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**High School Football** Meet Hilton Head High's Chip Mullen

# Just one of the guys

Player born with Down syndrome finds his place at Hilton Head High

By **SAM McDOWELL**

smcdowell@islandpacket.com  
843-706-8123

As Chip Mullen walks in a line amongst his teammates to shake hands with the Battery Creek Dolphins, he turns toward the northwest end of the field. He spots his coach, Tim Singleton, standing at the edge of the end zone, waiting impatiently for his team to arrive for the Seahawks' post-game speech.

Chip breaks off from the group of players at midfield and begins to race toward his coach, who throws his arms into the air in a celebratory manner. After all, he's just clinched his first region championship in six years at Hilton Head Island High School.

Chip follows suit, holding his fists above his head as if he's just climbed a set of stairs in a Rocky movie scene. His eyes never waver from his coach, who gazes back at him for a brief moment.

"To watch his eyes light up every day is priceless," Singleton said. "It's human. And that's what has been so special about this."

## A STORY OF DESIRE

Randy Mullen wasn't sure he had heard his son correctly.

Chip had decided he wanted to play football.

"He talked about it all the time, and one day he came and asked if he could play," Mullen said. "And I didn't want to tell him he couldn't do something."

But Mullen figured it might be unavoidable this time around.

Seventeen years ago, Chip was born with Down syndrome. His intellectual ability is impaired and some of his physical traits are abnormal.

Because of the former, he'd never attended a public school. He spent the past several years at Hidden Treasure Christian School in Greenville, which consisted of a mere 62 students.

The only sports teams with which he'd participated were parts of Special Olympics programs, with the exception of a Little League baseball team. And even then, he played down a level in age group.

But as Chip watched his sister Lauren cheerleading at football games last fall, he determined it was something he wanted to be a part of.

"I love football," Chip says.

Mullen knew it could provide his son with something he needed -- a sense of normalcy.

"He desperately wants to be one of the guys," Mullen said. "That's what this is all about."

Mullen leaped his first hurdle when a cardiologist cleared Chip to play. He passed over the next when Singleton agreed to allow Chip to participate at Hilton Head High. To Mullen's surprise, all that took was a simple phone call.

"He said, 'Come on out,'" Mullen said. "He seemed excited, which shocked me. I had never met him before. I didn't expect it to be so easy."

The next step was a bit steeper.

Hilton Head High's special education department doesn't include a program specifically designed for kids with Down syndrome. But Mullen was able to configure a program for Chip with the school's four special education teachers.

The transition to public school wasn't easy. The bells signaling the start of class startled him. The crowded halls made him uncomfortable. Switching classes three times a day was a chore.

"Football made things easier for him," Mullen said. "He recognized some of the faces he saw everyday. Not everyone was a total stranger."

It's not hard to pinpoint the difference football has made. Rather than hiding behind a backpack filled with books, Chip looks forward to the chance to walk through



Chip Mullen listens to Hilton Head Island High School football coach Tim Singleton in a huddle with his teammates during last Friday's Bridge Bowl game against Bluffton. Joining the football team has made the transition to public school easier for Mullen, who was born with Down syndrome.

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the hallways of a school filled with 1,200 students. It's yet another chance to see his teammates.

"He's always walking through the halls high-fiving everyone," said Seahawks backup quarterback Jeff Homad, one of Chip's best friends on the team. "He's the life of the school."

## A STORY OF ACCEPTANCE

It's a story Singleton can't tell enough. His eagerness to share it is evident by the smile that spreads across his face when it's even mentioned.

On Chip's first day of school, his schedule included a trip to P.E. class, which was playing flag football for the day. It was seemingly a perfect fit for Chip, but he instead refused to take the field.

"Can't. No helmet," Chip said. "Coach Singleton says."

During the first week of practice, Chip learned that he had to wear a helmet if he was going to play football. When he would remove it, Singleton made him run laps around the practice field.

"He's listening to me," Singleton said. "He listens better than half the guys I got here."

Chip doesn't see much action during practice, but he still makes sure to participate in all of its drills. That includes the crab walks, high knees and sprints all the players exhaustedly cycle through at the end of every practice.

On some days, when Chip feels the urge to lag behind, the Hilton Head High players begin to clap in unison and chant for Chip to finish.

"He's running up and down the field and the whole team is yelling his name, and he's having the greatest time ever," Singleton said. "And they love him."

But even that can't match his excitement on game day.

Each time Chip takes the field for a game wearing his hard-earned Seahawks uniform with No. 30 on the front and back, he glances up to the stands to see who came to see him play.

That fan base began to swell after the Seahawks' contest at Wade Hampton on Sept. 19. During the final minutes of that game, Singleton motioned toward the bench for Chip to enter the game.

As they noticed Chip was about to play, the Hilton Head High players stood up and crept to the edge of the visitor's sideline.

"Watching that makes you grateful for what you have and makes you not take anything for granted," Homad said. "With Chip, he brightens your day every time you see him do something."

The Seahawks positioned Chip at wide receiver on the play. He ran a route down the field while Hilton Head High

carried the ball toward the opposite sideline.

"Hey, he took his guy out of the play," Mullen noted.

Chip lined up on an extra point attempt later in the game -- and didn't leave the field after it sailed through the uprights.

"He wanted to stay on the field for the rest of the night, I think," Mullen said. "That was a special night for all of us."

Hilton Head High won the game, 48-7. Afterward, Chip rode home with his dad. Their talk never deviated from Chip's fine performance that Friday night.

"I win," Chip said after getting in the car.

Said Mullen: "We had to talk to him about the whole team concept."

## A STORY OF CHANGE

Mullen can recall when getting his son to clean his room was a daunting task. Convincing him to begin the night's homework? Just about impossible.

Chip preferred to listen to his vast collection of Disney compact discs.

But things aren't quite as they used to be.

"Ever since he started playing football, he's so much more disciplined," said Carmen Mullen, Chip's stepmom. "He's more mature. He does all of his work around the house."

"It really is amazing how he's changed."

Chip's heightened maturity level has led George Mullen to believe he can accomplish another goal -- running the New York City marathon next fall.

"The day Chip was born, I made a promise to him that he and I would run the New York marathon when he was 18," Mullen said. "We've got a lot of work to do."

Before he even prepares for that goal, however, Chip has a football season to finish. And he doesn't want things to end just yet.

As Chip kneels in the middle of a huddle of Seahawks after that region-clinching victory against Battery Creek, he eagerly waits for Singleton to wrap up his post-game speech because at its conclusion, he gets to lead a chant.

"Who believes?" Chip shouts, expending all of his energy into those two words.

"We believe," the players fittingly respond.

After repeating the chant twice more, the players jog toward the locker room. Chip breaks the huddle and follows them.

"Seahawks win," Chip says.

Indeed his maturation is apparent.

"This isn't just about him anymore," Mullen said.