



Standing tall

Cerebral palsy has not kept Doug Blevins from becoming an NFL coach

By Ron Pollack, Editor-in-chief

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Dolphins kicking coach Doug Blevins was about to have a great moment.

Great as in the type of moment you remember for the rest of your life. Great as in, when you are old, running out of time and living in the nursing home someday, you'll still remember every second, every smell, every detail.



Blevins was not where coaches are supposed to have such signature moments, however.

Coaches are supposed to have their great moments in football stadiums. Yet here was an emotional Blevins at a sports bar at North Carolina State University where he was scheduled to give a motivational speech to the student body the next day. As Blevins sat in the sports bar, this past season's Super Bowl raged toward a heart-stopping, never-to-be-forgotten finish.

The Rams and Patriots were tied, time was running out in regulation, and New England PK Adam Vinatieri was lining up for a game-winning field-goal attempt that would carve his name in the history books.

Although the Patriots are rivals of Blevins and the Dolphins, Vinatieri used to be, still is and always will be his guy. Back when Vinatieri was nobody from nowhere, Blevins had taken him under his wing and molded him into the kicker who would decide the outcome of Super Bowl XXXVI.

Vinatieri lined up for the monumental kick in the New Orleans Superdome. Blevins watched in a sports bar.

A sports bar! Conventional wisdom says coaches don't find their greatest moments sitting in a sports bar.

Then again, if Blevins followed conventional wisdom, he would have been watching the Super Bowl somewhere else immersed in a woe-is-me, self-pity party. If Blevins followed conventional wisdom, he would never have become a kicking coach, Vinatieri would probably never have become a professional football player and the Super Bowl outcome probably would have been different.

Sometimes you have to tell conventional wisdom to go to hell if it is telling you that your dreams are too impossible to chase. Blevins did just that, and now he found himself in a sports bar, fighting back the emotion while his girlfriend positioned herself to take a photograph of him watching Vinatieri attempt the kick that would decide a Super Bowl.

And if Blevins' potentially great moment wasn't in the conventional coach's setting, well, who really cares? Conventional wisdom didn't get Blevins to this point. He certainly is anything but conventional in coaching circles. Perhaps it was appropriate that his great moment would take place in an unconventional location.

A 47-yard attempt to win the Super Bowl. The ball was snapped. Vinatieri stepped toward the ball. Blevins watched.



Over and over, Vinatieri and Blevins had worked on just such a situation back when Vinatieri was no one from nowhere. Ironically, Blevins had always made Vinatieri do so from precisely this distance.

That was pretend. This was real. Vinatieri's foot drove through the ball with the Super Bowl on the line. Millions watched on TV sets across America. One of those millions was Blevins.

The ball soared through the air ...



Doug Blevins has cerebral palsy.

It affects his balance and therefore his ability to walk. He can stand up and take two or three steps before falling down.

"I look like I'm intoxicated," Blevins said.

Thus, he has used crutches or a wheelchair throughout his life to get around.

He can't use his left arm. He needs assistance getting dressed. He can tie his shoes, but it takes him almost an hour per shoe.

"I don't have time for that," he said.

If these facts make you think he is a unique story as NFL coaches go, you are correct.

If that makes you feel sorry for him, stop it. Right now. Blevins doesn't want your sympathy. He certainly doesn't want your pity.

When he looks in the mirror, he sees a very fortunate guy staring back at him.

"I think I probably view myself as having an inconvenience at times, but I don't ever view myself as having a disability," Blevins said. "I don't think of it in those terms.

"That's life. We go around one time, and we have one opportunity, so you make the best of it. Everything, and you hear people say this, but everything can always be worse. I'm very fortunate. The way I look at it is, the expression 'dealing with the hand I've been dealt,' I think I've been dealt a pretty fortunate hand. It could be a lot worse. I could have major speech impairments, because as a coach if you can't talk you're done. I could not be able to drive, not be able to feed myself, a number of things. So I think I'm very fortunate.

