

Manual's inspirational Whitney Foster finds bowling to be a hands-free sport

Written by Adam Himmelsbach The Courier-Journal
Jan. 17

courier-journal.com



Whitney Foster, left, gets some help from Madison Watson as Watson places the ball on Foster's arm. Foster is unable to pick the ball up herself.

Purchase Image [Zoom](#)

Whitney Foster, left, gets some help from Madison Watson as Watson places the ball on Foster's arm. Foster is unable to pick the ball up herself. / Michael Clevenger/The Courier-Journal

What is arthrogryposis?

Arthrogryposis is a congenital disorder characterized by joint contractures.

Most commonly, the joints of arms and/or legs are stiffened and may not be able to move. The arm and leg muscles are also weakened.

There is no cure, but physical therapy can be effective to gain

increased range of motion.

Source: arthrogryposis.net

You walk up and introduce yourself to Whitney Foster, but you don't reach out to shake her hand. It's not that you're startled by her disability, by her arms that cannot extend or her hands that cannot grip. You just don't know if she is comfortable shaking hands, or if offering would be an insult.

But then, she smiles, shifts her torso and right forearm toward you — of course, this girl who has taught herself to bowl without using her hands has figured out handshakes. And as you shake her tiny hand, you understand her constant struggle to show that she is just like everyone else — even when it appears she is not.

Whitney, a senior on Manual High School's bowling team, has arthrogryposis, a rare congenital disorder characterized by abnormally developed muscles and tendons. Her thin arms are raised near her chest with the backs of her hands facing each other, and she can barely flex her small fingers.

Yet, to see her unique approach to bowling is to see poetry in motion. She balances a 12-pound ball in the crook of her right arm, pressed against her frail biceps and forearm. She then takes a few gentle steps before lowering her body and gyrating slightly, as the ball smacks the floor. Although her shots uncoil slowly, they are accurate, most often spinning toward the center pin.

Earlier this season, Whitney bowled a 203 game. To put that in perspective, last year's Kentucky High School girls state runner-up bowled a 207, a 204 and a 183 in her five-game set.

This sport has helped Whitney shatter misconceptions, gain acceptance and inspire others. It has helped her, for the first time in her life, feel like just one of the girls.

"Anybody would look at her and say that she can't bowl," Manual coach Bob Hillerich said. "They'd say you need working hands and arms. But what she's overcome, it's just been amazing."

EARLY FEARS

Deborah and Nathan Foster remember the look of concern on their doctor's face when he scanned the 17-week ultrasound of their first child. He said their baby might be missing limbs and might never walk. He said they were a young couple, that they would be able to have more children, and that they should consider an abortion.

But they were not going to do that. The Fosters spent the next five months waiting for their baby girl, frightened by the unknown.

When Whitney was born, her feet were awkwardly positioned near her shoulders and her hands were curled. But she was alive, and she was beautiful and she had two arms and two legs, and they would find a way.

Whitney was in intensive care for a week because of lung problems. She also had lateral club feet, so both were put in casts for six months. The treatment straightened her feet, and Whitney took her first steps soon after her first birthday.

Doctors could do little for her arms, however. They tried casts and splints to straighten them, but nothing helped. Whitney wore a helmet for much of her childhood because her legs were still shaky and she was unable to brace herself when she fell.

“It was a lot for her,” Deborah Foster said. “But she always stayed strong.”

In elementary school, other children were predictably merciless. They would laugh at Whitney or call her “dinosaur arms.” One day she came home from third grade sobbing because a classmate called her the ugliest girl in the world.

“I even heard things from grownups,” Whitney says. “I found you just have to ignore it. If someone comes up and says, ‘What’s wrong with your arms?’ I’ll just say ‘Well, what’s wrong with your face?’ You kind of have to make it fun.”

Everyday tasks are a challenge for Whitney. She has very limited use of her thumbs and index fingers and cannot flex her hands. She often puts food — like chicken nuggets — on her forearm and raises it to her mouth.

At school, it is hard for her to remove notebooks from her backpack or take supplies out of her desk. She usually needs assistance. Sports are a challenge, too.

Whitney played soccer when she was younger but couldn’t run like the other children. She asked her mother if she could play basketball, and her mother fought back tears and explained that was not an option. Then one day about five years ago, Deborah and Nathan Foster took Whitney and her two younger sisters to a bowling alley.

BOWLING START

Whitney used a ramp the first time she bowled. Her parents would drag it onto the lane and place the ball at its crest, and Whitney would release it and watch it roll, like a snowball down a hill.

It was fun, but it made Whitney stand out when she wanted to blend in. And it was a hassle to tug the ramp back and forth.

“So one day I just decided to put it on my arm and throw it down the lane,” Whitney says. “It was so hard. I threw so many gutter balls.”

But it was a start, and it soon felt normal. Whitney signed up for Manual’s varsity team as a freshman, but she backed out at the last minute out of fear that she would not be accepted. The following year, she mustered the courage to join the team.

The beginning was uneasy, mostly because Whitney’s teammates were hesitant. Should they slap her five after a good shot or just tap her elbow? Should they shake her hand after a game? Should they help her?

“Little things, like we always hug each other goodbye,” Manual bowler Laynie Shulak said. “At first we were trying to figure out what she was comfortable with.”

Hillerich told his players to pick up Whitney’s ball and place it on her arm whenever it was her turn to bowl. The simple gesture created a bond. Whitney realized her teammates cared, and her teammates realized Whitney was very much like them.

“It was really cool that they didn’t judge me and that they made me feel like a part of the team,” she said. “They

Some opponents were initially less welcoming. They would give Whitney quizzical looks or keep their distance during post-match handshakes. So Whitney started introducing herself and initiating conversations, shoving away misconceptions as she went.

Her confident manner has helped shed light on her condition and inspire others facing similar obstacles. She started a disability awareness club at Manual that meets once a week, and she is an aide in the school's special education department. She has volunteered at Special Olympics events and she has even inspired a local high school freshman with a similar condition to try bowling, too.

“When I was younger, all the normal people would tell me that everything was going to be fine,” Whitney says. “But it's different when someone who knows what you're going through tells you. That's what I've tried to do.”

UP HER ALLEY

It's a drizzly weekday afternoon, and Manual and Fern Creek are preparing to play a match at Derby Lanes in southern Louisville. Players munch on French fries and quesadillas as 1980's rock music flows from speakers.

Whitney arrives with her mother, just like always. Deborah helps Whitney empty her bag, and she tugs at her pant leg when it becomes bunched up.

Before the first game, Whitney balances a meal-replacement drink on her right arm, tilts it in the air and takes a few sips. She's wearing her red jersey with her last name stitched onto the back; she appears confident in her uniform.

Her routine is now an unspoken understanding among the Rams. When it is her turn to bowl, a teammate gently places the ball on her right arm, and Whitney takes care of the rest, lowering her body and releasing her shot.

“Bowlers generate velocity with their feet and their swing,” Hillerich said. “She obviously has no swing, but it's amazing how accurate she can be.”

At a tournament earlier this season, Whitney started a game with five consecutive strikes and rolled a 203. By the end of the match, players from both teams were crying, amazed and inspired by her effort. Most often, her scores are in the mid-100s.

On this day, Whitney converts six spares in a row in her first game. The fact that it generates little reaction is a tribute to how far she has come. After successful shots, she slaps hands with her teammates. After the match, she shakes her opponents' hands.

The moments are normal and simple, and if you're not paying attention, you wouldn't even notice. And that, at its core, is all Whitney Foster has ever wanted.