

Look over Jordan, what do you see?

Rochester teen defies stereotypes as school makes run for football glory

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BY MITCH ALBOM

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Friday night, at a high school football playoff game, it was damp and cold, and the players bounced on their toes to keep warm. Near the Rochester Adams bench, amidst all these bigger teenagers, stood Jordan Kidder, barely five feet tall, with glasses and braces, a school cap, a jersey, a varsity jacket and a job to do.

"Watch this for me, Jordan, OK?" a player said, running over.

"OK," he said.

"Some water, Jordan," another said.

"Here," he said, handing over a bottle.

"How's it going, Jordan?" another said, slapping his hand.

"Going good," he said, slapping back.

As the game went on, he didn't throw a pass or make a tackle, he never pulled on a helmet, but when the Highlanders scored, he clapped his gloves hard, and when the kicker needed a tee, he made sure it was there, and when the team went to halftime, he went with them, getting the guys whatever they needed, encouraging them to keep fighting.

As student manager, Jordan Kidder, 18, has a unique job. As a young man with Down syndrome, he has a unique life. He doesn't quite look like the guys on the team, isn't quite as big, doesn't speak the same way, maybe moves a little differently. And in high school, where being "different" can be a curse, you might think the other players have been teaching him something.

Truth is, he has been teaching them.

"I didn't really know what to make of Jordan when we met," admits Josh Renel, Adams' star running back, who now picks up his buddy every Tuesday en route to team dinners at Buffalo Wild Wings, "but Jordan has shown me you can't really judge a person by what he looks like. He's just like any one of us."

The story behind his name

Just like any one of us. That sentence would have been laughable 18 years ago, when Cynthia Kidder was pregnant. Tests showed the likelihood of serious problems, and it was politely suggested she terminate the pregnancy. In fact, today, when a prenatal diagnosis is given of Down syndrome, studies suggest up to 90% of women choose to do just that.

Cynthia refused.

"If I have a child with problems," she said, "it's still my child."



Senior Jordan Kidder fills the water bottles on the sideline during the Rochester Adams' playoff game against Farmington Hills Harrison.

At the time, she was confident. She had a big job in New York, she had two other sons. She could handle it. But when the child arrived, she recalls, "People didn't say, 'Congratulations.' They said, 'So ... I hear you had the baby.' "

A dire life was predicted for her son: heart defects, smaller limbs, almond-shaped eyes, low muscle tone, learning disabilities. All the typical stuff with Down syndrome, a chromosomal abnormality that usually affects cognitive ability, physical growth and facial appearance -- in other words, how you think, how you grow and how you look. *He'll never read, Cynthia was told. He'll never do math. He'll never do anything that's not repetitive behavior.* A doctor told her the "good" news: There were two Down syndrome kids he knew "who worked at a McDonald's, wiping tables."

Cynthia was drowning. She called a religious aunt and asked for support. Somehow the spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" came up in the conversation, and the line, "I looked over Jordan and what did I see ... a band of angels coming after me ..."

The next day, she woke up feeling better.

She named her baby Jordan.

And from that day forward, the kid has been defying predictions. He learned to read -- slowly, but he did. He learned to do math and science. He went to classes with other "normal" kids -- at Cynthia's insistence, and with help from the Rochester school system -- and he made his own friends with an amazingly open and happy heart. One time, when Jordan was playing tag with some fellow grade-schoolers, Cynthia noticed they kept telling her son he was "it." Worried, she quickly intervened, lecturing the boys on the rules. But later Jordan told her, "The first part of recess was more fun. I got to be 'it' the whole time."

Cynthia and Jordan's father held Jordan to the same standards as their other children. They found teachers who would do the same. As a result, Jordan has grown into a pretty typical teenager: He listens to Zebrahead on his iPod, watches pro wrestling (his favorite is A.J. Styles), scarfs down hamburgers and pasta, sings in the choir, and is even on the swim team. OK, so he almost always finishes dead last.

What's important to him is that he's part of things.

Besides, at one swim meet, he finished next-to-last. You never saw anyone as happy with that result as Jordan was.

The story behind his role

But what Jordan really loves is the football team. He has been a student manager for four years, starting with the freshman squad and working his way up. He handles the equipment, distributes the water and consistently raises team spirit. The first day, he admits, "I was nervous. But I got over it."

Why were you nervous?

"I'd never been on a football field."

Were you worried they'd tackle you?

He explodes in an infectious laugh that could melt the hardest heart. "No. But one time, against Troy, I ran on the field for a tee, and they all came flying by me -- whoosh, whoosh."

Did you go down?

"No," he laughs again. "I went in between them."

Kids with Down syndrome are often described as having an almost supernatural effect on those who know them, a certain sweetness, innocence and nonjudgmental persona that, for want of a better phrase, chokes you up.

Tony Patritto, the Adams football coach, has that look often when he speaks about Jordan. Like so many others, he had never dealt with a Down syndrome kid, and his instinct, at first, was to pity and make concessions. Except Jordan kept coming late to science class. "I called him out," Patritto says. "I took a chance."

Jordan responded. And he has been part of Patritto's world ever since. There's a team gesture his Highlanders players use, a shark-like hand-to-the-forehead that signals "fins up" for defense. Whenever Patritto sees Jordan, in the hallway, in the locker room, "he gives me this huge grin and makes the 'fins up,' and it just makes my day."

When you ask Patritto what Jordan's duties are as team manager, he answers "to be with us." When you ask Renel, the star running back, about Jordan's popularity, he laughs and says, "You cannot *not* like him." When you ask Jordan -- who shaved his head with his teammates when the playoffs began -- what he will miss most when football ends, he says, "My friends."

And when you ask Cynthia Kidder, who now runs a national Down syndrome organization called Band Of Angels, dedicated to celebrating and supporting those with the disability, what she thinks about her son graduating next spring -- and planning to go to college -- she recalls how teachers once told her that by the fourth grade, Jordan might be able to make macaroni and cheese.

"I told them, 'He lives in my house, I can cook for him. But I'm not a teacher. Can you teach him?' "

They have. And he has taught them. About stereotypes. About patience. About dealing with real problems and still maintaining an explosive laugh and a sly sense of humor. When Jordan was told a Free Press photographer was going to take his picture, he asked, "Can they take one of me and the cheerleaders?" Adams won big Friday night, capturing a Division 2 regional championship, 49-10, over Farmington Hills Harrison. If the Highlanders (11-1) win two more games, they will be state champs, the Promised Land for a high school football team.

Then again, they may already be there. You look over Jordan and what do you see? A big-hearted teen flanked by a band of angels -- teammates, teachers, family, friends -- all loving someone "different" no differently than they love themselves.

If that's not the Promised Land, what is?

Contact **MITCH ALBOM** at 313-223-4581 or malbom@freepress.com. Catch "The Mitch Albom Show" 5-7 p.m. weekdays on WJR-AM (760). Also catch "Monday Sports Albom" 7-8 p.m. Mondays on WJR. To read his recent columns, go to www.freep.com/mitch. For more info on Down syndrome go to www.bandofangels.com.