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'I couldn't have asked for a better team to be part of'

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WHITE BEAR LAKE — Leslie Sieleni told the coach her son, Sean, didn't need to take the field.

"As long as Sean could sit on the bench and be a part of the team, he'd be happy," Leslie said.

But coach Tom Sohrweide wouldn't let the 10-year-old, who has Down syndrome, stay on the sideline.

"No, Sean will play," Sohrweide insisted.

The team of fourth- and fifth-graders went on to win the White Bear Youth Football championship Oct. 24.

Win or lose, Leslie said the Sieleni family "couldn't have asked for a better team to be part of."



Team 4 was 9-0 this season. - Submitted photo

"I have never been so proud to be a part of this community," she said. "The coaches, parents and boys have been so patient and accepting of Sean. He may not contribute much physically to the team, but to his teammates that doesn't matter. They encouraged him and made him feel special. It was his dream to play football and they all helped make that possible."

Leslie said she's always allowed her son to follow his dreams and he'd always exceeded expectations. He plays four Special Olympics sports and had played T-ball on Community Recreation Department teams. He's taken piano lessons and sang a solo in the Birch Lake Elementary talent show last year.

But Leslie was rather hesitant about football.

"I was not sure how he would deal with tackling and if the other boys on the team would understand Sean's limits. Man, was I in for a big surprise," she said.

The Karlen family helped reassure the Sielenis that Sean could succeed in football. Beau Karlen, 21, has Down syndrome and played football at Mahtomedi High School. After playing a little pickup football with Beau, Sean attended a football camp in Mahtomedi this summer, which Beau helped coach.

Leslie contacted White Bear Lake Youth Football Association President Lyle Hoff about playing on a team this fall. "He didn't even hesitate to respond 'you bet he can,'" Leslie said.

Sean was placed on the fourth- and fifth-grade league's Team Four, sponsored by the White Bear Lake Police Association.

Sohrweide, who serves on the Football Association's board of directors, has coached for approximately 10 years. Sean was his first athlete to have a disability.

"He went above and beyond to make this experience for Sean so exceptional," Leslie said. "He took it upon himself to do research on individuals with Down syndrome and how to include them in the action without making it too stressful for them."

Leslie said the team members were equally accommodating.

"None of the boys knew Sean and I was not sure how they would react to having an individual with an intellectual disability on their team," Leslie said. "That skepticism subsided after the first practice. These boys are amazing individuals."

Leslie admits Sean struggled at the first practice.

"We've been telling him for 10 years to 'keep his hands to self,' 'don't push' and things like that," Leslie said. "That mindset took a while to alter."

Sohrweide said that's not uncommon among new players. Even after they'd mastered their blocking, Sohrweide said he never had to remind the team members to take it easy on or include Sean.

"I never heard a disparaging word from any of the kids about anyone," Sohrweide said. "They were a good group of kids. They worked hard. They deserved everything they got."

Sean played at least a portion of every game — as cornerback or safety.

When he wasn't on the field, Sean was an enthusiastic cheerleader, Sohrweide said.

"He has a question and an answer for everything. He's such a likable kid," the coach said.

Sohrweide said Sean reinforced his beliefs about the true purpose of youth football.

"Yes winning is great, but it's really all about getting kids involved, learning the fundamentals and having fun," he said.

Leslie said she hopes her positive experience will inspire other parents of children with an intellectual disability.

"You have to be the advocate for your child," Leslie said. "Never, never give up and always take the time to offer your son or daughter the opportunity to participate. You never know what you may find."

Next fall, Sean said he wants to either play again or help coach. That is if he's not too busy with a new challenge. Hockey is his next ambition.

"He's never been on skates before, but you never know," Leslie said. "He might just do it."

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