"I tend to look at it as the glass is half full rather than being half empty. So I count my blessings every day. I've been very blessed and very fortunate to do what I do."

Blevins' attitude as an adult is a stew of optimism, determination and achievement. It is a remarkable recipe. What is truly astonishing is that during his youth he had wisdom beyond his years to know which ingredients to stir into the pot.

He lived such a hard-charging childhood that the Marines should have put him on their recruiting posters.

When Blevins' friends started playing youth football in the Abingdon (Va.) Little League Football Program, Blevins found a niche. A position was created for him. He was named junior commissioner.



"That was basically a mechanism, if you will, for me to participate, and I learned the game, hung around the coaches," Blevins said.

Furthermore, Blevins did actually play some football in a different setting. From the time he turned 10 years old until his early teens he would play tackle football with the kids in his neighborhood. Blevins was the kid playing on crutches. He got tackled just like everyone else.

Like football players throughout the country at every level, Blevins' football career was cut short by a knee injury.

He was carrying the ball and found himself on the wrong side of a big hit. His crutches came out from under him, and then he got hit again from the opposite side. His left kneecap was shattered completely.

Tough guy that he was, Blevins initially wrote it off as being sore. It wasn't until the next day that he realized he was seriously injured.

His knee may have been broken, but his competitive spirit was not. He couldn't play football anymore, but his sports career would continue a couple of years later. Blevins competed in distance runs in annual charity-sponsored races while he was in high school.

The events ranged from one to six miles. Blevins always competed in the one-mile event. He used crutches in the race that took part on a hilly course in his hometown of Abingdon, Va. Up and down the hills Blevins would go, sores developing and then starting to bleed under his arms from the crutches, as he navigated the course in about 10 minutes. Always, Blevins finished last.

"They were able-bodied people," Blevins said. "I just couldn't quite go as fast as they could go."

The other runners were not the competition.

"I love to compete and this was a way to compete against myself and against the terrain — the streets and the hills," Blevins said. "There was no one around in my situation to compete against, so it was just something that I wanted to do."

Blevins may have finished in last against the field, but he finished first against the odds. To the victor goes the spoils.

The organizers of the race gave Blevins a large trophy in each of the three years he competed and finished in the race.

"I kind of felt bad about (getting the trophies), because I didn't win, and my whole thing was you don't get rewarded unless you win," Blevins said. "I felt good because I finished, but I didn't have any expectations of getting a trophy."

"It was kind of embarrassing to me, because I did it for the physical fitness and the challenge to myself, and I was very competitive. I believe you've got winners and you've got losers, and I didn't think I should get a trophy if I didn't win."

"But they meant well. The people involved in the whole program meant well, and I realized what their intention was. So I was certainly grateful to them, but looking at it from the whole picture from my perspective, I didn't feel that I was deserving of a trophy because I did not win."

If you want to know where the seed was planted for Blevins to blossom into an NFL coach, simply look at a childhood in which he wanted to be treated the same as everyone else. He wanted no special treatment. Save that for handicapped people. He was merely inconvenienced. Perhaps he couldn't walk around like everyone else, but he wanted to be allowed to stand on his own two feet.

He asked for nothing more. He would accept nothing less.



Thus, his mother accepted the fact that her son was playing tackle football on crutches.

"She was always worried, but she knew that it was something that I wanted to do and I'd always done it," Blevins said. "And my mom was really fantastic. She was great because she treated me like any other kid. She never singled me out or treated me any differently because of my physical (situation). She was concerned when I broke the knee, but she knew that was something that I was going to do."

In some ways, one suspects Blevins mother might have been disappointed if he hadn't played football with all the other neighborhood kids. After all, she is the one who fought for Doug to be treated the same as any other kid in school.

