

Silent Football

Jacob Adamson loves football.

Jacob loves the ritual: tailgating before the game, wearing his team colors, and wearing his lucky socks, which he hasn't washed all season.

Jacob loves the game: the strategies and plays. He loves following the players and picking out favorites. 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 and spent a week in the hospital. His parents were thrilled when Jacob seemed to recover quickly and was soon home and back to his active, mischievous self.

But Jacob's parents also noticed that he 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, repeating everything he said. At age two he was starting to show a funny, creative personality. He would tell stories and make up his own jokes. He made me laugh every day."

Jacob's parents thought that he would start talking more over time, and they tried not to push him to talk again.

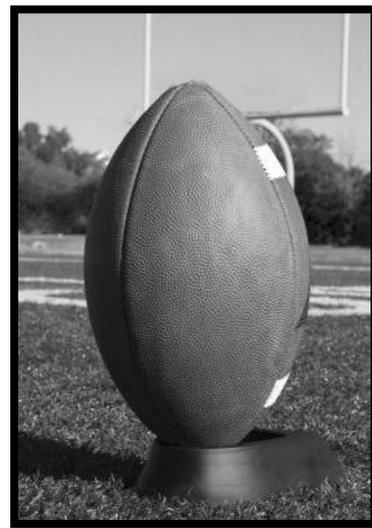
Then one day, they finally realized something might be wrong. "We were watching the Superbowl," explains Jacob's dad. "We had a large group of friends and family at our house to watch our favorite team play. Everyone was so excited, and there was a lot of cheering and

yelling at the TV screen. At one point, Jacob fell asleep in a chair. About ten minutes later, there was a particularly exciting touchdown. Almost everyone in the room jumped to their feet, yelling and screaming. Jacob didn't wake up. He didn't even flinch."

"We did some experiments 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, two doctors had confirmed what Jacob's parents suspected. Jacob was completely deaf in his left ear and hard of hearing in his right ear.

The entire family started learning sign language immediately. "We made sure that when we talked to Jacob that we were right in front of him so he could see our mouths moving." Soon, Jacob was starting to read lips and to respond, both by talking again and by using American Sign Language.



By the time Jacob was ready to start kindergarten, he was speaking well and was

fluent in sign language and getting better at reading lips. His parents researched schools for deaf and hard of hearing students, but Jacob really wanted to attend the same school as his big brother. With the help of Susan Morrissey, a sign language interpreter, Jacob excelled in school and 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. “The only thing that she couldn’t help me with was football.”

Despite being deaf, Jacob still wanted to play football. He loved watching his favorite teams and loved watching his big brother play. As soon as he was old enough to join the local league, he started begging to be able to play.

“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 to sign the words 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 actually 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 to play on some of the best university football teams in the nation.

“The more we read about successful deaf and hard of hearing football players, the more excited we were about letting Jacob try,” says his dad. “We did a little experimenting to figure out what position would work best for him, 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, and 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, when we weren’t allowed to tackle, 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.