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VARSITY

Illness Stunts Twins' Master Plan

Pat And John Calathes Hoped To Progress Eventually To The Pros Until A Brain Ailment Hit John.

February 10, 2004 | By Shannon Shelton, Sentinel Staff Writer

The picture coming from the 8-year-old tape is grainy because John Calathes Sr. has shown the video countless times to visitors in his home in Casselberry.

What could have been a basic home video of the 1996 10-and-under Amateur Athletic Union boys basketball tournament transformed into Olympic-level coverage in Calathes' hands. The credits, slick editing and strains of Whitney Houston's "One Moment in Time" almost mask the fact that it is a video about a dozen kids winning a youth championship.

On the tape, a pre-teen Darius Washington looks as if his head simply was glued on a shorter body. There's Taurean Green, too, the son of Florida Atlantic head basketball coach and former Orlando Magic forward Sidney Green. Sidney is right there, looking on with pride at his son's potential.

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Calathes (pronounced Kah-lathe-es) is proudest of his own sons, the dark-haired, blue-eyed twins John and Patrick, separated by 20 minutes when they came into the world on Dec. 12, 1985. They had been playing together since age 4 and dreamed of continuing their basketball careers together through high school, college and even the pros. The AAU championship was only to be a start of their flight to success.

Two years later, that joint path forked dramatically when young John was stricken with a condition called arteriovenous malformation (AVM), similar to a brain aneurysm, that effectively ended any basketball hopes and threatened his life. If bleeding from the AVM occurs, it can injure brain tissue and lead to brain injury, stroke, permanent disability or death.

"It was a very, very dangerous situation," John Sr. said. "Every year, there's a 4 percent chance of another bleed and a 1 percent chance of death."

Those odds sound low, but neurosurgeons say that even if hemorrhages don't happen, AVMs can produce headaches, seizures and progressive paralysis if treatments fail. In addition, the chance of bleeding is higher, the younger a person is at the time of the AVM.

While John struggled through a stroke, shunt and eye surgeries and steroid treatments to reduce brain swelling, Pat followed in step with some of the other young players captured on tape eight years ago.

Washington is now a senior at Edgewater and is headed to the University of Memphis. And Pat, who started at Lake Howell High as a 5-foot-11 point guard, sprouted to 6-10 and earned a scholarship to Saint Joseph's in Philadelphia before his senior season began.

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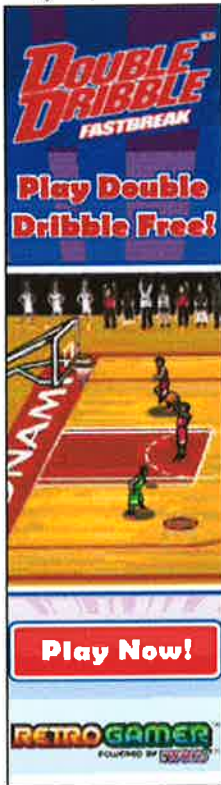
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Mom and stepmom were both present for the basketball-watching party that night, and both can be seen cheering in the stands at Lake Howell basketball games. On the elder John Calathes' latest video production, a retrospective of Lake Howell's 2003 season, they all eventually appear on tape, telling the boys how proud they are of their successes and voicing enthusiasm about the team's advancing to the state semifinals in Lakeland.

When they aren't gushing about Pat, the family is giddy about Nick, whom coaches and family members predict will be even better as a senior than his brother is now. As the starting freshman point guard at Lake Howell, Nick already is 6-1 and 150 pounds and has the basketball sense beyond a basic freshman level, coaches said. And he's more physically gifted as well — when Pat was 14, he was 5-11 and about 113 pounds.

"I'm happy for him," Nick said about Pat's success, a big smile lighting up his face as he speaks of his older brother.

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John, a reserve on Lake Howell's varsity team, stays quiet mostly during these basketball-viewing sessions or sometimes leaves the family room to get away from the hoopla. He says little about what happened during that four-year period he was out of basketball, preferring not to be seen as an object of pity.

At first, John said an arthritic right knee kept him away from basketball.

"John, tell the truth," Pat said. "Everybody knows, anyway."

Said John: "I don't want to be seen as some kind of mental patient."