Until the fifth grade, Blevins was taught by teachers in his home, because he was not allowed to attend the public school system. This was back in the 1970s when public awareness about disability issues was not what it is now in more enlightened times. Attempts were made to make Blevins feel part of the school system. He would be invited to the Christmas parties at the school, receive correspondence from the teachers and students and be included in the yearbook.

Nonetheless, these were mere band-aids on the problem. Sure, his in-home teachers kept him challenged, but he wanted to go to school like all of the other kids. His mom fought the system, going to the school and school board meetings to argue her son's case. Finally, she won and her son became the first child in his situation to attend Virginia's Washington County school system.

Asked what he was feeling as he went to his first day of public school when he was in the fifth grade, Blevins answered as only a future coach would. As he said the words, you could almost picture little Doug Blevins going to school with his lunch box, No. 2 pencils and a coach's whistle.

"It was like game day," Blevins said. "It was excitement. It was a little bit of nervousness, apprehension. The big thing was trying to factor in and to be able to get around from place to place. But it was an exhilarating and exciting feeling."

Trailblazers face barriers when breaking through old thinking. In Blevins' case, he found that the schools he went to weren't equipped to deal with a student who got around in a wheelchair.

There were no ramps. The building was not accessible.

No problem. Blevins and his friends were like the Marines. They adapted. They improvised.

"I had great friends," Blevins said. "They'd be there in the morning to help me into the building up the steps. When I changed classes I had to go up the stairs and downstairs, they'd be right there to help me and never thought nothing about it. It wasn't one of these things where I felt like, 'Oh, no, I'm a victim. I'm really being treated badly.' It was just something you did. I think that it actually made me stronger."

In high school, it was the same story. During his first two years of high school, there was no elevator. He had classes on both floors of the building, but the stairs never got the best of him.

"I would have friends that would meet me, we would coordinate our class schedule, and they would carry me up the steps and the wheelchair up the steps, and then when I had to come down (they'd) do the same thing.

"My friends were great. Most of them were on the football team. They played football. I was on the football team."

Rewind.

Blevins was on the high school football team?



Of course he was, just not in the typical teenage way. How could he not have been part of the football team?

This was a kid who fell in love with the game of football as a 4-year-old in 1967 watching the famous Ice Bowl between the Cowboys and Packers with his father.

"That game was just a fabulous game, and I can remember being devastated the Cowboys lost the game and the way they did," Blevins said. "It was just a phenomenal game."

This was a kid who was the junior commissioner of the Abingdon Little League Football Program.

This was a kid who played pickup football on crutches.

This was a kid who just had to be part of his high school football program. Barbed-wire fences couldn't have kept him away.

When he first started high school, Blevins sought out the head coach of the football team as well as the assistant coaches to try to convince them to let him be a part of the team.

"I think all of us were a little bit apprehensive," said Curtis Burkett, one of the coaches on the high-school football team.

Blevins did not have to be as convincing as a lawyer making a closing argument to a skeptical jury to win his case. It was more along the lines of ask and ye shall receive.

"They were fantastic," Blevins said of the coaching staff. "There wasn't a whole lot of convincing. They got me involved and made sure that I was able to participate."

Burkett said, "We felt like here was a young man who wanted to try something (that) was unusual, and we felt like we should accommodate it."

How long did it take Blevins to put the coaches' apprehensions to rest?

"Very quick," Burkett said. "Doug related well with the players."

What a graduate assistant does in a college football program is what Blevins did for his high school football team.

His responsibilities?

"Anything they wanted me to do I would do," Blevins said.

He helped the coaches grade film. He wore a headset during games and assisted with spotting and sending in plays. By the 11th grade, Blevins was learning a lot about offense and was very good on the defensive side of the ball when he branched out to a new area that would set the wheels in motion toward an eventual spot in the NFL.

He decided to start studying kicking.

His high school team was a top program, but kicking was not a strength.

