

THE 100-YARD «SMILE»

FORMER BRONCO ED MCCAFFREY BRINGS JOY THROUGH FOOTBALL

BY PAT ROONEY

It is a gorgeous spring day, and the athletes at Valor Christian High School are gearing up for a wild week that will feature the grind of final exams in addition to the twin thrills of following the Eagles in the state baseball and girls soccer finals.

Yet on this spring day, a fall sport reigns supreme. Football clouds are in the air, and a group of very special, extremely excited athletes are eager to show off their skills with Valor's football players and one particularly prominent former Denver Bronco.

It is almost game time at the second annual Dare to Play Football Camp, a program overseen by former Broncos receiver Ed McCaffrey, in conjunction with the Global Down Syndrome Foundation, that allows children with special needs, specifically those with Down Syndrome, to enjoy an opportunity to participate in one of the nation's most popular games.

Despite the pristine conditions, however, the camp is suffering a bit of a false start on this day. An accident on I-25 has snarled traffic and delayed the arrival of several campers and even McCaffrey himself.

This turn of events was intensely upsetting to one camper, 15-year old Brenden Van Bruwaene. The Castle Rock native and his mother, Carrie Van Bruwaene, were just about the last to arrive, having been ensnared in the mess on the highway. The younger Van Bruwaene is somewhat despondent as he slumps toward the field; he can see that the other campers have already started throwing around footballs and pouncing on tackling dummies.

Like most of the campers, Van Bruwaene has been looking forward to this event for weeks. Believing he already has missed most of the fun,

Van Bruwaene is all frustration and slumped shoulders as he wanders to the middle of Valor's football field.

However, once Van Bruwaene is informed he actually has not missed anything at all, his demeanor instantly shifts. His eyes brighten, his lips part with a beaming smile, and Van Bruwaene belts out an enthusiastic, "Hallelujah!" to the bright blue sky.

Van Bruwaene springs away to join the other campers as they hone their skills with McCaffrey and Valor's football players. His impossibly bubbly expression exemplifies everything the Dare to Play Football Camp aims to achieve.

"For me, to begin working with an incredible team of people to make this happen is very fulfilling and rewarding," McCaffrey said. "There

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- Ed McCaffrey



are a lot of wonderful people with big, big hearts who are willing to dedicate time, effort, and funds to make it happen. For me, it is really about the smiles. I love coaching. I love sports. Playing sports was an opportunity for me to never have to really grow up. When I see our high school kids and our campers running around smiling, having fun, throwing the ball around, and the kids are making friends, that is what it's all about."

McCaffrey, of course, is no stranger to philanthropic endeavors. Even before his playing days ended following the 2003 season, McCaffrey had become as prominent a figure throughout Colorado in community service projects as he was dissecting opposing secondaries in Broncos orange-and-blue. Through his McCaffrey Family Foundation, the former wide out has aided such charitable organizations as the Colorado Coalition for the Homeless, the Denver Children's Hospital and the Ronald McDonald House.

McCaffrey also has been hosting football camps for youth of all ages and abilities for years. When he was approached roughly two years ago by Michelle Sie Whitten, the executive director of the Global Down Syndrome Foundation, about possibly beginning a football camp geared toward those with Down Syndrome, the concept immediately felt like a slam dunk. Here was an opportunity to combine two of McCaffrey's biggest passions – teaching football and helping children – in one unique setting.

"Well, I've been running football camps for a long, long time for kids of all abilities, and our Dare to Play camp was a creation inspired by Michelle Sie Whitten, who has a daughter with Down Syndrome," McCaffrey said. "The idea was to give kids with special needs, specifically Down Syndrome, a chance to play team sports, specifically football in this case. It gives them a chance to play the great game of football, make friends, and have a whole lot of fun."

"I love coaching and I love teaching. Obviously, my expertise is the game of football. When Michelle and I began talking a couple of years ago, I guess I was a little bit shocked to find out there aren't really a whole lot of opportunities for kids with special needs, specifically Down Syndrome, to play team sports. I didn't know how it was going to turn out the first time we had a camp, because I'd met kids with Down Syndrome but had never spent any long amount of time with





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them. I wasn't sure how much they could handle or even if they would enjoy playing football. But I have to tell you, it has been one of the greatest experiences of my life. I know I can speak for the high school kids here at Valor who help out, that it has been a great experience for them as well to see the kids running around, catching the football, throwing the football and smiling. They are playing team sports for all the same reasons we all started playing team sports - to make friends and to have fun. And what an unbelievable experience."