Others, however, have seen evidence of John's pain.

"Can you imagine living in this household and not being able to play?" said Scutero, who has stayed close to the family and coached Pat on his Hoopnuts summer squad. "I tried to get John to be a team manager during his freshman year, but he couldn't do it."

John said he did help the team in some way that year but doesn't detail whether he turned down the team-manager option.

He eventually said matter of factly that he had an AVM — a congenital birth defect — and went through a couple of operations. He also said he spent his seventh-grade year at Faith Christian Academy as a home-schooled student.

John Sr. said John Jr. always was more reserved than his brothers were, even before his illness. Pat was the leader and the one who did the speaking for both. John Sr. also attributes his older son's reluctance to talk about his condition to his private personality.

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The dream has come true so far for Pat, who's having the time of his life watching his future unfold step by step, just as he hoped it would in 1996. But he knows he's leaving his brother behind.

Although John is one of his brother's biggest supporters, he said he used to wonder what might have been if not for the twist of fate that halted his basketball progression for four years.

"Maybe two years ago, I felt that way," John said. "But now, I'm OK with it. He's got his thing, and I've got mine."

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Mother Dee Calathes McCord said it's been difficult to make peace with the situation.

"John was a phenomenal player," she said. "He could have been in the same place right now [as Pat], and she knows that. I tell him that he's a walking miracle, and God has other plans for him."

PAT'S EMERGENCE

Since shining last summer in all-star camps and earning a scholarship from St. Joe's, Pat Calathes' life has been one triumph after another. He has led Lake Howell to a 19-4 record and is averaging 22.6 points and 9.3 rebounds per game. His 39 points in Lake Howell's 80-67 victory against Lake Brantley on Feb. 4 was the second-highest total in school history.

St. Joe's coaches visit him often, appearing at Silver Hawks games and regularly calling him and his family. And the Calatheses' home buzzes with activity whenever a St. Joe's game is on television.

The family recently squeezed about 12 Silver Hawks players into its family room, along with former Lake Howell and current Winter Springs assistant Mike Scutero and Pat's girlfriend, Jessica Samuels, a softball player at Winter Springs. During the game, they moved between the family room and the kitchen to help themselves to chicken wings, shrimp, cheese and other hors d'oeuvres that stepmom Sue Calathes had ready for the athletic boys with bottomless pits for stomachs.

Pat's college of choice is ranked third in the nation, and St. Joe's (20-0) and Stanford are the nation's only undefeated schools. It's another amazing turn of fortune for Pat, who knew little about the school before it started recruiting him. St. Joe's was one of the first schools to show its interest, John Sr. said.

Basketball binds together the Calatheses, including John Sr. and his wife, Sue; her teenage son, Stearn Roberts; the boys' mom, Calathes McCord; and the other boys, Pat, John and youngest brother Nick.

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His parents provide more detail. The AVM was found in John's brain. AVMs are tangles of dilated blood vessels that can disrupt normal blood flow in the brain and cause strokes. They begin to cause problems for patients usually between 10 and 30 years of age, according to the International RadioSurgery Association.

"Johnny's had a very tough time," John Sr. said. "Any time he'd have a headache, for example, we were always worried it was a complication. With normal people, you'd just tell them to take a few aspirin."

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The next four years consisted of an array of surgeries and treatments, enough to make him miss his seventh-grade year. Even when he re-entered middle school at Faith Christian and started at Lake Howell in ninth grade, health problems contributed to more than a few absences. Like his twin brother, he had a growth spurt, but his father attributes the fact John stopped growing at 6-7 instead of 6-10 to effects from the steroid treatments. By his sophomore year, he was able to play again, starting with pickup games at RDV Sportsplex.

Both parents tried to find different ways for John to channel his energy. Pat remembers John talking violin and drum lessons. John Sr. showed John Jr. how to do video-editing by computer so he could help put together game tapes. They say none of those things quenched his desire to be physically active, either in basketball or his other love, inline skating.

Pat, meanwhile, was on Lake Howell's junior-varsity team at the time and in the midst of a footlong growth spurt.

"My mom had to buy clothes for me every couple of months," Pat said. "I was so weak and gangly, sometimes I would just walk, and then I'd trip."

