

## “The Sky Is the Limit”: An Interview With Taylor Duncan<sup>1</sup> on What Baseball Can Do to Help Young People With Disabilities Reach Their Potential

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*In this interview, disabilities activist and commissioner of the Alternative Baseball Organization (ABO) Taylor Duncan relates his life as a student with autism and other special needs. He goes into stigmas that he had to overcome in school as he tried to participate in regular baseball activities. Encouraged by a coach to not give up and pursue his love for America's favorite pastime, Duncan's passion for the game eventually resulted in the foundation of the ABO, a nonprofit that has received wide attention throughout the United States. Duncan points out how baseball can provide everyone with opportunities to participate, build team-working skills, and practice perseverance. Finally, he stresses the importance to empowering people with special needs and providing them with chances to showcase themselves as mature and full-fledged members of society.*

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*Insights: It's wonderful to have a chance to talk with you. Thank you for the opportunity.*

Taylor Duncan: Not a problem.

*Insights: This interview will be read by a lot of teachers. I listened to your TED Talk, which was outstanding by the way.*

Taylor Duncan: Thank you.

*Insights: In your final statement, you said: "We want to be taught so we can do things to the maximum of our potential." I would like to learn your take on how this can happen. Educators can then read our interview and maybe get some ideas for how they can teach in exactly that way.*

Taylor Duncan: That would be so amazing and outstanding.

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1 Taylor Duncan is the founder and commissioner of the Alternative Baseball Organization Inc. (ABO), a nonprofit that provides baseball training, exhibitions, and activities for teens and adults with disabilities. Diagnosed with autism at age four, throughout his childhood, Duncan struggled with speech, sensory, and anxiety issues. However, baseball helped him to overcome many odds in his life. Today, through ABO, he is able to help thousands of people with special needs to feel part of a group and manage their challenges.

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*Insights: Let us start off with some information about you. I read one of your interviews, in which you mentioned that you were diagnosed with autism at age four. You had to cope with various speech, sensory, and anxiety issues. These are risk factors that might make it difficult to succeed in school. What was school like for you?*

Taylor Duncan: To answer your question, I'm going to go all the way back to the beginning when I was diagnosed. I'm from the southeastern region of the US. There wasn't much autism awareness back then, and since I lived in a smaller area, it was difficult to get the schools to agree to get me the services that I needed. My mother helped me through a lot of those obstacles. She took time to work with me day in and day out. A lot of what I was faced with stemmed from social stigma from the school system. Don't get me wrong – I had some great teachers, but I also had a couple that were far from great. While I received a lot of support in the public school system, I also had to face a lot of negative perceptions about my autism from some of the leadership. Some of them just didn't believe that students with autism could be taught with everyone else in a typical classroom.

*Insights: Do you think this has changed? Is there more awareness of autism today?*

Taylor Duncan: Yes, it's gotten better, but I'm still hearing stories that parents are having issues trying to receive services from the school systems. However, it depends on the area. For example, I was not only denied the opportunity to play on traditional baseball teams, but I was also not eligible for a lot of services because I scored too high on an IQ test. In middle school, I faced a lot of bullying one year, to the point where we had to call the sheriff's department. As a result, my mother took me out to homeschool me.

*Insights: I am sorry to hear that. Like I said, this interview will be read by a lot of teachers. Can you maybe come up with a couple of things that teachers should have done better in your case?*

Taylor Duncan: It all comes down to perceptions. There are a lot of negative perceptions and stigma surrounding those with autism and other disabilities. But when we're given the opportunity to show what we can do and are supported to be the best we can possibly be, the sky is the limit in terms of what can actually happen. You don't know what's going to happen until you give them the opportunity to show what they can do instead of placing limits. You need to encourage students to learn in their own individual ways.

*Insights: That's a very good point. In fact, a couple of experiments carried out in the early twentieth century prove just that. Before they even had a chance to get to know their students, teachers were told that the kids in their new class had been tested, and were given some information about their learning potential. But it was all a hoax. The students had never been tested. However, after a year, they had turned out the way that the teachers expected them to turn out even though the stigma was*

*totally random. So, you're right, the perception of teachers makes a great difference.*

Taylor Duncan: Absolutely, it does for sure. Often kids accomplish what you believe they can accomplish. Not a lot of people are like me. I have always believed I could get somewhere in life.

*Insights: Where did that come from? You mentioned your mother, who gave you a lot of encouragement. And in one of your former interviews, you pointed out some of our teachers who did the same.*

Taylor Duncan: Yes, I did have those who really believed in my potential and worked with me day in and day out to get me where I am.