The camp launched last summer with a couple days of instruction, with McCaffrey and the members of the Valor Christian football team serving as coaches, mentors and, more appropriately, pals. The campers enjoy one-on-one instruction from the Eagles' footballers, an experience that thrills the high school athletes almost as deeply as the youngsters who immediately form a bond with them.

"I think it is a bigger opportunity for our kids - the opportunity to serve and see what it is sort of like to be a good community member, to be a leader in the community," Valor Christian football coach Brent Vieselmeyer said. "This is good for them to learn patience. It is good for them to work with one another. We probably get more out of it than some of the campers do. A lot of these kids don't have an opportunity to do something specific like football. They get someone they are paired up with, and some of them will even get two, and they can sort of interact. Everybody comes from a little bit different vantage point. I think that has been the neatest thing for our kids, to see how excited they come out every day."

Last year's inaugural camp culminated in a game held at Valor's impressive stadium, complete with cheerleaders from the Global Down Syndrome's Dare to Cheer camp (see sidebar) stirring the enthusiasm and friends and family filling the stands. The event was so successful it returned this season in an expanded form, with more than twice as many camp sessions before the program once again ended in a game under a uniquely festive atmosphere.

"There is the Special Olympics, but something more defined and focused on football didn't really exist before."

- Carrie Van Bruwaene



The camp offers an opportunity that is rare among those afflicted with Down Syndrome. According to research presented by the Global Down Syndrome Foundation, the condition affects more than 400,000 people in the United States, including an estimated 6,000 in Colorado. Yet funding for Down Syndrome research lags significantly behind other afflictions such as Alzheimer's disease and autism, and few recreational programs are geared specifically toward those with Down Syndrome.

McCaffrey's camp aims to change that. Already the program is set to expand with a camp in

July in Washington D.C., and if the interest and enthusiasm continues to grow at its current pace, McCaffrey foresees a day in the not-so-distant future when the multiple-day camp morphs into a multiple-team league.

"Next summer, I think we'll actually try to have a league where we're playing seven-on-seven games," McCaffrey said. "We'll keep growing. We'll take it one step at a time and do as much as we can to create as many opportunities as we can for a bunch of great kids."

Those kids, naturally, are the focal point of the festivities going on at Valor Christian. Dustin Schrage, a 30-year-old athlete from Commerce City, shows up eagerly with his McCaffrey-like receiver's gloves, ready to wreck havoc on the field. Ten-year old Will Harmon of Aurora is a huge Boise State football fan and finally is reveling in the opportunity to follow his brother into the world of football.

And Brenden Van Bruwaene, who fretted his gridiron dreams had been derailed by the wreck on I-25, is running routes across the field, his fears immediately lost in the passion of the game.

"Before last year, (Brenden) didn't show much interest in football. Except going to Broncos games; he loves going to Broncos games, as I do," Carrie Van Bruwaene said. "As far as playing, he didn't really show much interest. Last year, we asked him if he wanted to do it, and he said sure and he just loved it. This year is great because they are doing more practices. He is so excited.

He has been more excited every week. The opportunity is just incredible because, unfortunately, there's not a lot out there. Especially on this scope and magnitude. There is the Special Olympics, but something more defined and focused on football didn't really exist before. I was just watching him out there, and he is throwing really well and catching, too, which he couldn't really do before. He's feeling really good about himself."

Brenden Van Bruwaene and his fellow campers continue going through their paces, running and throwing and catching to display the sort of skills and confidence that, for most, previously were lacking.

More importantly, they are shedding smiles 100 yards wide. In those joyous visages is the proof of just how powerful of an impact the beautiful game can make.

SOMETHING TO CHEER ABOUT

THE DARE TO CHEER CAMP SUPPLEMENTS MCCAFFREY'S FOOTBALL CAMP

BY PAT ROONEY

Disaster has struck in the Logan household.

The Dare to Cheer Camp, which is led by Denver Broncos cheerleaders to teach girls with Down Syndrome the moves and skills that have made them one of the most revered cheer groups in the NFL, is only days away. But 10-year-old Ashlyn Logan, in her zest to get to a dance recital, has suffered a fall that resulted in a broken leg.

gymnastics. She plays adaptive baseball and she is going to be a junior Denver Broncos cheerleader this year.

