

Columbine keeps player's memory alive

By Evan Dreyer

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Dec. 2 –

It has been a season of hope, one inspired by the senseless killing of a boy named Matt.

A single football game remains, Saturday's championship match pitting a Columbine High School team powered by destiny against a powerhouse Cherry Creek dynasty. Even if the Rebels lose - and they absolutely, positively believe they will win - they have already won. Won the hearts of a community, the hearts of their coaches, and the hearts of their slain teammate's family.

"These are unique, special kids who have looked adversity in the face and found a way to overcome it," says Ann Kechter, Matt's mom. "We're very, very proud of them, and we're pleased they're doing it for Matt."

Matthew Joseph Kechter, age 16, was among the 12 Columbine students and one teacher killed by two suicidal classmates on April 20.

Those who cared for Matt describe him as an old soul, a straight-A student who also loved to watch the theatrics of pro wrestling with his little brother. When he grew up, he wanted to be an engineer.

Matt, a 210-pound sophomore, was a defensive lineman on the junior-varsity team last season. He had hoped to make the varsity squad this year. He did.

The players all wear a No. 70 patch on the front of their practice jerseys and a No. 70 decal on the backs of their helmets. They chant his initials after every game and a couple even have "MJK" tattoos.

"Matt would be very honored and very proud that they are bringing such dignity to his memory and essence," says Ann, doing her best to keep the tears from seeping out. She mostly succeeds as she and husband Joe hold hands on the family room sofa. Behind them, a large photo of Matt graces the wall. His shoulder pads fill out the silver-and-blue uniform as Matt kneels on the ground, a fist resting on his helmet. On the white border that surrounds the photo are the signatures of all the boys on the football team.

Matt grew up with many of them, from kindergarten through Little League baseball, youth soccer and high school football.

Now, with Matt gone, the football players have adopted Matt's 13-year-old brother, Adam, as their own.

Matt's best friend, linebacker Ryan Barrett, takes Adam to visit Matt's grave.

Ryan also bought Adam, an eighth-grader at Ken Caryl Middle School, a Columbine letter jacket with No. 70 on the back. Adam was the honorary captain for the first game of the season and did the coin toss. He has served as ballboy for a few Columbine games.

And on Saturday, Adam has been invited into the team's locker room for the pregame speeches and to ride on the bus to the stadium.

Ann and Joe will be in the stands, too. Joe, 41, attended most of the games this year. It's been harder for Ann.

But Saturday symbolizes more than just another football game, more even than just another chance for Columbine to finally win a state championship. The team lost its last bid in 1981.

"This is really a reflection of everything that all the young men and women at Columbine have achieved, their unity and spirit," Ann says.

Without that spirit, without all the love from the players and the community, the healing would be much harder, says Joe, a roofing contractor. Not a week goes by when at least one of Matt's friends doesn't drop by the house. They send flowers and cards. "Just when you feel like you can't cope, the doorbell will ring and one of the kids will show up," says Ann, who works for Public Service Co. as a gas buyer. "In a way, it's like visiting with Matt because they share stories and reminisce about Matt." "It would be so easy for them to go on their merry way and forget about us," she adds. "It takes real courage for them to come over here." "And to sit down for three hours just to talk," Joe adds.

Zach Rauzi, a 17-year-old linebacker who knew Matt since the sixth grade, is one of those visitors to the Kechter home. He was a pall bearer at Matt's funeral and now has Matt's "MJK" initials and a cross tattooed on his left arm. His mother took him to get it in June and paid the \$100. "Every morning I see it in the mirror and think of Matt. I'll always have that," Zach says. There is no doubt, he adds, that the team will win on Saturday. Zach, other players and head coach Andy Lowry say that dedicating their 12-1 season to Matt isn't something they often talk about. They don't need to. "We all think about the chance that we have and that Matt doesn't have because of what happened," says Dusty Hoffschneider, a 17-year-old junior who plays defensive lineman and center. "It's always in our minds." It's also a heavy burden for a group of teenagers. "But we all thought about it real hard and decided it was something we have to do," Hoffschneider says. "We owe it to him and his family."

Coach Lowry says he wishes he could do more for the Kechters and the families of the others who were killed and hurt that day.

"Matt's always close to our hearts," he says. "But sometimes I feel helpless." Wouldn't it be fitting, the coach asks, if some day Matt's little brother played for the Rebels himself?

For now, Matt is looking down on his teammates, Zach Rauzi says, and "helping as much as possible."

Like helping the team overcome a 17-point fourth-quarter deficit against Fairview on Nov. 19 to advance to the semifinals.

"I wish Matt could be here physically to enjoy this because he loved the game so much," Matt's mom says.

She is comforted, however, by what her son's teammates have given her.

"They make me smile and laugh, and they make me cry," Ann says.

But most of all, "They give me hope that we will prevail. We've got a long way to go, but it shows me we have what it takes to carry on."