"I knew that if I was going to make it to the National Football League, professional football, that I would have to develop a specialty, and I would have to be the best at it since I was physically handicapped and would never play a down," Blevins said. "I



would have to be far and above anyone else in that specialty. So I started studying kicking initially to help my high school team. We had a very good team. ... We weren't the best at kicking. Nobody really knew why, and so I initially began to study it to help my team, and it turned into a passion, and it turned out that I was very talented at it. I had an eye for it. That's what ultimately led to the specialization."

Blevins started down this path by writing a letter to Cowboys kicking coach Ben Agajanian. In that letter, Blevins wrote about his love of the Cowboys, his own situation and how he wanted to become a kicking coach. Unbeknownst to Blevins, his mother also sent a letter to Agajanian.

Agajanian responded by sending Blevins a box of kicking material. Blevins couldn't have been happier if he'd received a treasure chest full of gold. Inside the box were kicking books, manuals, video tapes and information on where to order more material.

"Just like a starting kit if you will," Blevins said.

It was more than a kicking starter's kit. It was an NFL coaching starter's kit. If it sounds amazing that Blevins was already searching in high school for a specialty to get him to the NFL, consider something even more astonishing: The first time he told anyone he was going to be a professional football coach was when he was 9 or 10 years old if not younger.

"A lot of people thought I was crazy," Blevins said. "A lot of my friends thought I was crazy. And ironically enough, a lot of them told me that it would never happen, and some of those very same people that told you it wouldn't happen, there wasn't a chance in hell of it happening, are the ones that are calling you now wanting tickets, telling you, 'Well, we always knew you would do it.' That's what I find very funny."

Where others had doubt, Blevins had a vision. He had 20/20 vision when it came to seeing opportunity and a game plan. He was blind to the obstacles others saw.

"I think because from the very beginning I never looked at myself as being different," Blevins said. "I realized there were differences, and I had to compensate and improvise. But from the very beginning I never approached life that way. And my parents were great in the fact that they didn't make me feel any different, and I think that sometimes in our society today we get too hung up on status and trying to fall into a certain classification or category and so forth. I never did that. I never fell into that victim mentality. Just never thought that I couldn't do anything that I wanted to do if I worked hard enough."

Blevins was so certain that the NFL had a spot waiting for him that when he was in high school he bought a class ring and made a vow. He said he would not buy a college ring. He said he would not replace the high school ring until he had earned a Super Bowl championship ring to take its place.

Blevins still wears the high school class ring today, dreaming of the day when he will be able to put it out to pasture. But we are getting ahead of ourselves here, so more on that later.

Teen-age basketball stars may make the jump from high school to the NBA these days, but back in the late 1970s the NFL didn't exactly have the welcome mat out to hire high school kids as coaches so Blevins began the long coach's journey.

In other words, like coaches everywhere moving up the professional ladder, he changed addresses a lot. He just started earlier than most.

After graduating from high school, he attended the University of Tennessee on an athletic scholarship. Back then this meant he was a student assistant. He graded film. He clipped articles out of newspapers from opposing teams' local newspapers in search of bulletin-board material. He helped with travel arrangements, phone calls, administrative work. He assisted with the coordination of recruiting visits.



And, perhaps most importantly, he got to work with, and hang around, the kickers.

The kicking part of his job was extra credit. It wasn't on his list of assigned duties. Blevins did it on his own, and head coach Johnny Majors had no problem with it as long as the hard-charging youngster completed his official responsibilities.

"I just kind of hung around and absorbed that and learned," Blevins said. "It really wasn't a structured type of thing. I just continued my education process in that arena while I was there."

Can a kid major in kicking?

Apparently you can, because Blevins transferred schools twice while in college, and each time he went to a school that had a better Department of Kicking.

He left Tennessee after two years.

"It was one of those stupid things," Blevins said. "I had a girlfriend back home. So I went back and coached Division III football."

He transferred to Emory & Henry College, and while he didn't go on to marry the girlfriend that prompted the move, his love affair with kicking continued to blossom.

