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**Title: Beyond the gym: Willowbrook senior teaches life skills to young gymnast**  
*7-year-old Elmhurst athlete doesn't let his disability slow him down*



Willowbrook senior Keawe Winstead (left) is pictured with Payton O'Brien, one of the athletes he coaches at Elmhurst Gymnastics Center. O'Brien, 7, was diagnosed with osteosarcoma (an aggressive form of bone cancer) in February 2014. He and Winstead have developed a special bond, and he has learned many life lessons from Winstead.



**Top left: Payton O'Brien, 7, swings from the sofa in his living room to practice for gymnastics. Top right: O'Brien works on his strength and flexibility by holding himself up on his crutches. Pictured in the background are his sisters, Briley (left) and Avery. Bottom: O'Brien sits with his family. Holding the "We love Payton" signs are his sisters, Briley (left) and Avery. Sitting are (from left) O'Brien's dad, Brian, O'Brien, O'Brien's brother Walker and O'Brien's mom, Laura. O'Brien was diagnosed with osteosarcoma in February 2014 and now takes gymnastics classes at Elmhurst Gymnastics Center. He has formed a special bond with his coach, Willowbrook senior Keawe Winstead.**

When watching 7-year-old Payton O'Brien during practice at Elmhurst Gymnastics Center, he is just like any other athlete in the class. He swings on the parallel bars, hangs from the rings and enjoys learning new skills.

But there's something different about O'Brien. As his teammates jump up and move from one event to the next, he hops on one leg with the assistance of crutches. O'Brien was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, an aggressive form of bone cancer, in February 2014. Three months later, his right leg needed to be amputated below the knee, and he underwent lung surgery in September 2014. After those surgeries – and undergoing 21 rounds of chemotherapy – O'Brien had lost strength and his passion for sports. He had participated in gymnastics when he was younger, so his parents, Brian and Laura, took him to see his cousin compete in a meet. It wasn't long before O'Brien was asking to get back in the gym and attend classes at Elmhurst Gymnastics Center.

"In the gym, he's just like everyone else," Brian said. "He can do many of the events, so it's like he doesn't have a handicap."

It was at Elmhurst Gymnastics Center that O'Brien met Willowbrook senior Keawe Winstead, who took him under his wing and helped him regain his love for the sport – and much more.

"It has been amazing to watch O'Brien's self-esteem and strength grow," Winstead said. "There are days when he gets down or a little shy, but I remind him he's just as good as or better than the other kids. He is very mature and understands what's going on, and my job is to make sure he stays confident and develops not only gymnastics skills, but also the skills to not focus on what other people say or think."

Winstead started coaching at Elmhurst Gymnastics Center about two years ago, and he immediately found his niche with athletes who require a little extra attention.

"I want them to realize they can fit in and be 'normal,'" Winstead said. "My passion is working with kids who have that drive to succeed – like O'Brien. I want to help them reach their goals."

Winstead draws on his own gymnastics experience to help his students. For nearly 14 years, he has spent countless hours in the gym, and he has been a standout on the Willowbrook Boys Gymnastics Team the last four years. He plans to be a walk-on for the University of Illinois at Chicago Mens Gymnastics Team this fall. Winstead has qualified for the Illinois High School Association State Meet multiple times on several events, and the Willowbrook team finished in

4<sup>th</sup> place at the State meet this year. O'Brien has become an honorary member of the team. When he visited Winstead during a recent competition, the team adopted him as a Warrior and gave him a Warrior Gymnastics T-shirt.

Brian said Winstead and O'Brien have a special bond, which he credits to Winstead's positive and patient coaching style. O'Brien might have only one leg, but he doesn't let that slow him down. At home, he can often be seen swinging from the sofa and chairs as if they're equipment in the gym, so it might not be surprising to learn his favorite event is the rings. To see a video of O'Brien on the rings with Winstead, go to <https://dupage88.net/site/public/videos/?item=116>.

O'Brien said he likes gymnastics because Winstead makes classes fun.

"He teaches me a lot, and he gives good instruction," O'Brien said.

Along with gymnastics, O'Brien participates in baseball, golf and swimming. He also likes to play lacrosse and watch football and basketball. If there's one thing he has learned from gymnastics, it's to never give up.

"You can do it if you just try," he said.