

“An extra chromosome full of love”

By Abby Hooven

The final horn sounds, but the game isn't over.

Henry County's football team meets the players from the visiting Spencer County squad along the 50 to exchange high-fives and congratulate each other on a hard-fought game. Once the pleasantries are finished, Spencer County's defenders take their positions for one more run.

Running onto the field is McKinley Paynter, a player small in stature but big in heart. He takes the handoff from quarterback Jordan King and breaks free from diving linemen for an open run to the end zone. Once his score is confirmed, the entire Wildcat team hoists McKinley into the air to celebrate his touchdown.

In what has become a prominent postgame tradition, McKinley's touchdown run highlights the end of every Wildcat game, win or loss.

“It's fun because you get beat, you lose, and you still got a smile on your face at the end of the game because he's out there and doing it,” said head coach Matt Wright following the loss to Spencer County. “He scores and a heated game for four quarters brings a bunch of high school kids together to shake up and celebrate another kid. It's always cool.”

Yet, in McKinley's mind, he never loses.

“He wins every game. Whether they lose or not, he won that game and it's because he scored his touchdown,” said Leesa Paynter, McKinley's mother.

To some, the touchdown is just another play. But for the Wildcats, it's McKinley's time to shine, just as everyone else has throughout the night.

‘What is normal?’

McKinley was born with Down Syndrome, a genetic disorder in which an individual has “a full or partial copy of chromosome 21.”

“I used to say that the

chromosome was the happy love. They took that chromosome and made it full of love,” said Leesa.

Before he was born, Leesa and her husband, James, did not know McKinley had the condition. Prior to his birth, no one in their family had Down Syndrome.

“I did not know it,” said Leesa. “They told me when he was born that he had it and when they held him up to me, I knew it but we still had to wait for the test. Because you have to prove it to my husband. You have to prove it to me.”

Twenty-four hours later, the test came back with a 99.9% confirmation.

“I was in shock,” said Leesa. “I went through the mourning of a child with no difficulties, and they say you do go through this. They say you kind of go through a death if you don't know and then you have the child and you're like what do I do?”

With the future unknown, Leesa turned to her mother, who was staying with her at the time, for comfort.

“I said, ‘What do I do, mom? You know, he's dif-



Photos by Abby Hooven

McKinley Paynter runs in for a touchdown against Nelson County.

ferent.’ And she said, ‘Are you sure about that?’ And I said, ‘Everyone's going to think he's different,’ and I said, ‘He's not normal,’ and she looked at me and she said, ‘What is normal, Leesa? How do we know that we're not normal?’

She said, ‘God made him just like he made us. So he's normal in God's eyes so we accept him as normal.’ So it was kind of like oh wow. So he's normal,” said Leesa.

Creating a legacy

McKinley's gridiron glo-

ry dates back to his brother's involvement with the Chiefs. Since his father was the coach and his brother played, McKinley was at every game.

“At first, he wanted to be around the cheerleaders because of their pom poms, and then it graduated to him wanting to wear his brother's helmet and his pads and so then it was like, ‘Do you want to play?’ and he wanted to play,” said Leesa.

Due to neck difficulties and worries about future problems from impact football, McKinley could not take part in the game with the rest of the team.

However, still wanting to be on the field, McKinley's father created the infamous postgame touchdown play.

When James moved on to coach at the high school level, other parents and coaches stepped up to continue the tradition.

“When my husband stepped up to coach high school, it was Bobby Nation that took over and it was so funny because he's tall Bobby Nation and then there's little McKinley. He's little bitty and he

stayed right with Bobby and wherever Bobby went, McKinley went. And Bobby worked it out and he kept the play going,” said Leesa.

In middle school, Leesa credits Clark Sampson for keeping the play going with other teams. Now, in high school, coach Wright has arranged the play with opponents, but it hasn't always been easy.

“Did he have to fight for it? Yes. Did we have a lot of schools that didn't want to do it? Yes,” said Leesa.

At times, opposing coaches have rejected the idea, but the players override the decision to make the play happen.

