

Autism POVs episode: Autistic baseball player makes history

Host:

This is Autism Points of View by Autism Speaks
I'm Felipe Maya

For many autistic people, discovering their interests can lead to a world of possibilities. In this episode, you'll hear the story of a young man who discovered his passion at 10 years old and from there developed that passion into a successful career path.

Tarik El-Abour is 28 years old and in 2018 he made headlines when he signed a professional minor league contract with the Kansas City Royals. He was being hailed as the first autistic professional baseball player.

Tarik told me that when he first watched a baseball game with his dad, it just clicked, and he knew that he wanted to learn to play the game.

Tarik El-Abour:

I was 10 years old and me and my dad we were at this pizza shop in L.A. and the Dodgers and Giants were playing. And for some reason I was really intrigued, and I just couldn't look away, I just couldn't stop watching it and I thought that would be really cool to play. And then you know about a week or two later I picked up a bat and then it just seemed like a lot of fun and it's like each day I play even up to 18 years later at 28 years old it just gets more fun each time I do it. I mean like I knew there was something there but I had to keep working hard to unlock it and I'm still working hard to this very day to continue unlocking it. I played I played Little League then Pony league and I also and then and you know just like the normal route, high school, college and etc.

So after I graduated college I played an independent minor league team in the Empire pro league and my mentor J.D. Nichols at the time and he still is my mentor right now. He's the one who got me, hooked me up there and I was able to show what I could do. And then Reggie Sanders who works in front office for the Kansas City Royals, one of the front office people, took notice and was interested in me and eventually he got me signed and convinced management to sign me as well.

It was a great experience it definitely got my foot in the door and got my name in the system and definitely broke me into affiliated baseball which is which is the most important thing I needed from there. And I'm just looking into it as a springboard to get me to my next organization to play for and also and I was fortunate to come across two coaches who were also very good people as well and I enjoyed being around everyone. I'll be honest the biggest thing I took from it was that I always knew my worth as a player. But then but once I was there and after I left I knew that no one can ever mess up my worth as a player in my head or on the outside. No one can ever mess with that.

Host:

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted all of our lives and live events like sporting events were either cancelled or are being held with no fans watching. Major League Baseball has continued with no fans in the stands and a shorter season.

Tarik El-Abour:

I'm just. I just keep training and doing everything I can that doesn't involve me putting myself or those I care about at risk for getting COVID. And right now I'm just training and keeping myself ready for whenever everything calms down. So then I can eventually get to my next team but right now I'm just training staying at home and not really doing anything to put myself at risk. I have a lot of. I have a lot of goals on and off the field on the field in baseball. It's just I continue to be a better player and what I was the day before. And with that I know I will go past any expectations that I've ever had for myself as a player and a person. And off the field my goal is to, I would have to say it would be just to help people through my example, to know that they can do anything they set their mind to.

Host:

Tarik was diagnosed with autism at 2 years old and his parents put him in speech and occupational therapy shortly after. He says he remembers those therapy sessions, but he only first learned about his diagnosis when he was older, as a teenager.

Tarik El-Abour:

Well my parents never really told me I was autistic. They just let me be me and they would just make sure that I felt as normal as possible and that really worked because I always felt normal, I never felt different or inferior to anyone. I just felt like anyone else, but they taught me in a way that knew it would benefit from my learning process. So, then I can keep up with the general public and yet not feel different doing so. It's very interesting because a lot of things made sense. And the thing I'm happy about is that I realized like a lot of things that didn't make sense were self-inflicted and I wasn't aware of it. So, then I think it just rose my awareness of recognizing the symptoms. So, then I can do what's best for me in social settings.

The best way I can explain it is I learned how to pick up social cues and learned it and disciplined myself to keep learning and to keep socializing and not let any of the symptoms hold me back from having a social life. And most people they don't know I have it until someone tells them. I didn't realize that was a problem until I was older but once I realized that I worked on I worked on recognizing it all the time. So then I can become, it can become second nature to me and as I've gotten older it's become more second nature to me so I'm able to start having the relationships with people I've always wanted and always yearned for when I was younger and now I know how to go about it now and I know how to go about it in a respectful and appropriate way, to have the social life I always begs for when I was younger.

Host:

While Tarik's experienced challenges with social communication growing up, he says his autism also helped him become a better baseball player.