At Emory & Henry, he got to do more work with the kickers than he did at Tennessee. Emory & Henry did not have a kicking coach, so Blevins was the only person handling the responsibilities. He didn't have the official title of kicking coach, but he did the work.

Blevins' college career lasted six years ("because the football was what I took more serious," he said), and for the final two years he transferred to East Tennessee State where he actually was given the title of kicking coach.

"That was what really propelled me and started to get me the reputation that I have," Blevins said.

It was his reputation that got him a job in the NFL with the Dolphins. Stints as the kicking coordinator of the World League (1995 to '97, '99) and a consultant with the NFL's Jets ('94) and Patriots ('96) along with the work he did in his own kicking consulting company increased Blevins' visibility throughout the pro football community.

Blevins' work as a consultant for New England prompted head coach Bill Parcells and special-teams coach Mike Sweatman to recommend him to Dolphins head coach Jimmy Johnson when Miami needed to hire a kicking coach. Johnson was sent all of the kicking evaluations Blevins had done for the Patriots, and Blevins talked to some members of the Dolphins' organization.

Without ever talking directly with Johnson, Blevins was hired. No one ever told Johnson that Blevins had cerebral palsy and got around in a wheelchair.

Johnson got the surprise of his life when Blevins showed up for his first day of work with the Dolphins.

"I was in my wheelchair and I was in his office and told him I was Doug Blevins and he couldn't believe me," Blevins said. "He thought somebody was playing a joke on him. But Jimmy Johnson is a great human being, great coach. I love the man. Basically we talked about it, and he realized that I was Doug Blevins, and as long as there was no problem with me getting around and so forth then he had no problem with it, because he hired me based upon what I could do."

The dream was now reality.



Later that year, Johnson made the comment that he had hired Blevins for the simple bottom line that he could help the team win.

The message was clear. This was not compassion. This was a good football hire.

When Blevins heard about Johnson's comment, his chest practically swelled forward so fast that it's amazing the buttons on his shirt didn't shoot 40 yards up the field and through the uprights.

"It made me very proud," Blevins said. "That's everything that I had worked for. That type of attitude. Because Coach Johnson didn't even know I was physically handicapped until my first day on the job. He hired me based upon my reputation. He didn't know I was handicapped until I went to work the first day."

This was so much better than when he was a kid and got a trophy just for finishing last in the mile race. Johnson's comment was Blevins' trophy for finishing first in the Dolphins' job search.



Back to the sports bar.

Back to Super Bowl Sunday.

Back to Blevins watching Vinatieri, his former pupil, boot one of the most famous kicks in NFL history.

There are certain defining moments in one's life, and this was one of them for Blevins.

The ball soared through the air ...

... and split the uprights. Vinatieri was a hero. Blevins was the man behind the hero, the man who helped spin straw into gold, the man who helped turn Vinatieri from a nobody from nowhere into the toast of the football world.

Validation.

"There were a lot of things going through my head," Blevins said. "Pride. And just how strange life can be sometimes of how it all works out. And how happy I was the fact that if I couldn't be there at the Super Bowl that Adam was.

"I was happy. I was happy."

The bartender at the sports bar saw Blevins put his head in his hand, trying to fight back the emotion. Blevins' girlfriend told the bartender, "Oh, he's Adam Vinatieri's coach."

Just imagine what the bartender must have been thinking.

"This guy had to think we were nuts," Blevins said. "This guy had to think we were absolutely crazy."

A bartender hears a lot of lies. This was not one of them.

Vinatieri's kick was a defining moment for Blevins, but he would like to think that it was not THE defining moment of his coaching career.



Although he played a part in Vinatieri's success, Blevins does not feel he earned a piece of the Super Bowl dream vicariously through his former pupil.

"It gave me the feeling that I had made a contribution to somebody else doing it," Blevins said. "It certainly was a lot of satisfaction the fact that he got it, but no, that's his ring not mine. They're our rival. They're in our division. So I would rather be winning and Adam be home watching us, but I'm very proud of him nonetheless. But it was a lot of satisfaction. Don't get me wrong. There was a lot of satisfaction that I developed and coached a kid that everyone said wouldn't play and ultimately kicked the game-winning field goal in the Super Bowl. That's something that can never be taken away from either one of us."