*Insights: In your TED Talk, you mentioned that you had one good year of youth baseball in school and that one coach made you a different person. I guess, you know who I'm talking about?*

Taylor Duncan: Yes. Coach Banks.

*Insights: Can you describe that coach to me?*

Taylor Duncan: Absolutely. I don't know if he had any experience coaching students with disabilities, but our youth baseball team had a couple of kids with special needs, myself and another player who still plays in our organization today. Back then, we didn't win very many games, but our coach was one of the relaxed types. He really wanted to teach the game in a way it was fun for us, and he wanted us to learn many things beyond winning and losing. We only won two games—and one of them was by forfeit. Coach Banks wanted to give us the best experience we could possibly have with basically what we had. Because almost none of us were experienced players, we made the best with what we had.

*Insights: So Coach Banks was not so much about winning, but more about involving everyone.*

Taylor Duncan: Absolutely. Everyone got decent playing time. Toward the end, everyone had to play, because we only had eight players. If somebody showed up late, we would have forfeited. But it taught me a lot. We learned how to work together. We all had different personalities, of course. Some of us were not very baseball-minded people at all. It was a great experience, because I learned so much more than what wins, losses, and statistics can show. It gave me an opportunity to be able to work hard and continue growing my skills in a way that I never had been afforded before.

*Insights: That's wonderful, and it shows again how important it is to have at least one significant person in your life. You said that you had a couple of good teachers, but Coach Banks seems to have made the biggest difference.*

Taylor Duncan: Yes!

*Insights: And now you are able to stand in front of a thousand people in the Rialto Theater in Tucson to give an outstanding TED Talk. You come across as such a self-confident person.*

Taylor Duncan: Well, thank you. That's because people have given me the opportunity to prove myself. I have had a lot of bad experiences in my life, but I also had a couple of people who really helped to mold me into who I am today. One of them was Coach Banks.

*Insights: And you managed to found the ABO that has been all over the place in the media.*

Taylor Duncan: Oh, yes. We play by Major League rules. There are a couple other adaptive baseball programs, but to my knowledge, we are unique in the way that we play on traditional fields. We do it exactly the way you see it done on television, minus the stadiums and the multimillion dollar contracts. Sorry, we can't afford to pay our players, but we can give them a great experience.

*Insights: That's wonderful. What's the story behind founding the ABO?*

Taylor Duncan: To answer this question, I have to go all the way back to when I was much younger. Around the time when I was diagnosed with various special needs, one of my family members said that there was nothing wrong with me that a good baseball game couldn't cure. I got into the public school system in two different counties, but they wanted to place me in the secluded classroom, not general ed. My mother always fought for me to be in the general ed. classroom, believing that was the way I was going to be able to learn how to be more social with other peers. Finally, the school system agreed. But I had to face a lot of reservations, especially from one of my baseball coaches, who thought it was too much of an injury risk to let me play. I didn't even have a chance to go out there and show him what I was able to do. He just viewed me as a safety hazard. And when I tried to fit into the recreational slow pitch softball team, I had to face a lot of the same stigma. This is why I eventually recruited my own team through Craigslist and Facebook to be able to play in that same slow pitch league. We lost the championship game by only one run – that's how successful we were. It was awesome. And later after I'd been given opportunities to go to Florida for a professional skills training from a guy in Canada who was having a camp down there, it changed me so much that I wanted to start a league for players like me.

The ABO has grown fast. We now have 74 teams in 31 states. And we are going global. We have all different kinds of players on our teams – players with autism, learning disabilities, fetal alcohol syndrome ... We have them all. It's all about building awareness. We want to build awareness to show people: "Hey, give us the opportunity to show what we can do. We all face opposition, but we're united to power through those perceptions."

*Insights: Wow, what a pep talk. That's wonderful.*

Taylor Duncan: Thank you.

*Insights: Well, I want to talk with you about some specific features of baseball. In your opinion, what makes baseball suitable as a means to foster inclusion?*

Taylor Duncan: That's easy. In baseball, everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute to the team setting. Everyone has equal opportunity to be able to make the play out in the field. Everyone has the opportunity to be one of an unlimited number of players on a batting line-up, and we all have equal opportunity to be the one to help the team win the game and progress together. We learn how to communicate with our other teammates, we learn how to make the plays in order to further progress. Many players with special needs may have trouble communicating with each other, but when you're playing in the field, the game of baseball forces you to communicate with your teammates. For example, if I'm gonna run on first, but there's a runner on second, I'm not gonna try to steal second. Recognizing that requires communication. You've got to communicate with your coach, got to communicate with your teammates. A lot of the communication skills that can be developed and formed through America's favorite pastime could also be transitioned over into the work environment.