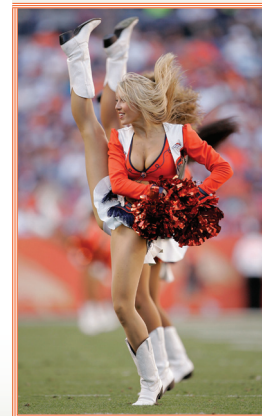
"More than anything, it's all for self-esteem. It builds her self-esteem and self-confidence that she gets to do what other kids get to do."

The culminating event of the Dare to Cheer Camp is when the young dancers get to cheer and perform at the camp-ending football game of the Dare to Play Football Camp at Valor Christian High School. Dare to Cheer draws young ladies with myriad backgrounds and skill sets. Twenty-eight-year-old Casey Gunning is a giddy fan of "the high jumps and doing the kicks." Kacey Beightol of Denver gets thrill after thrill whenever she screams out her favorite cheer, "Let's go Broncos!" And 27-year-old Laurin Gilmor, an aspiring writer whose devotion to the written word put this scribe to shame, simply, "loves to scream and shout. That's my favorite part."

Much like the athletes in the Dare to Play Football Camp, the Dare to Cheer campers are paired with Broncos cheerleaders for individual attention and some camaraderie. For the professional cheerleaders, the camp offers an opportunity

"More than anything, it's all for self-esteem."

- Erin Logan



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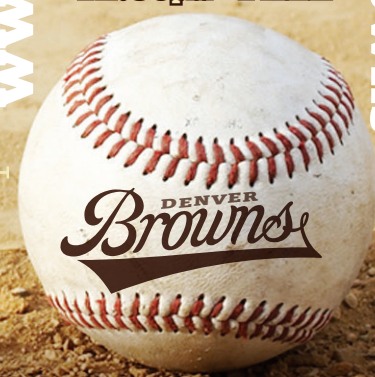
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for them to give instruction in their artistic endeavor while reveling in the sort of community service projects that have become as synonymous around town for the Broncos cheerleaders as their performances on autumn Sundays.

"No. 1 for us is game day, but No. 2 is community service," said third-year Broncos cheerleader Tara Battiato. "Our coaches are really good at picking women who believe philanthropy is

important to them as well. So all the women, we donate at least 50 hours of community service a season. When Dare to Cheer came to us, we were thrilled to do it.

"I personally was a little hesitant because I had not specifically worked with children with special needs before, but even in the short amount of time I'm thrilled with how much they are picking up and how much fun they are having. It's great to be part of."

ONE-ON-ONE WITH NO. 87

A Q&A WITH ONE OF THE BEST BRONCOS

Few former Broncos are as beloved, and respected, as "Easy Ed" McCaffrey.

The gritty wide receiver earned his respect on the field for the fearless manner in which he moved into the teeth of opposing defenses to make one critical catch after another. He was a key cog on the Broncos' back-to-back Super Bowl championship squads of 1997 and 1998, and he remains prominent among the club's all-time leaders in receptions, receiving yards and touchdown catches.

With his playing days fading further into memory, McCaffrey continues to be a pillar of the Colorado community, remaining in the state after his retirement to raise his family and pursue a long list of community service projects, including the Dare To Play Football Camp for aspiring athletes with Down Syndrome.

As McCaffrey dove into his work at the second annual Dare to Play Camp, he also sat down with *Mile High Sports Magazine* to discuss the state of the Broncos, his role as a father of fledgling athletes and much, much more.

