

# Feel-good story

## HIGH SCHOOLS



MATT WIXON

### Breakthrough therapy saved Ryan Dant and got him in the game

**R**yan Dant stepped into the batter's box, knowing his Hebron teammates were counting on him. If nothing more, he was going to make the Pearland pitcher work.

He fouled off two straight pitches. Down to his last strike, he fouled off another. Then a fourth straight, which got the Pearland catcher talking to him.

"He said to me, 'You're not going to let him go, are you?'" Dant said.

Not a chance. The Pearland pitcher wouldn't get an easy out against a hitter savoring his first high school at-bat. Not against a hitter who had to battle a rare genetic disorder for the chance to battle back from a two-strike count.

When Dant was 3 years old, he was diagnosed with mucopolysaccharidosis, also known as MPS I and Hurler-Scheie syndrome. People with the disease, which occurs in about 1 in 100,000 births, cannot produce an enzyme that helps clean out certain sugar molecules from cells, leading to damage to joints and vital organs.

In 1991, Dant's parents were told Ryan probably wouldn't live beyond age 10. If he made it to his mid-teens, doctors said, he would need a wheelchair and might be deaf and blind.

Instead, Dant, a junior at Hebron, will turn 18 on April 13. It's one of two birthdays he and his family celebrate each year. The other is Feb. 13, the date in 1998 when he received his first infusion of a breakthrough enzyme therapy.

The enzyme therapy probably saved his life, and it certainly changed it. Before his first therapy, Dant's stomach was so swollen from enlarged organs that he



NATHAN HUNSINGER/Staff Photographer

**Hebron's Ryan Dant (left) and Patrick Kocher goof off during practice. Dant is a manager for the team, and when he got a chance to hit in a recent tournament, he made it count.**

couldn't bend over. His joints were so stiff and painful that he walked with a limp and couldn't raise his arms above his head.

The enzyme therapy, which he receives intravenously once a week, changed that. Dant has grown to 5-5, walks normally and can run some — although not as fast as he would like. On the baseball field, he's hard to pick out in the mix of Hebron players.

"That's the way it should be," said his father, Mark Dant. "If you ask him, Ryan will say all he has ever wanted is to be like everybody else."

Before last season, Hebron baseball coach Steve Stone and assistant Scott McGarrh gave him that chance. They asked Dant to be the team manager. Football coach Brian Brazil later asked Dant to be manager for the football team.

Dant has loved doing both.

"All the coaches, all the players, they treat me with respect," he said.

And in some cases, they treat

him like a hero.

That happened on March 3, when a good Hebron baseball team was having a bad day in a game at the Clear Lake Classic in Houston. Down 16-2 in the fourth inning, the only thing that could save the day was the chance for Dant to hit.

After senior catcher Eric Royals doubled with one out, it was Dant's turn. His heart raced as the first pitch sailed outside and past the catcher, advancing Royals to third.

Then came the flurry of foul balls, which ensured Dant's first at-bat would be memorable. "He was up there forever," said friend and teammate Jesse Payne, a junior infielder.

Teammates started thinking what to say if the at-bat didn't turn out well. "How we would pick him up," Payne said, "because we didn't want him to get down on himself."

Instead, Dant picked them up. "After the fourth foul ball, I told myself, 'I can do this,'" Dant

said. "I calmed down and relaxed."

"And then," Dant said as he extended his arms as if he were swinging, "I just loaded and fired."

The left-hander lifted an inside fastball to right field. It was a sure hit until the right fielder, working on his own magical moment, made a diving catch. But Royals was able to tag up at third and score.

One at-bat, one run batted in. Not bad for a kid who, before a span of 10 surgeries in 14 years, was a fast learner in baseball who promised his dad he would play for the high school team.

In the stands, Mark Dant said he cried like a baby. On the field, Ryan Dant didn't even get halfway back to the dugout before he was mobbed by teammates.

"It was incredible. You would've thought we won the World Series," Stone said. "They came pouring out of the dugout and practically carried him back there."