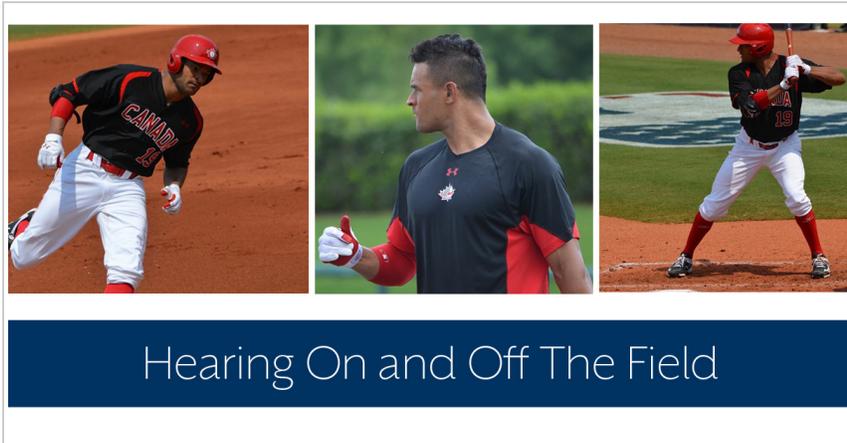


## HEARING ON AND OFF THE FIELD: TYSON GILLIES

By Sarah Bricker on Jul 13, 2015



Photographs courtesy of Alexis Brudnicki, 2015.

It's the bottom of the sixth inning, and the crowd's deafening cheers fill my head. The pitcher throws a curve ball, and my teammate misses, striking out before the ball even hits the catcher's glove. *Do I steal? Do I stay? Will he get the next hit? Will it be a line drive? Well, if it's a homerun, I should run. What if it's not?*

As I watch the pitcher wind up for the second pitch, options run through my head in fast forward. My feet dance in rhythm with my thoughts, toes scuffing up dust as I bounce off and on first base. And as my feet shift heel to toe, my mind races, analyzing all the plays, all the ways that next pitch could turn out, all the different things that could happen should the bat and ball meet. *I can't be sure. I should steal now. It's never safe to steal, but here we go.* The ball flies out the pitcher's hand as my feet push off the base and race towards second. I'm sprinting fast, second base getting closer and closer, and yet when I get there, all I hear is "OUT!" from the umpire. And then I hear the cruelty of the crowd.

This is the scene I imagine as San Antonio Mission's outfielder Tyson Gillies, 26, explains what can happen on the field when he makes a mistake.

"It's like they can't see past it," Gillies said. "People didn't want to take a chance on me when I started out because *I came with certain risks*. They couldn't see past my hearing loss. So now, when I make a mistake on the field, it's not just a bad call by a player, it's all about whether or not I heard the play at all. When I make a mistake, it's all they see."

### THE EARLY DAYS

Tyson Gillies was born with hearing loss, but he was almost 5-years-old by the time he was finally tested. "My lip reading was so good, I had everyone fooled," he said.

In school, his teachers thought he wasn't listening and often chastised him for not

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paying attention. "They didn't know what to do with me," he said. "In kindergarten, for example, I wouldn't hear everything so I'd memorize all the activities for each day. I knew when it was Monday or Friday based on what we were doing. I knew when snack time was, when naptime was and what came next. I was always one step ahead, so no one could see that I was different from the other kids. But, when activities got changed, I didn't know what to do and would get so frustrated that I'd just lose it."

But what Gillies' teachers thought to be bad behavior was actually a severe cookie-bite hearing loss in both ears. Testing showed that hearing aids were a necessity.

Growing up in a small community about four hours outside of Vancouver, Canada, Gillies said he faced a lot of teasing and bullying because of his hearing aids. "It was hard just being different...being the outcast," he said. "I was the only one. No one had hearing aids or knew what they were. Kids are always judgmental with anything different, but even adults would ask what the things on my ears were."

Until about tenth grade, Gillies said he was a homebody, avoiding social outings and doing anything he could to hide his hearing aids. He kept his hair long and wore beanies to hide the devices. "I went through a lot of hearing aids when I was younger," he said. "Kids threw one pair on top of a roof in third grade, but I threw some out of our apartment's windows or flushed them down the toilet. I didn't want to wear them."

After a while though, Gillies said the insecurities and isolation faded as he accepted how much he needed the hearing aids. "They just became part of who I am," he said.

Now, he's open about his hearing loss and is the first to tell others about his hearing aids or even to make a joke about them. "When you laugh about it or bring it up before anyone else can," Gillies said, "people are just more comfortable around you. If you say it first, it's like it's not longer an issue."

## HEARING BASEBALL: HARDSHIPS AND HOME RUNS

Today, Gillies is a professional baseball player, a centerfielder for the San Antonio Missions in Texas. The Seattle Mariners originally signed him in 2007 before being traded in a major deal to the Phillies in 2009.

Gillies never saw himself playing pro ball until later in life, and if you ask him, he's the first to admit the real reason he got started in the game: "I was waiting for hockey season." Originally, Gillies was trained to be the quarterback in high school, but he was turned away when his hearing aids wouldn't fit inside the helmet. "They never even took a chance on me...that was the last time I ever let anyone put 'can't' in my head," Gillies said of the experience. Despite his initial interest in baseball, Gillies quickly proved himself a powerhouse of athleticism and talent throughout high school and during his first year of junior college at Iowa Western Community College. He was drafted after only a year at Iowa and has been playing professionally ever since.

