



STAFF PHOTO/SUSIE KOCKERSCHIEDT

Christian Filtsos, who has cerebral palsy, plays football with sister Markella, 6, mom Elizabeth and dad Aries as pooch Chip referees. Christian plays for the Markham-based York Region Raiders.

Football brings out best in boy

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had football teams.

Then one day last summer his opportunity came.

While watching a Toronto Argonauts game at Rogers Centre, Christian's uncle, Ange Varsamis, introduced him to Marty Deveny, a coach with the York Region Raiders, which play out of Markham.

"You should come and play on the team next year," Mr. Deveny, a Stouffville resident, said.

"I want to play this year," Christian responded.

The Mount Albert boy excitedly called home from the stadium.

"Mom, I get to play football," he said.

Mr. Deveny approached the football league for approval. And coach Rob Emshie and his 15-year-old son volunteered to help Christian make the team.

But his parents, who had watched their little boy put up with so much adversity, resisted.

Christian kept asking his parents the same question: "Can I go to football?"

But they told him they would have to ask permission from the doctors.

"I know they will say no," he said.

Christian finally said to the doctor: "Can somebody listen to me? I want this."

The doctors knew how hard he had worked.

"The desire he had in doing this on his own is incredible," Mrs. Filtsos said.

Christian begged and pleaded.

"I'll do anything," Christian said to his mother.

Finally, the doctors said OK. Christian was in.

It was symbolic of all his hard work in therapy — repetition of physical motions helped Christian get needed messages to his brain. Slowly, slowly, he gained stability and function.

When Christian joined the team in July most of the boys welcomed him. But at least one teammate struggled with it.

"How is he going to play for this team? He can't even walk," a teammate said.

Another child responded.

"You know what? He is a teammate. We don't treat teammates that way. We have to give everybody a chance."

For Christian, it was all about getting into a real game. He had practised, but was growing impatient.

"Am I going on? Am I going on?" he asked one of his coaches. But practice came first.

When he started, he could only run about eight to 10 feet before losing his balance. It took him 15 to 20 seconds to pick himself up after falling. But as always, he worked hard to overcome the challenge.

And his coach's didn't give him special treatment.

"I bark at Christian. Look, I yell at everyone. He's one of the guys. He is not intimidated. He doesn't request or require extra assistance. His eyes light up when you praise him and he tries harder every time," Mr. Deveny said.

Finally, after more than a month of practice, he was called into a game in August.

He ran out onto the field and got into his defensive position. The play was called. Christian helped sack the QB.

Everybody clapped for Christian — the coach, cheerleaders and every teammate.

"I was taken aback when I heard everyone chanting his name," Mrs. Filtsos said. "They were encouraging my child. He set his sights on football, he made it happen for himself. He's had to work hard since he was eight months old for everything. This was his reward."

Early diagnosis of cerebral palsy and aggressive intervention made Christian's amazing progress possible, his mother said. But Mrs. Filtsos believes her son's chance to play football helped him push him even further.

"Christian's confidence has skyrocketed," she said.

After that first play, Christian was clearly elated.

"This is the best day of my life," he said.

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