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FEATURED

Driven by something greater: MHS athlete gets early start on National Guard career

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During his time in Fort Benning, Ga., for basic training last summer, T.J. McGraw took on a leadership role. He said that his experience in basic training made him a better person. Photo courtesy of Chris McGraw.

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MARTINSVILLE

Before the start of the biggest game of the season, a contest against Mid State Conference rival Decatur Central, Martinsville High School football coach Carter Whitson informed outside linebacker and senior T.J. McGraw that he was going to lead the team out on to the field.

It was a significant gesture from Whitson — it was National Guard night and T.J. had joined that branch of the armed services in March. He spent his summer undergoing basic training in Fort Benning, Ga. and now he was going to lead his teammates out on to their home field carrying the American flag.

"I was really excited about that, and it felt really good to do that," T.J. said.

The way T.J.'s father Chris puts it, they went from zero to 60 when it came to the McGraw family's knowledge of the military.

"We started looking into this in January and knew nothing, and by March 21, we knew everything there was to know about the military," Chris said. "We met with all the recruiters from different branches and finding out the ins and outs and this seemed to work best with his wants, needs and desires and our wants, needs and desires. Kind of killed two birds with one stone."

March 21 was when T.J. turned 17-years-old and became eligible to sign up for military service. and he hit the ground running. Just days after he signed up, he had his first weekend drill in Evansville.

Part of the appeal of the National Guard was the freedom it gave T.J. He could complete a year of military service while still in high school, and it would still permit him to attend the college of his choice next year.

The National Guard is T.J.'s future, and it's something he takes very seriously. His deployment date for basic training came in to conflict with sectionals for baseball. T.J. spoke to his coaches about the situation and chose to prioritize his service over playing sports. He made the same decision when it came to preparing for football season.

"I was very impressed with his maturity in that decision because I know if it was me in high school, I would have been like, 'Well, I wanna play football.' But he saw the big picture. He's always been able to do that — a very good young man," Chris said.

Chris speaks from experience. He played baseball and football when he was a student at Decatur Central High School. He loved sports so much he got a teaching degree in physical education.

"(I) did my student teaching at Ben Davis, coached at Ben Davis (High School). I got to work with Dick Dullaghan, and that's where I got the enthusiasm for coaching.," Chris said.

He's also coached his son since he was very young and continues to coach him in high school.

"They had a few coaching changes, and the new coaches asked me to come on, just a volunteer coach, but it's something I'm passionate about and love and especially with him," Chris said. "(I) gotta wear a coach's hat and a dad hat, and I've had a lot of practice doing that."

He tries to not let his instincts as a father override his needs as a coach, so he tries to avoid directly coaching his son.

One of the first things his former high school classmate and MHS baseball coach Jeff Scott asked him is if he'd be OK with coaching his son.

"And I said, 'Absolutely, I'm not gonna do it.' (Jeff) said, 'That's the answer I wanted to hear,'" Chris said.

By chance, his deployment orders changed right before sectionals and he was able to play in a sectional game. T.J. said his coaches are very understanding of his commitment and accommodate his needs.

"I sometimes have to miss football and do my National Guard the one weekend a month, and my football coach is totally OK with that and he supports me and everything I do," T.J. said.

Basic training

T.J. faced challenges this summer; it was his first time ever being that far away from home for so long by himself.

"Mentally, it was pretty tough in the beginning. Like I was thinking at the beginning, 'What did I get myself into?'" T.J. said. "Now that I look back on it, I'm really happy that I did it, and it has helped me be a lot better person."

That change is something Chris has noticed in his son — a greater drive and determination.

"Basic training turned him from a boy to a man. I tell the difference, other people that I've talked to at school have definitely noticed the difference. It's very eye-opening for me to see what the military has done for him," Chris said.

During his time in Georgia, T.J. took on a leadership role, which he said came about by happenstance.

"I kind of fell into the leadership role because I took things more seriously than some of the other people, and I also had friends," he said. "It was a group of people. We all took it a little bit more seriously than necessarily other groups."

Halfway through training, his friend and leader of the platoon lost his position as platoon guide and T.J. was given that role.

"It was stressful at first, there were times — it's funny — but I would wake up and I'd yell at people, thinking that something was going wrong," T.J. said. "It was stressful at first, but I had a lot of fun doing it and being with my friends, too, that were also leaders."

Senior year

T.J.'s plan for his senior year is pretty straightforward: play sports, honor his commitment to the National Guard, and prepare for his future. He's currently looking to study at a state college and is considering Indiana University, Purdue University and Ball State University. He's not yet sure what he wants to study but is leaning towards business.

On weekends, he has drill in Evansville, and he wakes up at around 4 a.m. to make the drive down south.

"And then we get there, we start doing classwork, we learn little things and things to help us when we go back to training," T.J. said. "That whole Saturday, we work. We go to bed around 10 p.m. and wake up around 6 a.m., which is pretty late, compared to what basic is. We would wake up at 4 a.m. every day in basic. and then we'd do more classwork."

The next day, they do more work and typically finish up around 2 or 3 p.m. Next summer, he will have another stint of training in Georgia, and after that, he will join a unit and be eligible to help out with disaster relief situations.

Joining the National Guard was a transformative decision for T.J. He's grown as a person and leader. It's also exposed him to people from different walks of life.

"It helped me realize that there's bigger things in life and there's different kinds of people in life. I met a lot of different people with a lot of different situations than what I have," T.J. said. "It helps me understand that some people have different problems, different strong suits."

"I'm more open to people and more understanding because you never know what someone's background is until you spend a whole summer with them and you get a lot closer with people. and now I realize that it helps me understand people a lot better and makes me a better person."

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