Tarik El-Abour:

The one thing that I do know it impacts me is my work ethic because you know we tend to be like single-minded and make our focus or go on one focal point like not just visually but also mentally as well. And for me that really that makes me that that's what makes me great or what

I do because I'm able to stay focused on one thing at a time and that one thing will get my all attention. Yes, I will not be aware of other things going on, but I will be focused on that one thing and one thing we have no choice but to succeed which in this case it's baseball. Really, if I'm being completely honest it's just one of things you can explain why you love it. You just stop playing it. it's just my craft, really, it's kind like some people love painting they don't know why but they could just paint for hours. And for me it's just my craft really, there's no other way to say it.

Host:

Major League Baseball has been a long-time supporter of the autism community. In the past, most teams held annual autism awareness games by teaming up with one of our local Autism Speaks chapters or Walks. These games have included sensory items for autistic guests, quiet spaces for when the environment gets to be too much and more accommodations.

Those games meant so much to families in the autism community and now there is a new way that the MLB and the cause have collided. Lids is the largest brick-and-mortar retailer for the MLB and they have teamed up with Autism Speaks for a very special campaign. Every Lids store is selling custom Autism Speaks caps with messages of love and kindness, along with puzzle piece hat pins that are all benefiting the cause.

Tom Ripley:

My name is Tom Ripley and I'm the Chairman and CEO of Lids. So, in every store, if you walk into any Lids store around North America in the back of the store you'll see three or four different autism hats on the back and you can pick a hat, whatever color whatever size, and we will embroider the hat for you with one of the Autism Speaks logos.

Host:

I spoke with Tom about the partnership and his personal connection to the cause.

Tom Ripley:

I have twin 15-year-old girls that are both on the spectrum. And so it's been a, it's been a pretty incredible journey for my wife and I. We have three kids, we have a 17-year-old son and then twin 15-year-old girls that that are that you know it's that are wonderful young ladies but you know they come with all the all the challenges and realities of being on the spectrum. We got their diagnosis at about three and a half years old. We got a diagnosis and frankly shame on us. I don't know why you would know a lot about it if you didn't have a child with a diagnosis, but we knew nothing about it. And so we had to get fully educated on what we were facing.

For us it was, there weren't that many resources for educating yourself. And so, Autism Speaks, the website, frankly was, it's always dangerous when a parent is educating themselves on medical issues online because there is a massive standard deviation of information out there, right. Back then it just wasn't that much information on autism and so Autism Speaks was really this kind of collection point of data and information for us. And it made a real impact and was really helpful. It just helped us understand what this is and frankly understand what it isn't. And start to understand; Where do we go? Who do we talk to? Like every autistic kid they have their days. But we're able, what we learned early on is a highly regimented schedule where we you know we get up and we do the same things every day.

Frankly that's good for everybody in my household. It's not just my daughters. But that regimentation in our lives gives them some predictability.

Host:

Tom told me that the Autism Speaks Lids campaign has meant so much to Lids employees, their customers and his own family.

Tom Ripley:

it's been a little bit of a grassroots effort which has been really fun to watch, frankly. It's brought my wife to tears a couple of times. It's really an emotional topic, it's very personal topic for us obviously. So, my daughters names are America and Star and so they have two little hats. They, you know they're 15 so they're not that little but they have hats that one has an American flag on it with the Autism Speaks logo on the side, and one has one with a star and an Autism Speaks logo on the side. it's just a cool way to subtly, kind of, raise some awareness.

Host:

Just like you can choose a Lids hat with any MLB team logo on it, I asked Tarik what his dream baseball team to play for would be.

Tarik El-Abour:

To be completely honest being a grew up in L.A. and the big city. I just think that you can really go wrong with either L.A. or New York like either teams or the Dodgers, Angels, Mets, Yankees. Because not only did I grow up in a big city, but I also love living in the big city. So, I guess any of those teams would be ideal. Mets, Yankees, Dodgers, Angels or basically any old historical organization also throw in the Giants, the Cubs.

Host:

We wish Tarik the best of luck in the future, here are some parting words of advice he says have always helped him in life.

Tom Ripley:

The only other thing I wanted to say is that no matter what obstacles you have, everyone's gonna have obstacles as far as pursuing what they want to pursue, but the ones who succeed are the ones who just keep going through all the failures cause you're gonna fail but as long as you get that one opportunity between all the failures, it's all worth it.

Host:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Autism Points of View. To learn more about Tarik or our partnership with Lids, visit autismspeaks.org/podcast. And don't forget to subscribe to Autism Points of View wherever you listen to podcasts to get new episodes as soon as they're available. For COVID-19 information and resources, visit autismspeaks.org/coronavirus.

This episode was written and produced by me and edited by Chris Skiles. I'm Felipe Maya, thanks for listening.