

The Life of Reilly – Sports Illustrated’s Rick Reilly

Jake Porter is 17, but he can't read, can barely scrawl his first name and often mixes up the letters at that. So how come we're all learning something from *him*?

In three years on the Northwest High football team, in McDermott, Ohio, Jake had never run with the ball. Or made a tackle. He'd barely ever stepped on the field. That's about right for a kid with chromosomal fragile X syndrome, a disorder that is a common cause of mental retardation.

But every day after school Jake, who attends special-ed classes, races to Northwest team practices: football, basketball, track. Never plays, but seldom misses one.

That's why it seemed crazy when, with five seconds left in a recent game that Northwest was losing 42-0, Jake trotted out to the huddle. The plan was for him to get the handoff and take a knee. Northwest's coach and Jake's best friend, Dave Frantz, called a timeout to talk about it with the opposing coach, Waverly's Derek Dewitt. Fans could see there was a disagreement. Dewitt was shaking his head and waving his arms.

After a ref stepped in, play resumed and Jake got the ball. He started to genuflect, as he'd practiced all week. Teammates stopped him and told him to run, but Jake started going in the wrong direction. The back judge rerouted him toward the line of scrimmage.

Suddenly, the Waverly defense parted like peasants for the king and urged him to go on his grinning sprint to the end zone. Imagine having 21 teammates on the field. In the stands mothers cried and fathers roared. Players on both sidelines held their helmets to the sky and whooped.

In the red-cheeked glee afterward, Jake's mom, Liz, a single parent and a waitress at a coffee shop, ran up to the 295-pound Dewitt to thank him. But she was so emotional, no words would come.

Turns out that before the play Dewitt had called his defense over and said, "They're going to give the ball to number 45. *Do not touch him!* Open up a hole and let him score! Understand?"

It's not the kind of thing you expect to come out of a football coach's mouth, but then Derek Dewitt is not your typical coach. Originally from the Los Angeles area, he's the first black coach in the 57-year history of a conference made up of schools along the Ohio-Kentucky border. He'd already heard the n word at two road games this season, once through the windows of a locker room. Yet he was willing to give up his first shutout for a white kid he'd met only two hours earlier.

"I told Derek before the play, 'This is the young man we talked about on the phone,'" Frantz recalled. "'He's just going to get the ball and take a knee.' But Derek kept saying, 'No, I want him to score.' I couldn't talk him out of it!"

"I met Jake before the game, and I was so impressed," Dewitt said. "All my players knew him from track. So, when the time came, touching the ball just didn't seem good enough." (By the way, Dewitt and his team got their shutout the next week, 7-0 against Cincinnati Mariemont.)

Into every parade a few stink bombs must fall. Mark Madden of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* grumbled that if the mentally challenged want to participate in sports, "let them do it at the Special Olympics. Leave high school football alone, and for heaven's sake, don't put the fix in." A few overtosteronized Neanderthals on an Internet site complained, "That isn't football."

No, it became bigger than football. Since it happened, people in the two towns just seem to be treating one another better. Kids in the two schools walk around beaming. "I have this bully in one of my [phys-ed] classes," says Dewitt. "He's a rough, out-for-himself type kid. The other day I saw him helping a couple of special-needs kids play basketball. I about fell over."

Jake is no different, though. Still happy as a frog in a bog. Still signs the teachers' register in the principal's office every morning, ready to "work." Still gets sent on errands, forgets where he's going and ends up in Frantz's office. Still talks all the time, only now it's to NBC, ESPN and affiliates from CBS and Fox about his touchdown that won the game.

Yeah, Jake Porter thinks his 49-yard run made for a comeback victory. He thinks he was the hero. He thinks that's why there were so many grins and streaks down people's faces.

Smart kid.

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Don't miss The Life of Reilly (Total/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, \$22.95) -- a best-of compilation of Rick Reilly's columns and features, with a foreword written by Charles Barkley, available online and at bookstores everywhere.