Blevins will earn his own Super Bowl ring, thank you very much. He refused to buy a college class ring because he was determined to replace his high school ring with his own Super Bowl jewelry. Trying on someone else's just isn't good enough. He wants his own.

"I want it so bad that it bothers me," Blevins said. "I lay awake at night thinking about that. I want that championship ring."

Blevins is too much of a hard-charger to think any other way. Ride someone else's coattails to his ultimate glory? No way. That's much too passive for Blevins.

This is a guy who played football on crutches as a kid.

This is a guy who says that if he didn't have cerebral palsy, his football position would be linebacker because, "I would have wanted to be anything where I could hit somebody, just knock the s--- out of somebody. Yeah, that's what I'd like. I probably would not have been a very good quarterback; I was just too intense. I'd want something where I could just unload on somebody and hit them."

This is a guy who is intrigued by football because of "the emotion, the violence, the intensity, the strategy. Just how hard it is, how much work is involved, and to be successful at any phase of this game how good you have to be. You have to be the best, and you have to be very good at what you do to enjoy success in this business, and I like that. I like the challenge. I enjoy that."

This is a guy who quit the Cub Scouts as a kid because "it was more passive. It wasn't that competitive. I enjoyed sports, and it just didn't provide me with that excitement. I just didn't really enjoy it."

This is a guy whose energy level is so high that he only sleeps three or four hours a night.

This is a guy who describes his coaching style as "very intense. It's a war out there. I want to win. My philosophy is to do everything you can to win, and I want you to, if I can put this in a philosophy, I want you to put all of your personal things and all this life stuff aside. When you're on the field it's all business. And winning is the only objective. Nobody ever remembers who came in second. Nobody cares. The objective is to win. So I guess you could say my coaching philosophy is to win, to be the best."

This is a guy who says of his level of achievement, "I think that I'm the best at what I do, and I think that the numbers warrant that."

Not the best kicking coach who has cerebral palsy. The best kicking coach. Period.

Vinatieri's kick was a signature moment for Blevins. He does not believe it will turn out to be THE signature moment in his career.

That would mean Blevins is satisfied, which is probably the most offensive thing in the world anyone could say about him.

"I feel real good about what I've accomplished professionally and about the guys that I've coached and what they've accomplished



professionally," Blevins said. "So I feel very good about that. But by no stretch of the imagination does it mean I'm satisfied or that we're done."

He also is not satisfied with the number of steps he has taken up the coaching ladder. The man who has always needed crutches or a wheelchair to get very far is determined to continue climbing with his own two feet.

"There's definitely further steps up," Blevins said. "I want to be the best kicking coach I can be. But I'm very interested in being a college head coach. I would love to have an opportunity to be a college head coach. And also I would like to be able to possibly go somewhere like Texas and be a head high school coach at a major program. Like a 5A, 6A school, somewhere like that and then continue, I have a kicking consulting company, and continue to develop that company as well. I would enjoy an opportunity like that. But definitely a college coach or head coach in some capacity on some level."

A head coach in a wheelchair. If you think that sounds unlikely, you haven't been paying attention.

"I think it will eventually happen," Blevins said. "It's going to be like it always has been. You've got to prove yourself. Somebody, there'll be another Jimmy Johnson somewhere along the line that will take a chance, that will look at me based upon what I've done as opposed to what they don't think I can do. Then I'll be able to go in and show them what I can do."

Doug Blevins can see the future now just as he did as a kid when he said he would coach in the NFL someday.

His vision has a Super Bowl ring going on his finger and then a head coach's whistle going around his neck. His vision has even greater signature moments than anything he's achieved to date.

And they will not take place with him sitting in a sports bar.