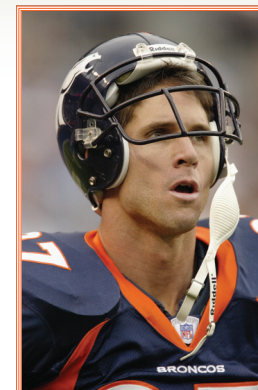
What is your take on the new-regime Broncos with your former quarterback, John Elway, and head coach John Fox? I've got to say the last couple years have been interesting, if nothing else. I've had the opportunity to meet John Fox a couple times and I know he's a real

dedicated coach. He has a history of turning around teams that have been struggling, and the Broncos certainly have been struggling. I know he's chomping at the bit to get the team out there and start having them practice together and watch film. He probably feels like his hands are tied. I think (the lockout) is a disadvantage for the Broncos. It's a lot harder when you have a new coach and a new system and you're bringing in some new players; it's tough to get that type of chemistry and camaraderie that you need going into the season. Even if they were here, it already is a little bit of a disadvantage to have a new coach with a new system. Teams like the Steelers that have been playing together might have a little advantage over the Broncos. But, I've got to say I'm really excited a guy like Brian Dawkins has stepped up and brought the team together to try and start practice in the offseason. It is going to take leadership like that to make it happen if it's going to happen. Hats off to Brian Dawkins. I'm glad the players are still working out. This is an owners versus union thing. But the players and coaches can't wait to get back on the field. I know that.

What will it take to end the lockout and get the teams back on the field? Compromise. I don't think either side is going to get everything they want. Usually it's a pretty fair deal if both parties walk away thinking they could have gotten more. Hopefully that will happen,

and hopefully that will happen soon.

Have you ever considered coaching at the NFL level? I wouldn't rule it out. I'm really having a good time being there for my family and watching my kids. I run a bunch of football camps in the summer because I love doing it and it keeps me close to the game. Coaching at a higher level is a huge commitment, but as my kids get older it may be one I'm willing to make. I watch a whole lot of football and I dissect the games that I'm watching and always try



"There are certain bumps and bruises that never go away."
- Ed McCaffrey

to look at it from a coach's perspective. Hopefully, if you're not playing, the next most-fun thing to do as an ex-football player is to coach. It might be in my future.

How is the broken leg and the other aches and pains holding up? There are certain bumps and bruises that never go away. You play 13 years in the NFL, or any serious length of time, you don't walk away from the game the way you felt going into it. That is a fact of life. One of the things I would like to say regarding NFL alumni is that I hope both sides – the NFL and the current players – consider retired players when they're making this negotiation. I know both sides have suggested that they'd like to do things for retired players, especially in the areas of health care and medical assistance. I hope they are serious when they say that. I've seen a lot of the guys I know who go through a lot once they retire and have a lot of needs, especially when it comes to their health. Now that I'm a retired player, I understand that. I hope the current players realize at some point they will be retired players, too.

When you began your career with the New York Giants, one of your teammates was Dave Duerson, the former Chicago Bears All-Pro who recently committed suicide in part because of brain trauma he suffered during his playing days. What is your take on the recent increase of research into how head trauma affects players after their careers are done? I'm extremely excited that they are doing this kind of research. I think it's something that is needed. It's something that's necessary. And something I think will protect future NFL football players. It was

heartbreaking; I played with Dave Duerson. He was a teammate of mine. Hopefully this research will help prevent this happening to future NFL players.

Your two oldest sons (Max and Christian) are multi-sport standouts at Valor Christian. What are the dynamics of being a former elite athlete and a father all at once? It's been my goal to put my kids in the hands of really good character coaches who hopefully know a little bit about the sports they're coaching. Luckily, I think I found that here

at Valor. They have wonderful coaches who are very smart and care about the kids. I've taken different approaches with each of my children. We're all different and they learn differently, and they all can be pushed to different degrees. Luckily, they're great kids. They love sports and they love running around with their teammates and having fun. Every now and again I give them my two cents, but I never try to force it upon them. I've never forced them into any sport. I let them know, honestly, being a good person and academics come first. And then if you want to play sports, that's great. Every year you can decide if you want to continue playing a sport, but once you commit to it, you see it through the season. And they've played all different sports. My youngest kids are now playing lacrosse. The kids have played football, basketball, baseball, track, this year for the first time. I think it's great for kids to play multiple sports. They make a lot of different friends that way.

Are you more nervous for their games than you were for your own? I have to say that sometimes I get more nervous for them than I did for myself. You don't have control. I always felt like when I was playing, I at least had control over my own destiny. I knew to work hard and be ready to play on game day, and I was ready to deal with whatever the outcome might be. With your kids, you love them so much and you just want the best for them. You are totally helpless in the stands. Hopefully my role is to encourage them to be the best that they can be with what God has given them. I just emphasize the importance of doing their best and being good kids with strong character and being good teammates. **MHS**

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