



October 11, 2004

## It's All in His Mind

Despite cerebral palsy, Doug Blevins has made himself into one of the most astute kicking coaches in the game

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MAMA ALWAYS tells her son he can be whatever he wants to be--as all mamas do--but in Doug Blevins's case it's probably a lie. She's watching him through the kitchen window, orange Nerf football jammed between his wooden crutch and his right arm after he takes a handoff from Jimmy Lowe. The neighborhood kids are playing tackle football, and they aren't taking it easy on her handicapped son. She's already had to rush him to the hospital after his kneecap was shattered by a rough tackle. Still, Mama can't tell her boy that the words on those inspirational signs she buys at the drugstore, those little plaques reading GO FOR IT and REACH FOR THE STARS, are just platitudes--that a short, scrawny boy with cerebral palsy, well, he can dream of a lot, but he shouldn't dream of a career in professional football.

When Doug was three, in 1966, he caught a stomach virus and was hospitalized with dehydration. He was a tiny boy, weighing just 20 pounds, and Mama--Linda Blevins--carried him everywhere. The pediatrician who treated Doug took Linda aside and told her, This boy is smart. Most kids with cerebral palsy are brain-damaged and suffer from speech impediments. "Not this boy," he said. "You've got to make sure he gets his chance."

Mama always knew that her boy was bright, and she fought for his chances. When Abingdon (Va.) Elementary School officials told her that Doug was welcome to attend special education but not mainstream classes, she protested that Doug was not retarded. "Well," a member of the school board suggested when the buck was passed to him, "how about we send a teacher to your house three days a week?"

No, Mama told him, what Doug needs is school. He needs other kids. He's a real bright boy, she would shout, and he can be anything he wants to be.

Mama, a skinny woman with big hair, got her way. Doug went to school. And she never told anyone her doubts about the one thing Doug really wanted to

be. Because he decided when he was four years old that he was going to have a career in pro football. Mama said he could be anything, right? Doug never needed much sleep, and he stayed awake until the end of the Monday-night game, tucked under a light blanket in his wheelchair, his head listing to the right as it does when he is rapt. When his beloved Dallas Cowboys lost a big game, he would cry, whether he was five years old or 10, and his daddy, Willis Blevins, would say, "Son, it's just a game."

And Doug would think, No, Dad, no. It's not just a game. Football was the one place a kid in a wheelchair was never, ever supposed to go. That field was reserved for the strong, the powerful, the healthy--for men who were nothing like Doug. But Mama said he could be anything he wanted. If he could make it in football, Doug knew, he would have transcended his handicap.

After his parents went to bed, he would sit in his room, in the cone of light cast by a helmet-shaped lamp, surrounded by real football helmets and team pictures and signed photos, and he would write letters. To presidents, CEOs and, of course, football coaches and players. Ronald Reagan, Tom Landry, Roger Staubach. He would explain who he was and ask them questions. And they would answer. How could they not? They would tell him about their lives or the game and wish him well and send him a signed photo. Those late nights he was working his way toward something, refining his interest in the game. He realized, after sending letters to Landry and Cowboys kicking coach Bob Agajanian with some questions about kicking, that no one seemed to know--or care--very much about the subject. And when Agajanian answered and the two began a regular correspondence, Doug realized that here it was. A way into the NFL. Kicking.

"I remember watching kickers tie their toes up on the sidelines," Blevins says, recalling the practice that ensured a square toe in the days before soccer-style kicking. "It was medieval. I was thinking there had to be a better way. And I knew, since I would never play a down, that I had to develop a specialty and become the best in the world at it to even have a shot."

He was in high school when he began working with kickers. He sent away for every tape and instructional manual, watched video of every NFL kicker. There were similarities in the techniques of successful kickers: Morten Andersen, Efren Herrera, Jan Stenerud. Each repeated the same motions. He measured his steps precisely, planted his foot in the same place before every kick and squared his body to the end zone. Each had a leg that was not only powerful but also fast. Blevins watched the tapes and made notes and compared the NFL kickers with those he was seeing in high school and college games, and in all of the amateur kickers he noticed flaws, inconsistencies, tiny imperfections that resulted in wide lefts or wide rights or short kicks.

"There hasn't been a great deal of thinking about kicking," Blevins observes. "The special teams coach is in charge of kickers, and he's almost never been a kicker."