“It offends you. It hurts you because you can't understand why but I think there's been like three teams that we played, and they didn't want to pursue it but the boys on the team came out and would pursue it whether the coach said yes or no,” said Leesa. “It makes me sad that some adults don't seem to want to accept it whereas the younger kids are accepting and embrace it.”



McKinley shares a hug with his mother, Leesa, before the captain's meeting against Spencer County.

A special bond

For the teams interested in the opportunity, the love and camaraderie overflows onto McKinley. He is often seen fist-bumping or hugging his opponents, who he sees as his “buddies.”

“McKinley always talks to the other team. He just loves the other team just like he loves his guys,” Leesa said.

Most opposing players make sure McKinley feels included and part of the normal game activities. One player in particular, though, has gone above and beyond to forge a special bond with McKinley over the last few years.

Each season, the Wildcats take on Western Hills, and after each game, one boy for the Wolverines has taken time to chat with McKinley.

“Last year, he came up to him at the game and they talked for a long time,” said Leesa. “He just had a big heart, just taking time, didn’t rush to go to the locker room or anything and talked to him for a while.”

This year, Leesa’s son’s fiancé noticed the same boy was talking to McKinley again after the game. Leesa saw McKinley pointing at his green jersey, telling the boy that he loves green. After their conversation, the pair hugged and went their separate ways.

“McKinley turned around to me and says I love his green, his jersey’s green I love it,” Leesa said.

The conversation didn’t end that night, though.

“Next thing you know, my husband came home, and he said he was looking for a box in the mail and I said, ‘Why,’ and he said well some boy from Western Hills, McKinley told him he loved his jersey, and he’s going to send him one,” said Leesa.

A short time later, a box arrived at Leesa’s door from the Western Hills player. Inside was a neatly folded green No. 6 jersey and a hard-written letter explaining why he sent the jersey. In a post to Facebook, Leesa showed McKinley opening the package, remembering the boy and showing excitement for his own green

jersey.

“It was a very sweet gesture. You don’t find it very often,” said Leesa.

Leaving an impact

McKinley has left his mark on visiting teams, but his lasting impact on the Wildcats is felt by every player and coach.

“I can’t explain how kind the boys are and how they work with him and how they take care of him,” said Leesa. “My husband coaches but my husband doesn’t really have to worry about him because the boys just step up and take care of him. They just kind of guard him and make sure he’s dressed and ready to go out on the field.”

On any given Friday night, fans can look down the sidelines and see McKinley wrapping his arms around one of his buddies. He’s quick to check on his teammates, always asking if they’re okay and giving them a thumbs-up of encouragement.

“You can just tell there’s that friendship and I believe that friendship will always be there by all of them, even the ones that have graduated like Sam,” Leesa said. “He just took him under his wing and he became his buddy and they’re best friends. I mean when McKinley sees Sam, he’s in his arms hugging him.”

Sam Royalty recently graduated from Henry County, but he remembers first meeting McKinley when he joined the football team his sophomore year.

“McKinley is someone who can light up someone’s day after having a bad day. One of my favorite memories is when McKinley and I would do our handshake,” said Royalty. “Also, the love he has for football is like no other. McKinley would watch his teammates and cheer them on and tell them good job no matter what. Then when his time came, he ran the ball like a wild man.”

McKinley extends the same level of care to his coaches, often checking in on coach Wright during games.

“He’s a guy that’s going to smile, he’s looking around, he’ll walk over to the sideline, ‘You doing good?’ ‘Yeah I’m do-

ing good McKinley,’” said Wright.

Even at home, McKinley can sense when his mother needs one of his warm embraces.

“You can have the worst day, and I try not to show him I’m upset, and it’s like he knows, and so then it’s a hug and he’ll stand there and hug me and never ask a question,” said Leesa.

Off the field

The same bubbly, happy-go-lucky McKinley on the field exudes compassion and love to his classmates as well.

As a mentor, Royalty spent time with McKinley in the classroom, describing him as a “great kid.”

