

# Butler Eagle

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## **Giant Effort 9-year-old inspires his team, coaches**

BUTLER TWP — Following a wave of blockers, Blaine Hooks avoided diving tacklers and rambled 83 yards for a touchdown Aug. 21 at Shaler.

"It was 85 yards ... I know. I scored it," the 9-year-old member of the Butler Lil' Tornado football team said proudly.

His pride was genuine. But during the early stages of his life, it was doubtful Blaine would ever see the light of day, let alone an end zone.

He was born just 23 weeks and six days into his mother's pregnancy and weighed one pound and four ounces at birth. His eyes and ears had not yet developed.

The first 100 days of Blaine's life was spent in West Penn Hospital in Pittsburgh, much of that time on a ventilator. He still has scar tissue on his lungs as a result.

"He was given a 5 percent chance of survival," said his father, Ray Hooks of Butler. "The doctors gave him no chance even before he was born. We were told my wife could have the miscarriage in the hospital or at home." Six days later, Blaine was born. I got a call from the hospital at 4:30 a.m. saying my wife was in labor."

Unable to talk until age 4, Blaine still deals with serious allergy issues and needed laser surgery — 2,000 pops to one eye, 1,000 to the other — as an infant.

Blaine remains underdeveloped for his age, "but has really progressed over the last four years," his father said.

He weighs under 70 pounds and plays on a Lil' Tornado team, which has a player weight limit of 115 pounds.

"His dad approached us about Blaine playing football, and we're not going to turn a kid away," Lil' Tornado founder and coach Bill Halle said. "From his size, he wasn't going to be an impact player here, but we don't take it easy on him, either.

"He goes through every drill and every contact the other kids go through in practice. There's times he gets mauled, gets bowled over ... He gets right back up."

But he never cries.

"Nope ... not me," Blaine said smiling.

Not even after taking a big hit.

"OK, maybe a little bit," he admitted. "But I keep playing."

Blaine plays on the defensive line during the few plays he gets in games.

"It doesn't matter to him," his father said. "He loves being part of a team. Taking part in calisthenics is as enjoyable to him as getting on the field." So Jake Halle, the Lil' Tornado's 9 to 10 year old team coach, had an idea.

His team opened the season at Shaler last Sunday and lost by a wide margin on the scoreboard. He asked the Shaler coaches if they would allow Blaine to score a touchdown late in the game.

"A team asked us a similar favor last year, and we did it," Jake Halle said. "And I thought Blaine deserved that moment."

So Blaine was sent into an offensive huddle for the first time in his life.

"I was nervous," he said. "I didn't know what to think. When they told me I was getting the ball, all I could say was 'Oh no.'"

"They told me to take the ball and run around that side (pointing to his right)."

His father couldn't believe his eyes when he saw Blaine jog into the offensive huddle.

"All I could think was that he wasn't going to know what to do," Hooks said. "I'm thinking, just line him up outside as a receiver and let him stand there.

"When they handed him the ball, I saw what was going on."

As Blaine turned the corner around right end, he was surrounded by his teammates. Shaler players dove at the ground in front of him, to his side or behind him. Nobody touched him.

Shaler's players were told not to make the tackle and they gladly obliged. Blaine was helped into the end zone by teammate Sheldon Miller at the end of the play.

"There wasn't a dry eye in the house," Bill Halle said. "It was one of the most emotional scenes I've ever witnessed. This is what youth sports is supposed to be about."

Jake Halle agreed.

"Blaine isn't at the physical capacity to be an impact player," he said. "That doesn't mean he's not part of this team and shouldn't feel that way."

His parents are still feeling the impact of that 85-yard run.

Hooks said, "I hugged Bill's wife, Bill, Jake, went across the field to shake the Shaler coach's hands and thank him. We cried all the way home.

"That was as special a moment in our lives as it was in Blaine's. I know how many people it took to make that happen. It was an example of sportsmanship I will never forget."

It won't leave Blaine's mind anytime soon, either.

"The best part of playing football?" he said, repeating a question. "My touchdown! That felt awesome."

The touchdown served as payback to Blaine, courtesy of the Lil' Tornado coaching staff.

"We've used Blaine as motivation for our entire program," Bill Halle said. "Here's a kid who had to fight just to live, out here every day giving away 50-plus pounds to kids blessed with more size, speed and ability — yet nobody works harder.

"Other kids are inspired by that."

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