

Headline: Lakeland College Muskies a big hit with the Deppiesse brothers

By Michael J. Lewis

You just never know where a great pep talk is going to come from.

Sometimes it's from your coach or manager. It could come from a friend or a relative. Some stranger could make a comment that inspires a whole team.

Or it could come from a 10-year-old you've just gotten to know, yelling in the locker room and making everyone feel good.

The Lakeland (Wisc.) College football team had a fantastic season this fall, going 8-2 and finishing on a seven-game win streak.

On Nov. 7 they had a home game against Rockford (Ill.) University, and things were going well; the Muskies led 15-0 after two quarters.

But little did they know, they were about to get an unusual motivational speech at halftime.

From a 10-year-old boy named Jon Deppiesse, who they'd met a few months earlier when Jon and his brother Mason (who was diagnosed with a brain tumor in April) were adopted by the squad.

"He got us fired up, man!" recalls Lakeland senior linebacker Romain Johnson.

"He started telling us how he was playing football in his league once and they were way up at halftime, and then the other team made a big comeback," added wide receiver Michael Esiobu.

"And he was telling us we can't let up, we've got to keep playing hard and make sure we win."

The Muskies won the game, 31-6, just one of the many wonderful experiences they and the Deppiesse family have had since the adoption in August.

For Lakeland and head coach Colin Bruton, adopting a Friends of Jaelyn child was already old hat. In Nov. 2013 the Muskies adopted Noah Weyker, a teenager who was with the team for a year. As Noah's health improved, though, Bruton said he "got back to his regular life" and wasn't seen as much.

"But we knew we'd love to adopt another kid if the chance came," Bruton said. "And then we heard about Mason and Jon."

Now 8, Mason, from Cedar Grove, Wisc., was suddenly diagnosed with a high risk medulloblastoma. More tests revealed cancer cells in Mason's spinal fluid as well.

What followed was every parent's nightmare: Six weeks of radiation and then six months of chemotherapy.

In August, Lakeland was contacted about adopting both Mason and Jon, and they enthusiastically welcomed them to the squad.

"They're part of our family, and they're really a wonderful family," Esiobu said. "They're great kids."

Jon has been around the team more, owing to Mason's difficult challenges with his cancer, Bruton said. Jon has come to Lakeland games and practices, and about 10 Muskies players went to Jon's first youth football game this fall.

"Our guys were wild and cheering and a little ruthless toward the other team," Bruton said, laughing. "I think of course Jon needed a little attention this year, because of what happened to Mason. Hopefully we gave him some."

Mason was able to see the Lakeland team a few times, and Bruton and Esiobu went to see him at Children’s Hospital of Milwaukee a few days before Christmas. They had dog-tags with the boys’ names on them and gave them as presents, and Esiobu said Mason was excited to get them. On Mason’s CaringBridge.com web page, Mason and Jon’s Mom Shelly expressed gratitude for all the Muskies have done.

“The Lakeland Football organization has been wonderful to the boys,” Shelly wrote. “Especially Jon... He needed some attention and the team was right there showing support when he needed it. From coming to see him play his very 1st game to offering him football tips to goofing around with him on their sidelines.”

Bruton and the players said they hope Mason’s health improves enough that he can come to more games next season, and of course they’ll welcome Jon anytime.

“If I were their age, and a college football team adopted me, man, I would’ve been ecstatic,” Johnson said. “They’ve been so great to have around; I look forward to seeing them every time they come. To be able to give them the same love we give our teammates is really special.”

