

Ahead of the Game

Christopher H. Roberts/Tracy Press

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Seven-year-old Jared Brooks is a baseball phenom. By Christopher H. Roberts

On any given evening at All-American Sports Academy — with dozens of young baseball and softball players running, hitting and catching over the din of coaches, parents and other onlookers — it's hard to stay focused on any one thing.

But it's even harder not to notice Jared Brooks.

Not at first, of course. At only 7 years old, Jared barely reaches the height of an adult's waist, and he's wearing an Oakland A's hat, exactly like most young bat-and-ball hopefuls east of the Bay Area.

But if you look a little longer — you don't need to look very hard — you can see Jared's a little different.

He's got notable pluck and drive for someone so young, egging on his coach, former MLB draft pick Randy Muldrew, and his father, Jeff, to get his workout started. And as soon as it begins, even the most jaded spectator can't turn away.

Jared runs, fields and throws like a natural twice his age. He stoops to scoop a grounder, jumps to grab a fly and snags a line drive with equal grace and ability, skills that normally take years to hone. During an hour-long workout, an observer could count the balls he misses on one hand.

With the bat, he's just as on point. At seven, the Hawkins Elementary second-grader has yet to play a full season of Tracy Little League hitting off regular pitching, but he puts the bat to whatever Muldrew offers.

"Kids his age don't know what to do," Muldrew said. "But he does — I've never met anyone this young (with such natural ability). You can say something one time, and he'll pick it up."

If you ask Jeff Brooks, Jared's innate ability in the batting cages isn't a surprise. He says Jared was hitting Wiffle balls over the roof of their house at age two. But the real shocker was his arm.

"He's got an uncanny ability to throw the ball," Jeff said. "In diapers, he was hitting me in the chest with footballs."

And that was without any incentive or direction from Jeff or Jared's mother, Leslie. Jared just picked up a ball one day and started throwing it.

Skeptics will be skeptics, and a doting parent will be a doting parent. But to watch Jared, at age 7, turn, pivot and fire a throw across the All-American gym to Muldrew in one motion makes it hard to be anything but a believer.

Jared's workout is supposed to be only an hour long, but after every "last pitch," Jared begs Randy for one more. One more. Just one more. Even after a dozen "one-mores," he's still not tired or bored.

Most parents would already have dreams of multimillion dollar MLB contracts floating in their heads, or at the very least images of college scholarships. But Jeff and Leslie don't.

"If he decides tomorrow he doesn't want to play anymore, so be it," Jeff said. "We gave baseball its run."

And what a run it already is.



Enrique Gutierrez/Tracy Press - lil' star: On the sports cover, Jared Brooks, a seven-year-old baseball player, celebrates after hitting his target during practice Feb. 28 at the All-American Sports Academy. At left, Jared reaches for a fly ball during catching, fielding and batting practice.