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## 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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By Karl Taro Greenfeld

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.



**ENLARGE**

Blevins, who has worked with kickers since he was in high school, can improve a pupil's performance with just a few observations.

Hans Deryk/AP

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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."

Blevins put his theories into practice working with kickers as a student assistant at Abingdon High. In his senior year he won Abingdon's Ray Petty Memorial Award, a scholarship usually given to a player. In 1983 Blevins matriculated at Tennessee, where he worked with the football team as an administrative assistant. Pretty soon the parents of kickers at nearby high schools were paying the kid in the wheelchair \$25 to \$40 an hour to work with their prodigies. As for the Vols coaches, he says, "They had me doing all the s---work, filing, grading film. It was like, Here's the cripple, give him stuff to do."

Blevins transferred to East Tennessee State in 1986 to serve as its student kicking coach. After graduating two years later, he formed his own kicking consulting company. Later he was hired as an assistant football coach at both Abingdon High and Southwest Virginia Community College in Richlands. At night he was back in his bedroom at home, staying up until 3 a.m., sending out letters and resumés to NFL general managers, reviewing tapes, grading every kicker in the league.

An administrator at the community college knew Dick Steinberg, the New York Jets' G.M., and told him about Blevins. Steinberg said, "He can't walk, how the hell do you expect him to coach?" But he called Blevins and listened to this self-described "geeked-out cripple" talk football for two hours.

"Then," Blevins says, "this cripple sent in a fax report after every Jets game analyzing what the kickers were doing wrong." The next season the Jets took Blevins on as a kicking consultant. "The happiest moment of my life," he recalls. His reward for finally making it to the NFL: about \$10,000 a year.

"This is an uphill battle," Blevins says. "It's hard enough if you're not an ex-player. But if you're a cripple? Forget it. I needed to have walking, talking resumés out there. If I had guys I found who became successful kickers in the NFL, then I'd always have a place in this league. I needed to develop an All-Pro kicker."

The graduate, a kicker and punter who had hoped to get invited to an NFL camp when he finished at South Dakota State in 1995, was back in the bedroom he grew up in, staring at his old soccer trophies. Every morning he loaded bundles of *The Rapid City Journal* onto trucks before changing into his swimsuit and climbing the high chair to lifeguard at a public pool.

One afternoon his college coach called and told him that Brian Hansen, then the Jets' punter, would be working out at a high school just across the state line in Minnesota. The graduate drove there in his 1988 Nissan pickup and punted with Hansen for an hour. "He was so much more consistent than me," the graduate says. "My best ball and his best ball were about equal, but then I'd hit a s---y one, and he'd crush another one. His were money every time."

The graduate wondered aloud about how to achieve that sort of consistency. "Call this guy," Hansen said, handing him Doug Blevins's business card.

The graduate sent Blevins a tape of himself punting and kicking in college and was told he had a good leg but needed to work on a few things. "How soon can you get here?" Blevins asked him.

"Give me two days," the graduate replied.

When Adam Vinatieri got off the plane at Tri-Cities Regional Airport outside Blountville, Tenn., there in the arrivals lounge was this tiny dude with a drooping right eye and a gnarled left hand that was bent in at the wrist like a field-hockey stick. "I thought someone was making a big joke," Vinatieri recalls. "Here is this handicapped guy being wheeled around by his wife. I'm like, Seriously, where's Blevins at?"

But in the minivan on the way to Abingdon, as Blevins described the areas they needed to work on --  
Number 1: Make sure you are square with the goal line every time you kick, dammit -- Vinatieri felt he had

come to the right place. No one had ever talked to him this knowledgeably about kicking. "Doug has the perfect kick in his mind," Vinatieri says. "Your perfect kick. He's never kicked a football, so he doesn't have this idea that there is only one way to do things. He watches you and figures out what you need to do."

Vinatieri rented a tiny apartment in Abingdon and took successive jobs driving a taxi, waiting tables and tending bar. That winter and spring he kicked four days a week with Blevins and headed over to Mama's house for Sunday dinner. "We ate, slept and drank football," Vinatieri recalls. "We were like two kids on the outside looking in."

