

“I want to be the fastest man in the world.”

BLAKE LEEPER

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# Make It HAPPEN!



## Before Reading

Think about your own goals. Do you want to play soccer or make music? All activities take time and practice.

## During Reading

During reading, review the highlighted vocab words. While learning about Blake, understand how he got to where he is today. What **skills** has he shown that have helped his **career**? In each chapter, the Make It Happen! activity will help you, too, build skills to reach your own goals.

## After Reading

Look in the back of the book for questions and activities to help you think about Blake's story. Share these with a friend, parent, or teacher. Also, talk about the skills you need to reach your goals.

**skills:** the ability to do something that comes from training, experience, or practice

**career:** a job or profession that someone does for a long time



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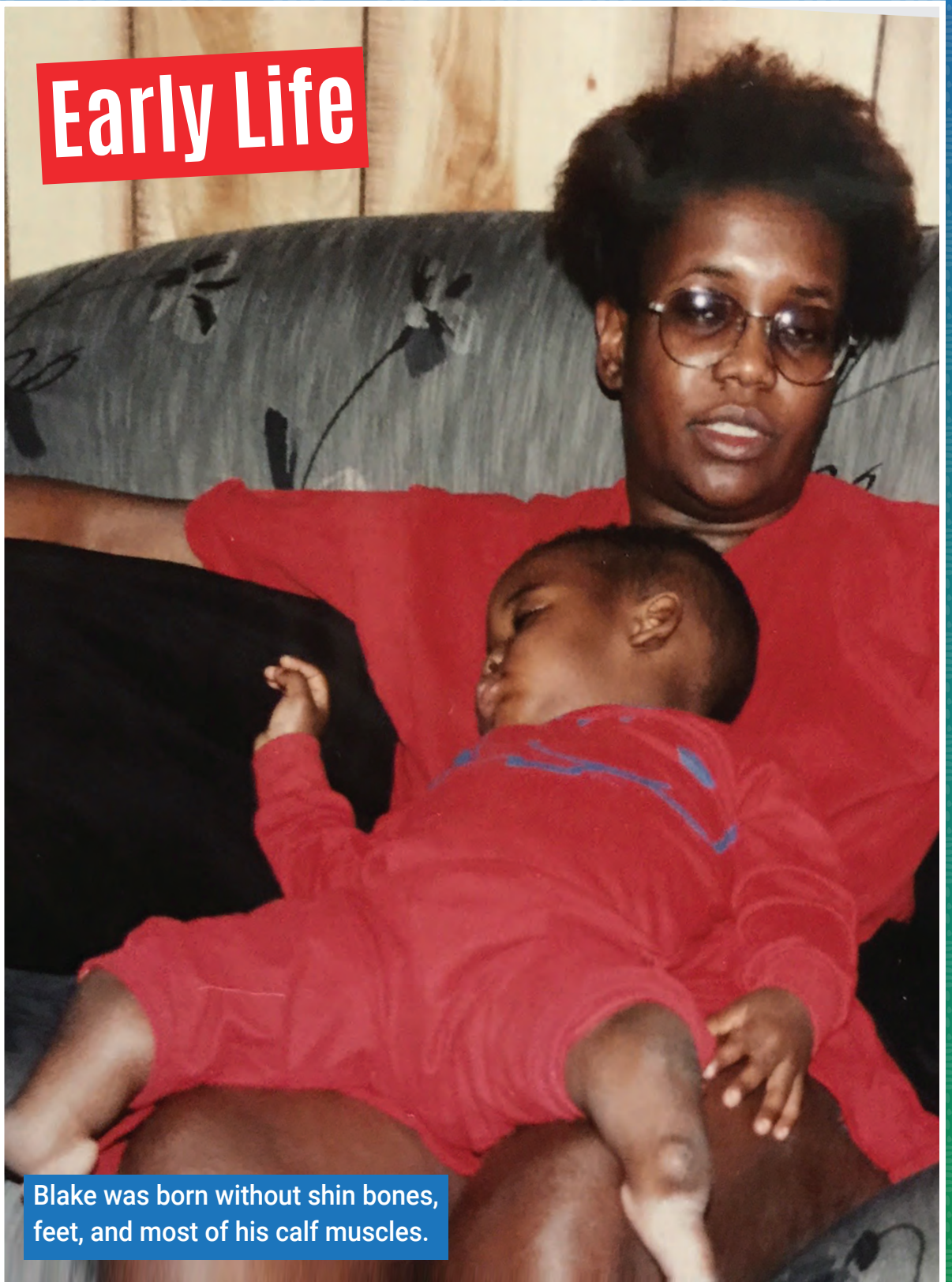
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# Early Life



Blake was born without shin bones, feet, and most of his calf muscles.

