to say things.”

Physically, he was back on his feet but was slower and less steady as he moved across the floor, far from the finely tuned athlete who dominated in the paint at Cypress Springs. Eventually, doctors offered Evan a choice ... heart surgery to repair the defect or an aspirin regimen that would thin his blood to prevent future clotting.

“They told me that if I had surgery I wouldn’t be allowed to play basketball ever again,” he said. “They told me I could take an aspirin every day and still be able to play.” The choice for Evan was easy. “I wanted to play and my family supported me in that,” he said. It would have been easy for Evan to withdraw into the darkness of his situation, relinquishing his usual optimistic demeanor for self-pity and anger. Instead, with basketball as his driving force, he went to work.



He worked out to recondition his muscles, teaching his body how to function again, one step at a time. He estimates that during that period of time, he took a million shots at a basketball goal. It was his love of the sport that drove him to succeed but, he is quick to add, it was the love of his family and those in his church that made the difference.

“I see my stroke as something that changed my life but not completely in a bad way,” he said. “I got closer to God, closer to my family, and I was able to overcome what will likely be the biggest challenge in my life. I came out of this a stronger person, a better person.”

A year after his stroke, Evan was a legitimate college basketball prospect again. But with the head coach at Baton Rouge no longer there, Sims had a change of heart about his collegiate destination. “I knew this was going to be my do-or-die year on the basketball court,” Sims said. “How I did this year would determine whether I played Division I NCAA basketball or NAIA. I needed to be at a school where I could shine.”

With offers coming from NJCAA Region XIV schools Navarro, San Jacinto and Lee colleges, Sims had his pick of the top programs in the league. Instead, and on the advice of his Baton Rouge CC coach and mentor James Rix, Evan met with new Lamar State-Port Arthur Head Coach Lance Madison.

“I asked Coach Rix what he thought and the first name he gave me was Coach Madison’s,” Evan said. “Coach Rix spoke so highly of Coach Madison and then he came down and watched me work out at a church in Houston, and later I worked out for him at Memorial High School in Port Arthur. Coach Madison offered me a full scholarship and I accepted. “God was giving me all the signs that this is where I needed to be,” he said.

Evan is a solid force off the bench for the Seahawks this season. Standing 6-foot-8 and broad at the shoulders, Sims is strong in the paint and can knock down a silky-smooth jumper from the wing as though he’s done it his whole life. With a few weeks left in the 2012-13 season for Lamar State, Sims has already gotten offers from Division I colleges like Abilene Christian University, Louisiana Tech, University of New Orleans, Chicago State and the University of Louisiana at Monroe.

“Knowing that I still have that hole in my heart, I think about that sometimes. Not a lot,” he said. “Me having a stroke? That’s never going to happen again. I already fought that battle and won.”