*Insights: That makes sense. What importance do you assign to the communication that goes on in the dugout? A baseball game lasts such a long time, and you have a lot of opportunities to watch the game while you are not directly involved in it.*

Taylor Duncan: Definitely! In the dugouts, there's never a dull moment. Trust me. And that's very, very important.

*Insights: Let's elaborate on the inclusive aspects of baseball a bit more. What I find fascinating is the fact that you can look at guys like Pablo Sandoval, Prince Fielder, or Bartolo Colon – big stars in baseball – but you wouldn't necessarily assume that they were professional athletes if just met them on the street and didn't know them. Clearly, their overweight bodies have not affected their play. Baseball seems so inclusive that whatever skill you seem to have, you can bring it to the table.*

Taylor Duncan: Definitely. In skateboarding, everyone seems to be very thin. That's not the case with baseball. And it's not like everyone has to be tall like in basketball. That's what the ABO is all about: We look for the skills that each player has. We don't focus on what they can't do, but on their abilities.

*Insights: I guess this is why you avoid the term "disabled" in your interviews, but rather talk about being "differently able."*

Taylor Duncan: Exactly. A lot of our players have physical limitations. But it's all about showcasing them in the best way we possibly can. There is one player on my team with Down Syndrome. He has been with us since the very first day. Last year, we had a celebrity game with some former MLB players and a lot of people watching. This player made his first round around the 90 foot base paths and scored a run. Unassisted. With no help.

*Insights: Awesome. That's very impressive. Let me touch on another topic. The big leagues have seen a number of players with special needs: Curtis Pride has hearing impairments, Jim Abbott was born with a stump rather than a hand, George*

*Springer has been afflicted with a communication disorder since childhood, and Zack Greinke and Joey Votto have recently grappled with depression. There have even been a hand full of players with developmental disabilities, like Nolan Ryan, who is affected by dyslexia and Justin Miller, a pitcher with attention deficit disorder. And in 2018, the Kansas City Royals signed Tarik El-Abour, the first professional baseball player with autism. How important do you think athletes like these are toward helping to get rid of the stigma that people with disabilities are faced with?*

Taylor Duncan: I think they make a tremendous difference. It is fantastic to showcase what we as players with disabilities can do, and it would be even better if one of them came through our organization one day. I believe there are a lot of players who could've played beyond high school, but weren't afforded those opportunities.

*Insights: A little earlier, you talked about communication skills that you learn through baseball and that are often transferable to the job market. Could you elaborate a bit more on what baseball can teach you for life?*

Taylor Duncan: Oh, yes. There is so much. It teaches you confidence and perseverance. You go through stuff in baseball just like you do in life. I mean, you go through disappointments in games just like you do in other everyday situations. So why not learn how to deal with those disappointments through America's pastime rather than trying to channel it with all the other stresses that life brings?

*Insights: Often special education seems too much focused on making modifications for students without attempting to empower them. You prepare the road for the child, which is all fine, but it might be more important to prepare the child for the road.*

Taylor Duncan: Oh, yes! Life itself is a big challenge, no matter where you go and how you look at it. We have to arm young people with special needs with as many life skills as possible and enable them to execute them on their own. This is especially important if something happens to their parents. You need to be prepared for how to tackle life's challenges on your own and with a network of friends that you have built yourself. I worry about individuals with autism, especially adults who don't have resources in their communities. When their parents are gone, what are they going to do? A lot of them won't know where to go, because they haven't been taught the skills to be independent. That's where baseball comes in. We're teaching them life skills through baseball. We show them how to work together as a team so that maybe they can translate those skills into other life areas.

*Insights: You're a perfect example of this. You had to work through speech issues, and now are a great motivational speaker. And you have to communicate with people all the time as CEO of the ABO. All it took was people to believe in you and to give you the chance to prove yourself.*

Taylor Duncan: Have you ever heard the song “Subdivisions” by Rush?

*Insights: I don't believe I have.*

Taylor Duncan: The chorus goes like this: “In the high school halls, in the shopping malls, conform or be cast out.” That’s what our society is still like today. For those on the autism spectrum and others with special needs, as they try to become involved in romantic relationships, for example, they are cast out, because that’s outside the box for a lot of people. Life is hard enough for us, and denying us opportunities that we could have taken makes it harder than it has to be.

*Insights: Well, you are certainly playing an important part to change this. Through your media presence and the ABO, you have brought the problem of stigma surrounding special needs issues to a lot of people's attention. It's great to see someone like you who is not willing to put up with the status quo, but tries to make life better for hundreds or even thousands of people who are differently abled. Thank you very much for the time you spent doing this interview with me.*

Taylor Duncan: My pleasure. This was fun!

#### **AUTHORS' NOTE**

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