

## Featured Article

## Knowing Noel Has Made Us All Better

Jason N. Kaye - Jr Freshman Assistant Coach

Everyone loves a comeback story—one that demonstrates a struggle of epic proportions, a no-quit attitude, and a feel-good storybook ending. Its truly inspirational to experience first-hand the transformation of someone who comes to realize the possibility of accomplishing things they once couldn't fathom.

Football is the ultimate team sport; it promotes lessons and provides examples that carry over into all aspects of life. Learning to work cooperatively to set and achieve goals; negotiating—and sometimes sacrificing—individual aspirations for the greater good of the team; appreciating the satisfaction that comes from performing your assignment, demonstrating responsibility, and being acknowledged for

your successes and encouraged to overcome struggles: the residuals of football last long after the pads come off.

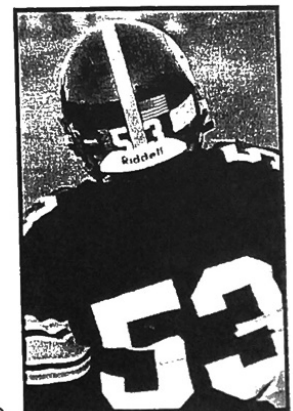
Ironically, it's often not until we step away from the game that we gain the perspective of how much the game mirrors life. Its important not to take football for granted. Not just the friendships and laughs and opportunities to compete, but all the small things (that really aren't small). While it's easy to focus on first downs and superb blocks and vicious hits that fold opponents in two, the small things that most don't see matter most. They never appear in any box score or stat line or scouting report and you can't see them watching game film. Even savvy spectators who have memorized all the rules

and have seen all the game's scenarios lack the ability to pick up on the small stuff (that's really not small—not at all!).

The reason why the small stuff is the big stuff is because it transcends the game. The small stuff forges character and attitude and helps define the type of person we will become. The small stuff solidifies for all a collective understanding that the side stories within the game linger longer than the echoes of the whistle.

It would have been easy for Gerald Noel to quit. Although he would have been approached, questioned, and encouraged to continue, no one would have been significantly surprised. Just 6 years old, the rookie reported for junior freshmen pre-season practices in late July over the weight limit. Not only wouldn't he be able to compete at the Jr. Fresh level, but experience and maturity aside, he couldn't make weight at the Freshmen or JV levels either. Running was a challenge and he struggled through basic exercises. Besides low stamina and the burden of extra weight, Noel was hampered by self-doubt and demanding physical objectives that tested his comfort zone. For Noel to stick it out with the Steelers, he'd have to learn how to push himself, get over the culture shock of how 2nd and 3rd graders that wear our colors carry themselves, and adjust some habits he'd been practicing for years. It wasn't going to be easy. It takes a tough person—yet alone a child—to sacrifice and change patterns of behavior. In Noel's case, his decision could ultimately impact his outlook on life and provide an example for his teammates they'd never forget.

Instead of yelling at Noel and complaining that they needed to run more (because he chose to walk), the strangest thing happened: his teammates refused to be broken and worked through their pain to motivate Noel.



# CHEER FOOTBALL



It's easy to turn on someone and blame them for the consequences of their actions (and how they impact you). Perhaps it's due to the age, proof that with youth and naiveté come innocence, or maybe it'd have been different if big strangers with whistles weren't coordinating the agenda, but one thing is clear: Noel's struggles bred encouragement, support, and team unity. Where should we start?

With the 20+ lost pounds? Of course, they weren't lost, like keys left under the stack of bills. They were shed, calorie-by-calorie, cut and burned. Noel made a decision. Together with his family, he made a commitment to turn the corner. It's a story we've all heard. But did you hear the one about the kid who can't play in games but still makes it to practice and works hard to get better every day? For Noel, running is now a choice; he's experienced success, so now he knows he can. As Coach Lynn says, "We don't expect you to be the fastest on the team, we expect you to be the fastest you can be." That doesn't give Noel an out; it gives him an opportunity to mark his effort and measure his growth. The expectations haven't been lowered or adjusted—just custom tailored for individual success.

What about the teammates who finish their laps and then run back in, as Coach Hult calls it, to "get Noel and bring him home". I sometimes wonder how many times I've heard "Come on, Noel!" or "No Quit, Noel" this season. Never screamed in exasperation—only to genuinely motivate. In the beginning of the season, while Noel walked the ends of his long laps, Coach Hult sent selected teammates out to usher him to the finish line, the rest huddled together, clapping encouragement. Admittedly, our coaching staff debated aloud how many minutes of practice this daily routine took. Coach Hult wouldn't say much; typically, he'd smile and nod toward the gathering of players chanting "No Quit" with Noel as they shuffled past for their water, the mass of players joining them in stride and cheer.



I'll never forget the excitement each player felt for Noel when he found out Coach Hult scheduled a scrimmage so Noel could play. Players wore their uniforms, announcers called the game, and Noel later received a copy of his game play on DVD. Even though it wasn't explicitly stated, everyone understood the scrimmage was a reward for Noel's perseverance and growing pride. Even sweeter, was the day weeks later when Noel found out right before the National Anthem that he'd be playing in that afternoon's game. There he was, standing on the sideline in his game jersey, his shoulder pads off, when the call

came in: "Get Noel dressed! He's playing today!" I swear, the entire sideline erupted in cheers and back slapping.

"I didn't think I was gonna be able to play," Noel shared after the game. "I was happy I got to start on Black D and I even got a chance to run the ball!" Play, he did! Coach Hult figured since this would most likely be Noel's only official game of the season, he would get as many reps as he could handle.

In their yearbooks this year, players will mention memories of wide-base blocking or form tackling, or perhaps they'll write about the fumble recovery drill on Mud Day. Maybe it'll be a great play made during a game or a team victory against the Lions they'll want to cherish. Although it's unlikely to be chronicled in print, our season with Noel will go down in history. There's something about this kid. People gravitate toward him. They root for him. I think there's a little Noel in all of us. We all have lofty goals we aspire to accomplish. We all have obstacles standing in our way. We all face adversity that tests our resolve. But not everyone has a band of brothers clad in black and gold that pledge to have your back—no matter what.

Everyone loves a comeback story—one that demonstrates a struggle of epic proportions, a no-quit attitude, and a feel-good storybook ending. The best stories linger—they're still being written.

