

David Perry, Football Player: A story of inclusion at its best

By Diane Perry

My son David Perry is a high school football player. He's stocky and strong, very social and respected by his peers. David also happens to have Down Syndrome.

As David was growing up, our energetic neighbor always told him that he was "built to play football." David's transition to ninth grade at the local high school brought up the question of extracurricular activities, and I immediately thought of football.

I asked David if he would like to try out for the ninth grade team, and his response was an enthusiastic "yes." I contacted the football coaches to inquire about David's participation, and to my relief, the head coach was very open to my son's participation. He expressed his commitment to creating a successful experience for David and for all his players, and he explained that "all my players play." He said he needed to gauge David's capabilities, but he was excited about David playing.

The conversation was a relief. I knew that the coaches' open minds assured David would get a fair chance, but my husband Dave and I also made sure to lay out clear goals for our son's participation. If David made the team, he would practice and attend all games, and most importantly he would be challenged by the coaches.

Although the coaches seemed to be on board, we had a few concerns. I was unsure of David's abilities to play the game, which he had never really played before. Also, David had no prior understanding or knowledge of the team like many of his teammates who had been playing since they were young children. This seemed like it could be an obstacle.

After David's participation was in place, four-hour-long preseason practices finally began in the long, hot days of August. I dropped David off at the field, suited up and ready to go. Dave observed practice for a little to make sure that things were running smoothly, but after a short time he felt confident that our son was safe and accepted.

David came home from practices tired and sweaty, but happy. He talked about his coaches and teammates and answered all of my questions ("Did you meet anybody new? Did anybody help you out? Do you want to keep playing?"). Despite the strenuous practices, David explained that he did indeed want to continue playing.

After a few weeks, the head coach noticed that David often chose to sit out during practice, explaining that he was too tired to do the numerous drills, exercises, and stretches. The coach contacted us and explained that for safety reasons participating in warm up stretches was mandatory and that David's choice to opt out of them was making his participation difficult. However, the coach maintained a positive attitude. He supported David in working at his own pace, and the team encouraged him throughout practice.

Dave and I had a conversation about the importance of participating in stretches and drills during practice, which was enough to make David "step it up" at practice. I believe that, when David chose to sit out, he was observing and processing the routine. Football practice involves a whole routine of stretching, conditioning exercises, and drills that David was unfamiliar with, and he needed time to get used to it. After awhile, the routine was his motivation.

All of David's coaches and his teammates were supportive from day one, even through the somewhat rough beginning of the season. The coaches constantly suggested new ideas and rethought David's participation themselves. They didn't come to Dave and me with problems and expect us to know how to solve them. They figured it all out themselves and just occasionally checked in with new ideas.

On the first game day of the season, David was introduced to the proud tradition of wearing his football jersey to school. He didn't play in that first game of the season, but he did play in the second game and

nearly every game thereafter. His first game was exciting, but also nerve-racking. I was chatting with some of the other parents in the stands when they suddenly told me that David was on the field. The entire parent section cheered for him, but I was worried about the opposing team's reaction.

To my relief, David's participation was never an issue with any of the coaches, team members, parents, opposing teams, or referees. His first game and in fact every game went smoothly, and David quickly became a staple of the kicking team.

The most important and rewarding part of David's participation on the football team was camaraderie among both the players and their parents. Wearing his jersey to school allowed him to display camaraderie with his teammates and friends, and that sense of belonging quickly became the most meaningful reward of playing.

The friendships David developed were incredible. He talked about his friends at home, sometimes ate lunch with his teammates, went to the homecoming dance, and had friends over to hang out during winter break. Although David was on the ninth grade team, he also knew players on the JV and Varsity teams, so his circle of friends spread throughout the school.

He made an especially close connection with the team's quarterback, Adam. David was like a magnet to Adam. His mom told me that her son looked forward to practice because David made it fun. Adam even went to one of David's away basketball games over the winter, and my son was more than thrilled to see his good friend supporting him.

David's friends even shared stories about him with their parents. Teenagers don't usually talk about friends with their parents, but they sure did talk about David. Several of the stories made it back to me, and it felt good to know that David really was a part of the team.

I felt like a part of the team too. My fellow team parents supported Dave and me as much as their children supported David. They cheered for him, shared their children's' stories with us, and one even wanted to contact a newspaper so that everyone would know about my son.

At the end of the season, I thanked the team profusely for the great experience. I thanked the coaches personally and sent a letter to the superintendent of the school district about the great experience my family had with the football team. I even got to go into the locker room before the last game to thank David's teammates for their dedication, support, and open-mindedness.

Everyone, including David's coaches and many of his teachers, credit his membership on the football team with making his transition to high school extremely smooth. Developing a huge network of friends and acquaintances throughout the school is important to any student starting high school, and being included on a sports team with his typical peers certainly made that happen for my son.