

Silent Football

Jacob Adamson loves football.

Jacob loves the rituals. He loves tailgating before the game. He loves wearing his team colors. He loves wearing his lucky socks. He hasn't them washed all season.

Jacob loves the game. He loves the strategies and plays. He loves following the players. And he especially loves the roar of the crowd after each touchdown. He feels that vibration from the tip of his toes to the top of his head. But he doesn't hear the sound.

Jacob is deaf.

When he was two years old, Jacob got a serious infection. He had a very high fever for several days. He spent a week in the hospital. His parents were so happy when Jacob seemed to recover quickly. He was soon home. He was back to his active self.

But Jacob's parents also noticed a change. Jacob didn't seem to talk as much as he had before he was sick. "He had started talking when he was quite young," says Jacob's mom. "He copied his big brother for a long time. He would repeat everything he said. He was just starting to show a funny, creative personality. He would tell stories. He would make up his own jokes. He made me laugh every day."

Jacob's parents thought that he would start talking more over time. They tried not to push him.

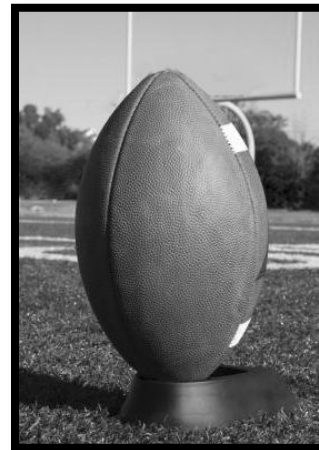
They finally realized something might be wrong. "We were watching the Superbowl," explains Jacob's dad. "We had a large group of friends at our house. Our favorite team was playing.

Everyone was so excited. There was a lot of cheering and yelling at the TV screen. Jacob fell asleep in a chair. About ten minutes later, there was an exciting touchdown. Almost everyone in the room jumped to their feet. Everyone was yelling and screaming. Jacob didn't wake up. He didn't even move."

"We tried some things with him the next day," explains Jacob's mom. "I sat in front of him so he was looking at me. His dad stood behind Jacob and made noise. He clapped his hands; he called Jacob's name. Jacob didn't respond at all."

Within a week, they had visited two doctors. Jacob was completely deaf in his left ear. He was hard of hearing in his right ear.

The entire family started learning sign language right away. "We made sure that when we talked to Jacob that we were right in front of him. We wanted him to see our mouths moving." Soon, Jacob was starting to read lips and to respond. He began talking again. He also used American Sign Language.



By kindergarten, Jacob was speaking well. He was fluent in sign language. He was getting better at reading lips. His parents researched schools for deaf and hard of hearing students. But Jacob really wanted to go to the same

school as his big brother. He got a sign language interpreter. Her name is Susan Morrissey. With her help, Jacob did well in school. He loved being a part of a regular class.

“Mrs. Morrissey is like part of our family,” Jacob says. “She’s sat through almost every class with me from kindergarten to now.” Jacob is currently a high school sophomore. “But she couldn’t help me with football.”

Even though he was deaf, Jacob still wanted to play football. He loved watching his favorite teams. He loved watching his big brother play. He wanted to play too.

“I was worried that he’d get hurt,” says Jacob’s mom. “But I knew how much he loved the game.”

“I thought the idea of Jacob playing football was crazy. I’ll be honest about that,” says Mrs. Morrissey with a laugh. “I tried to help him when he first started playing at age 8. But I know nothing about football. I couldn’t follow the game well enough. I couldn’t sign the words fast enough to help Jacob keep up on the plays.”

Jacob’s father became an assistant coach to help his son. “We did some research. There are quite a few deaf and hard of hearing football players. There have even been a few in the NFL.”

There are several high schools for deaf and hard of hearing students around the country. Many of them have football teams made up entirely of deaf and hard of hearing players. Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. is the world’s only university dedicated to students who are deaf and hard of hearing. They also have a

football team. A handful of deaf and hard of hearing players have earned scholarships. They have played on some of the best university football teams in the nation.

“We read more and more about successful deaf and hard of hearing football players. We got more excited about letting Jacob try,” says his dad. “We tried to figure out what position would work best for him. But that’s pretty much like we’d do with any player.”

“I wasn’t very good at offense,” Jacob says. “The plays change too often on the field. There was no good way for me to be told what change to make. I kind of ended up just running around.”

Many deaf and hard of hearing players find it easier to play defense. Defensive formations can be easily signed from the sidelines. “I’m not a big guy,” says Jacob. “Defense was fun to play when I was a kid. We weren’t allowed to tackle then. But it’s kind of scary now when I get knocked down from behind and never hear it coming.”

But Jacob found his place. “It turns out I’m a pretty good kicker,” he says with a smile. He’s kicked three field goals in his high school team’s last two games.

“My goal is to play at the college level,” says Jacob. “I don’t know if I’m good enough to get scholarships or anything like that. I just want to play the game.”

“He can accomplish anything he puts his mind to,” says Jacob’s mom with a smile.