Blake was born on August 31, 1989, in Kingsport, Tennessee. Blake was a healthy baby. But he was born with both legs missing below the knee. “Everyone was shocked in the delivery room,” Blake’s mother, Edythe, said.

A doctor at the hospital examined Blake. He told Blake’s parents that their son might never walk. Blake’s parents were worried. They didn’t want his **disability** to hold him back in life. “We had no idea what was facing us, but we were going to do the best that we could,” said Edythe.

Blake began wearing **prostheses** when he was 6 months old. He was adventurous and wanted to explore his surroundings. The new legs gave Blake more freedom. As a toddler, he was always on the move.



A positive attitude was something Blake worked on, even when things got hard.

**disability:** a physical or mental condition that affects a person’s everyday life

**prostheses:** artificial body parts



# A Love of Sports Begins

Growing up, Blake always looked up to his older brother, Kris. Blake wanted to play sports just like his brother. Blake started with baseball. As he grew older, he played basketball and tried running cross-country. Things weren't always easy.

Blake's prostheses were stiff. Sometimes they would fall off. But Blake was a true athlete. He never took the easy way out. He refused to let his disability define him.

As Blake grew, he needed new prostheses to fit his body. Every two years, Blake got a new set of legs. Each pair was equally hard to break in. Blake had to learn how to move with them. It was also difficult emotionally. Strangers would



As he got older, Blake became more and more aware of people looking at his prosthetic legs.



stare at his prostheses. It made him uncomfortable. However, Blake decided that he wasn't going to worry about what other people thought. He was going to live his life to the fullest. "It was in that moment that I decided I would accept who I was," he said.

## Make it HAPPEN! Embrace Empathy

**Empathy** is the ability to understand another person's feelings. Practice using empathy to learn more about other people's experiences and see what happens.

- Read a book about a character who has different abilities than you. What challenges did the character face? How did they feel about their experiences?
- Take a trip around your neighborhood. Make a list of the physical challenges that people with disabilities would face.
- Explore what it is like to lose one of your senses. Try listening to music with background noise or without sound at all, or feeling objects inside a box without seeing them first.

**empathy:** the ability to share and understand someone else's feelings

Talk about what you learned with your friends. What was it like to experience the world in a different way? How did you feel? Did anything you learn change your empathy?



# First Steps of the Journey

Growing up playing sports, Blake knew that he was no different from anyone else. If he wanted to run, he would run.



In 2008, Blake saw a runner competing with prostheses on television. The man was Oscar Pistorius. He was competing in the Beijing **Paralympic Games**. Blake was **inspired**. For the first time, he saw runners who looked like him. If these athletes could compete, Blake knew that he could too. He decided that he wanted to give running a try.

Before he knew it, Blake had a new dream. “I want to be the fastest man in the world,” Blake said. Soon, Blake was fitted for new running prostheses called **blades**. It took a while to get used to running with them. But Blake’s practice and hard work paid off. “I’d never gone so fast in my life,” he remembered.



For the first time, Blake was able to run as fast as he wanted.

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**Paralympic Games:** a series of international contests for athletes with disabilities

**inspired:** encouraged someone to do something

**blades:** special prostheses made for running

# The Next Step Forward

Blake was going to follow his dream of running full-time. Later, his decision to quit college was a big shock. But his parents knew Blake would make the right choice

for himself. Blake entered his first race in 2009. He did not have a coach, but he still won. Coaches from the United States Paralympic Team were impressed. They invited him to the Olympic and Paralympic Training Center in California. He began to train with the best runners from around the world.

Blake's dream was coming true. He was on his way to becoming a professional Paralympic athlete. "From there, everything just started to take off," Edythe recalled.



Deciding to leave school was a huge decision. But Blake knew he had to follow his dreams.

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His path forward was not always easy, though. In January 2011, Blake traveled to New Zealand for a race. The trip had been long and tiring. Blake was very **nervous**. He was disappointed to come in fifth place. But he was still **determined**. Blake trained hard to get his body ready for the next competition.

**nervous:** feeling unsure or fearful

**determined:** having reached a firm decision

**Make It  
HAPPEN!**

## Put a Stop to Bullying

Bullying happens in different ways. It can be hurtful for people who feel “less than” like Blake did. It is important to identify bullying when you see it happening so you can help stop it.

- Sit down with a group of friends and talk about times when you saw someone being bullied.
- Talk about what you could have done to stop the bullying. What could have helped your friend at the time of the bullying? What could they have done if they were being bullied? What can you do if you see someone else being bullied?
- Create an Anti-Bullying Handbook with your friends. Share tips and actions that can help stop bullying. By working together, a group can make a positive change.