Blevins quickly turned Vinatieri from an average college kicker into a very good college kicker. By the end of the winter Vinatieri had become one of the most consistent kickers Blevins had ever worked with. "The ball was exploding off his foot," Blevins recalls. He had become a consultant for NFL Europe and needed a kicker for the video he would show to the converted soccer players the league was flying over to Atlanta for training camp. He used Vinatieri to demonstrate the proper techniques for field goals, kickoffs and punts. Pretty soon NFL Europe G.M.s were asking Blevins, What about the kid in the video, can we sign him? Vinatieri joined the Amsterdam Admirals in the spring of 1996 and was in the New England Patriots' camp that summer. Two Super Bowl-winning field goals later, Vinatieri says of Doug Blevins, "I wouldn't be here without him."

Blevins has since helped eight other kickers and punters make the NFL, and he's worked with another 13 who were already in the league. That's almost two dozen walking, talking r♦sum♦s.

There is no handicapped sticker on Blevins's minivan. He refuses to park in spaces for the disabled. And if you feel sorry for him, he has this to say to you: Piss off. His relentlessly positive attitude seems willfully unrealistic. When he has been fired from coaching jobs (as when the entire Jets staff was dismissed after the '94 season) or passed over by NFL teams, he has insisted on seeing the rejection as an opportunity. Mama says that's just how Doug is. "Everything has been twice as hard for him," says Linda, who divorced Doug's father in 1975. "That's really irritated me. But he just doesn't let it bother him -- or he doesn't let it show."

Blevins says his affliction is the "Cadillac of handicaps," in that it's not progressive or life-threatening or completely disabling. His tireless optimism enables him to keep his dignity when he has to hold his bladder on airplane flights; when he needs assistance climbing in and out of the shower; when he needs help wiping himself at the toilet.

"The hardest thing about being physically handicapped," he says, "is that women don't find me sexually attractive." Fortunately, he will tell you, they are drawn by his blustery confidence. "Men are shallow," he says, "but women aren't, thank God."

Blevins has been married twice: first to Nenita Colon, with whom he has a six-year-old son, Roman, and now to Nancy Duque, 42. Doug and Nancy just had their first child, Sarah Elizabeth. Both of Doug's children are healthy. The only time his mood darkens is when he is asked about Roman, over whom he and his ex-wife are fighting a custody battle. "That's hard," he admits. "That's a tough deal there."

He does get hurt, insists the Colombian-born Nancy, but he will never admit it. "He has been punished," Nancy says. "People only see him as handicapped. They don't see the professional in him, the man in him."

Doug is quick to dismiss pity: "We live in the entitlement age. I'm entitled to this, to that. F--- that. I get what I get because I can do [the job], not because it's given to me."

At the Vikings' training camp in Mankato, Minn., the players in their pads and cleats click across Stadium Road from the locker room to the Minnesota State practice fields. Daunte Culpepper, Randy Moss and Chris Hovan all represent ideals of the human form. Then here comes Blevins, buzzing along in his electric wheelchair, a baseball cap perched on his head, which lists as he pushes the joystick forward with his good hand. Blevins is hoping to win a job with the Vikings as an assistant special teams coach. After six seasons with the Miami Dolphins as a kicking coach at \$25,000 per year, his contract was not renewed last year, in part because, Blevins says, the team wanted him to choose between coaching and running his own consulting business. "I had to support my family," he says.

The Vikings' kickers and punters are gathered on one of the practice fields. As kicker Aaron Elling, a longtime Blevins client, sets up for 30-, 40- and finally 50-yarders, Blevins wheels back and forth, making semicircles behind the kicker, imparting advice in his raspy Southern drawl. Elling is hooking a tiny bit. Blevins tells him to shorten his first step about six inches.

"He just sees things," says Elling. "Ten minutes and he'll improve your kicking."

Vikings coach Mike Tice agrees: "I've never seen anyone that knowledgeable about kicking."

Blevins remains an insomniac. Nancy complains that when he finally wants to go to bed, at four or five in the morning, he gets her up to help him take a shower. Now, however, Doug's nocturnal habits have an unexpected benefit. He can respond if the baby wakes, and Nancy can get a few more hours of sleep.

Until Sarah Elizabeth stirs, Doug sits in his office, watching videotape. The Vikings didn't offer him a full-time job, but he still hopes to coach in the NFL.

He admits to just one regret: "I will never know what it's like to play football, to go out there when you're hurt and it's fourth down and it's cold and raining and you've got blood dripping down your face. I'll never know what it's like to be in the huddle and suffering and a little scared but mostly fired up and wanting it so bad that it's killing your insides. I'll never know how that feels."

You already do, Doug. You know exactly how that feels.

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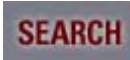


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