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Snider finding solace on diamond

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By Jordan Bastian / MLB.com

DUNEDIN, Fla. -- It's the little things that Travis Snider cherishes most. They're moments that didn't seem significant at the time, but are now memories that carry more weight in the wake of overwhelming loss.

A kiss on the cheek. A simple hug. Dinner waiting on the kitchen table.

Whether Snider -- now a top prospect with the Blue Jays -- walked into his Washington home after a poor day on the diamond or he'd just powered Jackson High School to victory, his mom, Patty, always offered the same greeting.

"You remember those things," said Snider, sitting on a set of bleachers at the Bobby Mattick Training Center on Sunday morning. "You learn so much about those things that were so important to you, but you never realized how important they were."

It's those memories that have kept the 20-year-old Snider from unraveling after losing his mom to a tragic car accident this past September. It's moments like those that also help him deal with the deaths of his grandparents, his best friend and one of his former coaches -- all in the past two years.

Snider doesn't dwell on the losses. Instead, he focuses on the lives of those who have passed away and he talks about how fortunate he was to have them for as long as he did. Snider has fought with anger, but he has realized that he has a great escape at his fingertips.

Baseball has provided Snider with an emotional outlet -- a distraction from the inner anguish he's experienced at such a young age. He's doesn't shy away from shedding tears, but on the field he's maintained a workmanlike approach amid a wave of sorrow.

"You think about it every day. That kind of stuff doesn't go away," Snider said. "But just to be able to wake up and go to the yard every day and know that my mom and grandma and my grandpa and all of those people are up there looking down on me -- I know it's something they'd want me doing."

After Snider's tour with Class A Lansing concluded last season -- a campaign in which he hit .313 with 16 home runs and 93 RBIs in 118 games -- he headed home to Mill Creek, Wash., to be with his family. A frightening two-week period in 2002 taught Snider to savor time spent with his mom, his dad, Denne, and his sister, Megan.

During Snider's freshman year, his mom slipped into a coma and experienced liver failure after a bout with pneumonia. Patty Snider was connected to a breathing machine and she remained unconscious for two weeks -- an ordeal that deeply affected Travis.

"That was kind of a time when I was confused," Snider said. "I struggled with trying to balance myself as a person. Ever since then, I've had anger issues.

"But I feel fortunate that the last four or five years that we had her after she was really sick, I learned so much. It just opened my mind."

That time of Snider's life taught him to appreciate every moment he has with those close to him. That's why when he recalls the week his mom passed away -- mere days after he returned from Lansing in September -- Snider focuses on the last moments he spent with his mom.

"For me, I feel like I was fortunate just to see her then -- to be able to spend that time with her," Snider said. "Not just to say that I feel like I got to say good-bye or anything, but just to be able to see her before losing her. You don't get a chance to do that again. That part was a blessing.



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"It's been good for me, because it kind of keeps that emotional side in me there. You don't turn into a rock. Obviously, you step on the field and you've got to be even keel. But I know it's OK to cry. I know it's OK to get angry. It's how you deal with your emotions is what I'm learning about."

"All the things he is as a player, he's probably more so as a person."

-- Jays GM J.P. Ricciardi, on Travis Snider

Shortly after Snider lost his mom, the Blue Jays decided to send him to the Arizona Fall League. For Snider, who was selected with the 14th overall pick in the 2006 First-Year Player Draft, it was a chance to test his skill against some of the best prospects in baseball.

Beyond that, it was an opportunity for Snider to keep busy during his time of grief. Snider responded by batting .316 with four homers, 11 RBIs, a .404 on-base percentage and a .541 slugging percentage in 26 games with the Scottsdale Scorpions.

It was well beyond Toronto's expectations.

"We thought he could handle it," Blue Jays general manager J.P. Ricciardi said. "But to do what he did in the Arizona Fall League as a young kid, he's got a chance to be a good player. The one thing about him is he understands that he's got a lot of work to do and he's not afraid to work."

"You always draft players with the idea that you like them, and then you get certain players who you find you end up liking even more. All the things he is as a player, he's probably more so as a person."

While in Arizona, Snider visited with extended family and got to see some friends who lived nearby. Being able to suit up just weeks after losing his mom might seem like a difficult task, but Snider said it was precisely what he needed at the time. It allowed him to focus on something else.

"It was really therapeutic," Snider said. "It was the best thing that I could've done. I don't know if the organization planned it like that or what their reason was behind sending me. Obviously, it was a test and another experience in its own to be around some of the best players in Minor League Baseball."

When his time in Arizona came to an end, Snider wasn't able to escape more suffering. He lost one of his closest friends to drug addiction, and a summer-league coach, who helped instruct Snider during his last three years in high school, passed away after a battle with cancer.

Snider, who has delivered three eulogies among the many funerals he's attended, decided it was best to get away from everything for a while.

Growing up, his family visited Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, each year. This time, Snider's dad let Travis head to their retreat in Mexico with his sister and a few close friends over the offseason. Snider used the time to reflect on everything that had occurred and try to understand what he could possibly learn from it all.

"It was unbelievable experience for me just to enjoy everything for what it was," Snider said. "Just to enjoy life for the simple things instead of the things people get caught up in. It was just a good mental break for me to get away from everything -- no cell phones, no e-mail -- just enjoy life."

"You just get to enjoy the beach and the water. We really just tapped into things that I hadn't really opened my mind to. I was trying to figure myself out as a person and how I've dealt with these things."

As far as the Blue Jays can tell, Snider hasn't let his situation take a toll on his game. If anything, he's been able to use the experience as a way to better himself on and off the field.

"He's mature well beyond his years," Ricciardi said. "He's had to go through some things that no one that age should have to go through. ... Never in anybody's wildest dreams would you think a 20-year-old kid would be this mature. I know some guys my age that aren't that mature."

"It's a credit to him. He's able to really translate it to his baseball ability. I think the true test of any young player is how they handle adversity."

Snider's baseball therapy is continuing this spring in Florida, where he's a guest at camp with Toronto's Major Leaguers. He's spending plenty of time talking to coaches, picking the brains of players and simply observing everything that's going on around him.

Snider can find his name on any list of baseball's top prospects, and some forecasters have projected that he could potentially debut in the big leagues as early as this season. He's set to head to Class A Dunedin to open the year, and a promotion to Double-A New Hampshire at some point during the year is probable.

As for when he expects to make it to the Majors, Snider doesn't have a specific timeline in mind. Instead, he's using what he's learned from the past few years to understand that, in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't really matter when Toronto decides to call him up.

What matters to Snider is cherishing every moment, especially the ones that might seem insignificant at the time.

"Something that I've started to take really serious in the last year or two of my life is understanding that there's more to life than just baseball," Snider said. "Like I've learned, we don't know how long we have on this earth.

"It could all end tomorrow. I just want to make sure I don't take anything for granted."

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