

Plainfield teen 'signed' into Drew men's lacrosse family

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DAILYRECORDSPTS

MADISON — It was just an accident. Anthony Pernel hit his head on a windowsill in August 2011. It didn't seem like a big deal. Until the headaches started.

Pernel's head hurt every day. He had three concussions in a six-month period, 10 of them in three years.

Normal childhood ceased for Anthony Pernel, his triplet brothers Ryan and Justin, and their parents, Jeanette and David. Diagnosed with a traumatic brain injury, he couldn't focus on anything. His balance was affected, vision blurred. Bright lights and loud noises caused physical agony. Continuing to play soccer or baseball was out of the question.

Anthony Pernel was back on the sidelines on Sunday as part of Team IMPACT, a nonprofit organization that partners children with life-threatening or chronic illnesses with college athletic programs. Pernel, 13, "signed" a facsimile of a National Letter of Intent with Drew men's lacrosse Sunday morning, as head coach Tom Leanos gave him a navy No. 1 jersey and welcomed him into "the family."

Pernel led the Rangers from their locker room to the freshly plowed turf, was part of the pregame huddle and watched the game from the sideline wearing a camouflage Drew-logo baseball cap and a dark Drew lacrosse jacket over the new jersey. Pernel made sure the players' discarded sticks were arranged properly at the end of the bench and distributed balls before the Rangers' home opener — a 8-6 loss to Washington & Jefferson.

Those are the same tasks given to Drew players on the bench because, Leanos said, "He's not a manager. He's a teammate. We're going to treat him like everybody else." Leanos instructed Pernel, "Tell 'em, 'Put your sticks in a line,' and they'll do it for you. Be firm with



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Anthony Pernel, 13, of Plainfield (center), his parents Jeanette and David, and triplet brothers Justin (back left) and Ryan were welcomed into the Drew men's lacrosse family on Sunday.

them. They're your teammates now."

Leanos learned about Team IMPACT through the Tufts men's lacrosse program, which had a 7-year-old cancer survivor as part of its NCAA Division III championship team last spring. Drew was matched with Anthony in September, and some of the players helped build a playground at Queen City Academy, a charter school in Plainfield where Ryan and Justin are in eighth grade. The family attended the Rangers' fall scrimmage at Misericordia, and has been to practice a couple of times.

"He was real quiet when we first met him," said sophomore midfielder Drew Stenger of Hazlet, who was part of the Rangers' Team IMPACT leadership committee. "It feels like it built a lot of confidence, giving him people to look up to. ... Anthony brings a bunch of positive

energy to the team. Having him on the sideline gets us hyped."

Involved with sports since tee-ball at age 4, Anthony didn't really know much about lacrosse when he was matched with Drew. The players gave him a stick, and taught him the basics so the triplets can throw the ball together around at home. They all have Drew hats and T-shirts, and players' parents e-mail Jeanette and David Pernel regularly.

"It almost feels like hockey, but in the air," said Pernel, an eighth grader in a therapeutic program at Cornerstone Day School in Mountainside. "It's a once in a lifetime experience. They've been really great to me. It's been really amazing. ... (The players learn) how it feels to put someone under your wing. It makes me feel pretty special. All this time, I couldn't play any sports. It's mind-blow-

ing and amazing. I couldn't play sports, but now I'm with great guys, and a great team."

Ryan, the oldest Pernel triplet by a minute, and Justin, the middle brother — acknowledged they've become more patient while making sacrifices for Anthony, the youngest — also by a minute. But in a home where ESPN "is always on from the time we get home from school until the time we go to bed," according to Justin, they kept playing on teams, while Anthony "missed being part of a team. (Drew lacrosse) brings out that feeling of being special."

The Rangers have become "an extended part of the family" to Jeanette Pernel. Ryan got a lacrosse stick for Christmas, and may help start the team at Union Catholic next year.

Skipping a concert or a trip to Six Flags Great Adventure isn't such a big deal.

"It would leave him out and we're brothers. It's a bond for life. We're always going to have each other, no matter what," said Justin Pernel, who has been accepted to Tabor Academy in Marion, Mass., where he hopes to play ice hockey. "Since he had his concussions, he'd missed sports really greatly. There's not a lot of sports he can play. Being part of a lacrosse team makes him feel a part of sports again."

Concussion-free for a year, Anthony Pernel was finally cleared to go back to gym class — just in time for the President's Challenge physical-fitness test, he explained with a groan. He hopes to be able to rejoin a team soon, though Jeanette Pernel remains cautious.

"I was that kid who was out of school and out of sports," he said. "Now I'm that kid who's a leader. I can't take it all in. I'm on the path to recovery."

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