Despite his talent on the field, Gillies' hearing loss has affected the way others see and treat him as a player. "People always go for the ears when I tell them I can't hear, and that's the worst," he said. "I can't hear them and don't respond, so they end up thinking I'm being a jerk. It's something I wish I could explain to everyone, especially the fans that are yelling behind me. They end up thinking I'm rude, but in reality I just haven't heard them so I don't respond."

With coaches, Gillies said he's had some great ones and some who weren't quite sure how to work with him or who understood how his hearing loss impacted him as a player.

He recalled how one coach interacted with him after signing with the Mariners. "One of my coaches would always go up to me, talk really slow, use hand signals and say, 'You. Are. Going. To Right Field,'" Gillies said. "He did it everyday, so finally I was like I need to do something. One day when he got done telling me where to go, I said, 'Ok. Oh, how's your family? Your friends? How was your weekend?'" and he just stared at

me in shock. It was like he finally understood that I was actually capable at that point, that my hearing loss didn't make disabled or different."

Gillies said the automatic assumption that he's incapable because he has hearing loss is one of the biggest obstacles he's faced as a ball player. "I've always worked like crazy to be a powerhouse on the field so that no one can say anything about my hearing loss, and after a while, people start to forget I'm hearing impaired and start talking about how I play instead," he said. "When something happens that puts focus back on my hearing loss, it's like oh great, here we go again. I just try to tell myself it's going to get better and that I can't let it hold me back."

"If you don't act like you have a disability, no one else will," said Gillies' girlfriend Caitlin Connolly. "He just puts it out there before anyone else can and makes it obvious before there is even an issue. In all the sports he's played, he's never really seemed different because it's so much unspoken communication. He's always one step ahead of everyone else, playing out scenarios before they happen so that when they do, he's ready."

But, what Connolly is amazed at isn't Gillies' openness about his hearing loss; it's how he handles difficult and negative situations. "He has such a strong wall, and he is incredible at keeping it inside, but just some of the things I've heard at games...it's disgusting," she said. "Some of the players used to call him Radio when he first started, but the fans are honestly the worst. They'll use his hearing loss and are ready to blame him for missing a ball, shouting, 'Did you not hear the ball? Didn't you hear the play?' It's the only thing they look to when something goes wrong."

Commentators, Gillies said, will do the same thing, citing his hearing loss as an excuse for the way a play went or the loss of a run. While the teasing incites flashbacks from growing up, Gillies said he does his best to brush it off. "Because of my hearing loss there are insecurities and frustrations that come with it, but I just try to remember that it's all part of the game," Gillies said.

"Everybody has to deal with teasing and taunts. I just try to remember how far I've come and what I've done to overcome it. I always tell myself to stop feeling sorry for myself, that it could be so much worse and that I should be thankful for what I have."

## HELPFUL HEARING AIDS

Gillies' has worn numerous hearing aids throughout his life, and said that as he got older he tried to always ensure his hearing aids were the latest technology. "He just has a better quality of life overall," Connolly said of what hearing aids do for Gillies. "Whether it's sports or communicating with friends, they make him so much more confident and open. Without them it's like he's a different person."

In May, Gillies' broke his hearing aids; a 2012 set of Starkey completely-in-the-canal devices, Connolly said it was like his world just fell apart.

"I watched it happen and could see what a setback it was for him," she said. "He is such a positive person, but watching him struggle with the older technology was really hard. The older hearing aids were holding him back. When he reached out to Starkey and they invited him to come to Minnesota, it was a miracle. He was so excited, and I was just sitting there crying when I found out because I was so happy for him."

## TWO WHOLE NEW WORLDS

Neither cried at the end of the Starkey hearing appointment, but both were all smiles when they found out that Starkey Hearing Technologies CEO Bill Austin had worked with his team to create not one, but two hearing aids for Gillies to walk away with.

"I was shocked when I heard them say he was getting two pairs," Connolly said. "We just weren't expecting that. We were already so grateful, but when that happened... we were just speechless."

For on the field, Gillies was fit with invisible-in-the-canal (IIC) SoundLens2 hearing aids to help block out wind interference and be virtually unnoticeable while playing or practicing baseball. While his former hearing aids were unable to hear sounds well from behind and to the sides, Gillies said he's amazed at how clear and easy he can hear and understand sound from every direction. The goal with the SoundLens2 devices was to enable Gillies to have optimal hearing without any interference while playing, especially while wearing hats or helmets.

For off the field, Gillies has receiver-in-the-canal (RIC) Halos that will offer him power, personalization capabilities, the latest in hearing aid technology and the ability to create geo-tagged memories, which is key with upcoming travel plans to North Carolina, Canada and possibly Asia

"I'm on the road a lot for baseball, so this is going to be amazing when talking on the phone while traveling," Gillies said. "I called my mom last night and she was in tears because she was so happy for me," he said after a night wearing the Halos. "It was incredible how clear her voice was, and even last night when we went out in Minneapolis to loud restaurants with live music, I could hear and understand so much."

"He gives people hope," Connolly said of Gillies. "Here he is, this successful and talented athlete with hearing loss. People look at him and see how far he's come with hearing loss and they see that in the end it doesn't mean anything, that it doesn't stop him from going after what he wants."

By: [Sarah Bricker](#)

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