“McKinley would always say hello to everyone and want to ask how you are doing,” said Royalty.

For parents with students with special needs of any kind, navigating the various accommodations required for a successful learning experience is a tall task. Leesa initially leaned on Down Syndrome of Louisville for guidance for a variety of things, including schooling, until McKinley was in middle school.

“They helped me with school meetings. They helped us be able to mainstream him and so we just kept it up and so I hope to be able to be a help to other parents too,” said Leesa.

Several parents have contacted Leesa with

questions regarding the best course of action for education and choosing between public school vs. private.

“I public schooled McKinley. Has it always been easy? No. By all means, no, but we’ve always come to an understanding, and have I gone to a lot of meetings and walked out of there angry and crying because I feel like he wasn’t getting the same treatment. We just have to step up as parents and help and fight for it,” said Leesa.

Henry County High School has been “a real help” to Leesa, including Ms. Moore.

“He has a really good group of teachers and you know Ms. Moore is the one that you know she sets up everything and she’s really good at it and I’m very thankful for her and what she’s doing to prepare him along with us,” said Leesa.

With McKinley set to graduate in the spring, Leesa and James came into this year unsure what to expect after he receives his diploma.

“That’s where Ms. Moore has come into place, and that’s where she has started working with us and setting us up and helping us and giving us information and it’s kind of teaching me,” said Leesa.

A major focus at school, and home, is gaining in-

dependence and taking on responsibility. He has worked the coffee cart throughout high school and “absolutely loves it.”

“I think he loves seeing the people because you know Down Syndromes are people people. They’re personable. They just love to be around people, so I think that’s been perfect,” said Leesa.

At home, McKinley is expected to help around the farm and complete his chores just like his brother and sister.

“He works on the farm just like my husband and son do. They find work for him, like they worked cattle last weekend and were giving shots and everything and McKinley was right there among all of it. He just does it. We treat him normal,” said Leesa.

Aside from his love for football, McKinley enjoys his iPad and acting. He participated in the Wizard of Oz production with Theatre Downstream, a performing arts theatre in Henry County, and several other shows when feasible.

Looking ahead

After graduation, McKinley will work at Our Best Restaurant in Smithfield. Leesa is grateful the local business is stepping up to grant McKinley a chance to work in some capacity.

“I feel like we need more businesses locally that

will accept children with special needs and take just a little bit of time. They may not be able to work a full day. It may only be a couple hours a day, but it would be routine and someone train him and work with him for a matter of time and then he would just do it,” said Leesa.

Like their other two children, Leesa and James fully expect McKinley to succeed in whatever he pursues.

“He may succeed in a different way but we’re pushing him to work a job. We’re pushing him to take on responsibilities. Am I scared? Oh absolutely, but this is where my faith in God comes in. That God’s going to take care of him,” said Leesa.

“Answered prayers”

After the Wildcats saw their season end on Nov. 4, every parent, coach, player and fan set aside their sadness for the conclusion of a remarkable year and cheered on McKinley for one final touchdown run. His buddies took turns sharing hugs and heartfelt goodbyes. The happiest kid on the team, as Wright says, shed a few tears of his own.

For years, McKinley has been a bright light in the ups and downs for the Wildcats. He united the team, and the entire community, for a bigger purpose than football, but Leesa never imagined her son having such an impact on Henry County.

“To me, he’s just my child and he’s no different than my daughter. He’s no different than my son,” said Leesa. “All three of my children are very friendly and loving and he’s just extra. He’s completed our family, whole entire family on both sides. It makes the world go round.”

McKinley will surely continue to bless everyone he meets on and off the field, making more buddies for life and showing everyone, through his love and kindness, that we aren’t so different after all.

“I prayed while I was pregnant for a child that was blonde-headed, blue-eyed and that he would love everyone, and everyone would love him. And wow, God answered prayers,” said Leesa.



Photos by Abby Hooven
Above: McKinley Paynter sits on the sidelines in a recent game.

At left: McKinley Paynter hugs one of his teammates following the team’s matchup with Spencer County.