Pat said the family refrigerator always was packed as his family tried to help him gain weight. He ate peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches eight at a time, took weight-gain shakes and learned how to bang in the post with exercises where he literally would take an hour of knockdowns, his mother said.

His body no longer was that of a point guard, and he needed to learn to play like a big man.

"As he grew, he went through that clumsy stage," said former Lake Howell basketball coach Steve Kohn, now the school's athletic director. "But he still has all of the skills of a point guard. When you get to be 6-9 and you have those skills, you can become a great player."

In his second year at Lake Howell, Pat said reality struck. For the first time, he doubted his basketball ability.

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"During my sophomore year, I didn't even know if I would be able to get a scholarship to college," he said. "I thought I would maybe go to a smaller Division II school. I was hoping that at least Rollins might consider offering me a basketball scholarship."

During his junior season, however, he averaged 12.4 points during the regular season as a 6-8 center/forward on a senior-heavy squad. The Silver Hawks made it to the Class 5A state semifinals, and Pat was an all-Seminole County selection. He followed that with a strong summer competing for Team Hoopnuts, his AAU travel team, and going to elite camps.

And that's when colleges began taking notice. Although he and his family are Catholic, Pat considered non-Catholic institutions such as George Washington and Northwestern, along with Providence, Creighton and St. Joe's. The Hawks won by providing the combination of academics, personal attention, a decent record and the chance for immediate playing time.

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"For a kid his size, I was impressed with the skill level he played with," St. Joe's Coach Phil Martelli said. "He's very comfortable with the ball, and he loves to play basketball. It sounds odd, but not a lot of kids today just like to play basketball or are good at basketball. We'll feed his love in our program. He has a chance to be very good, even great."

With one of the biggest decisions of his young life already complete, Pat has been able to concentrate fully on the high school season, in which he hopes to lead Lake Howell to a state championship.

TOGETHER AGAIN

In his junior year, John got another chance to join Lake Howell's basketball team as a player. Finally healthy enough to get back on the court, his skills allowed him to make the junior-varsity squad. This season, he made varsity.

"It's great," Pat said. "The couple of years that we didn't play together, it was kind of weird. I went to Five-Star camps and all that without him. We've been playing together since we were 4. . . . It was more different than it was heard, but it was pretty tough. We had always talked about how we would play each other on different teams when we went to the NBA.

"All kids do that."

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It was like old times, John and Patrick, who grew up playing basketball together after quitting a soccer league at age 4 again were fulfilling some part of their master plan. During a game last week, John, Pat and Nick all appeared on the court at the same time for a few minutes, something that John Sr. said was a great moment for the entire family.

The two say they still are as close as one would expect of twins, often reading each other's thoughts and expressing the same ideas.

When a song is going through John's mind, for example, Pat said he might be thinking about the same tune.

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But now they look a bit different.

Besides the height disparity, they have asserted their individuality in different ways. Pat spikes his hair daily, a style that Nick copies, while John streaks the top of his locks in a honey-blond color and combs his hair down.

"I'm my own person," John said.

But John realizes this is the last time his life will intertwine with his brother's.

John's lack of conditioning over the past four years has put him behind his Lake Howell teammates, and he doesn't play more than a few minutes each game.

As his mother said, "he's not out of the woods yet," although John said he no longer has the AVM after radiation treatments.

And although John was speaking of trying to work for a basketball scholarship as recently as six months ago, his mother said, he seems to have settled on his future away from the court if he doesn't pursue college ball. He wants to become a radiologist/X-ray technician.

"This situation turned him towards the medical field," John Sr. said. "He's kind of directed towards that now."

Pat will be leaving his twin behind for the first time in his life when he moves north this fall, but he's making sure to carry their joint dream with him to Philadelphia.

"He's not going to have the opportunity like I did, and I know he worked hard," Pat said.

"I'm playing for my whole family now."

Pat also plans to honor his brother in another way. St. Joe's junior guard/forward Pat Carroll already wears No. 33, Pat's Lake Howell number. Pat Calathes' youth number, 4, belonged to former NBA coach Jim Lynnam, St. Joe's retired that digit during the 1984-85 season.

In Pat's mind, there was no other option than No. 12.

"That's John's number," Pat said.