

# High school football player in Missouri with Down Syndrome scores big

September 20 2009, By Ryan Young

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Matt Ziesel doesn't stray far from coach Dan McCamy on the sidelines during St. Joseph Benton High School's freshman football games. He likes to stay within earshot.

"I'm ready, Coach. . . . Coach, I'm ready," Ziesel says.

McCamy says he hears it about 10 times a game, and also at practices, from Ziesel, his 5-foot-3, 110-pound running back.

So in the final stages of Benton's third game of the season on Monday at Maryville, Mo., McCamy decided it was time for Ziesel -- a 15-year-old freshman with [Down Syndrome](#) -- to make his season debut.

With about 10 seconds left in the game, and Benton trailing 46-0, McCamy called his final timeout, told an assistant coach to organize the team for the "Matt play" and ran across the field to the Maryville defensive huddle -- and to some puzzled looks from the opposing players.

"I've got a special situation," McCamy remembers telling Maryville freshman defensive coach David McEnaney. "I know you guys want to get a shutout. Most teams would want a shutout, but in this situation I want to know if maybe you can let one of my guys run in for a touchdown."

Several days have passed since Ziesel chugged more than 60 yards down

a sideline for his first high school touchdown -- but the buzz hasn't.

The YouTube clip that McCamy posted Tuesday morning had received more than 1,500 hits as of Thursday night. The e-mails and messages of support also have been rolling in all week -- to McCamy as well as the Ziesel family.

"It's just amazing how one play can mean so much to one kid and then to a team and then to a community," McCamy said Thursday after practice. "And now it's spread not just to the community of St. Joseph, but now it's spread across the region. How something so simple can impact so many -- to me, that's the amazing part about it."

Mike Ziesel, Matt's dad, a longtime high school coach and the athletic director at Benton, was standing near the top of the bleachers Monday when a spectator told him it looked like Matt was about to enter the game. His wife, Patty, was at home. She hadn't planned on Matt actually getting on the field Monday.

Neither had McCamy. As he headed across the field to talk to McEnaney, McCamy wasn't sure what the reaction would be. He asked the players to avoid physical contact with Ziesel but to make it as real as possible for him.

"The (Maryville) players, they didn't hesitate at all," McEnaney said. "They jumped right on board."

And so Matt Ziesel ran a sweep to the right and just kept going. This time, it was McCamy making sure he was close enough to be heard -- running down the sideline alongside Matt, yelling as loudly as he could.

"Come on, Matty! They're coming!" McCamy yelled, making the play as real as possible for Ziesel.

Benton lost Monday's game 46-6, but those six points made a bigger impact that McCamy could have ever imagined.

"It's not necessarily about winning or losing," said McCamy, a second-year coach who played college football at Missouri. "Obviously up in Maryville we lost the game. The end result, we lost the game, but when we went away, we were all kind of winners."

After he posted the touchdown video on YouTube on Tuesday morning, McCamy sent the link to the Ziesels, so Patty could see her son's first [high school](#) score, and to five fellow Benton coaches.

From there, the highlight and the emotions it stirred just kept spreading.

"I don't know that I (have) gotten one comment from somebody who said they didn't cry" after watching the video, Patty Ziesel said.

Mike Ziesel, who coached boys basketball for 19 years, said what made him most proud was the way the rest of the players embraced the opportunity.

"It was just a good thing to see people realize that the value of winning is not (as) important as it is to participate and enjoy the [game](#)," Mike Ziesel said.

Said McEnaney, who co-coaches the Maryville freshman team with Jordan Moree: "It just kind of takes you back to what it all really should be about."

The truth is, Patty Ziesel had reservations about Matt joining the football team. And after she had taken him for the mandatory physical, she received a call from his pediatrician.

"When they got the report that said he was playing football, the pediatrician's office said, 'We just want you to know that (the doctor) doesn't approve of him playing [football](#),'" she recalled. "I said: 'Well, neither do I, but here's the deal: He wants to be part of the team, and he will be part of the team.'"

To minimize the danger, Matt doesn't take part in full-contact drills at practices, and on his touchdown run he raced untouched as players from both teams trailed along.

Standing next to Matt on Thursday after practice, Patty said she hoped the players on both teams understood how important Monday's touchdown -- and their roles in it -- were for her son.

McCamy is sure they do.

"Some of them get it now, but in due time all these kids who were a part of it will have a better understanding," McCamy said. "When they grow up and they get older, everybody will realize the impact that maybe that play (has) had -- not just on that kid's life, because Matt will remember that forever -- but on some of these other kids and what they may have been a part of."

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