

York University and York Region Lions working to increase low-cost access to football

By Robert Belardi

There are times when we all need a saviour.

It might arrive in a different form other than mom and dad. It could be a video game that helps you decompress. It could be a book, that sucks you into its fictional realm. Or it could be something that you want so desperately, such as a sport.

But what if the sport is too expensive to play? And your child is crying out that he/she wants to play? Pressure continues to grow.

It becomes an entirely different story when your child has challenges or is on the autism spectrum. How can you change their life?

For one mother, her son felt he had no reason to belong. But when he saw football, it changed everything.

?I bring him out to the field and this coach proceeds to spend three months with my kid coaxing him. Out of the car, to the grass. From the grass, to the track. From the track, to the edge of the turf. To the field. Then putting on a helmet. Then shoulder pads. This coach put him in a base layer, and convinced him that nobody was touching him,? said Jodi Tavares, current President at York Region Lions and employee at York University.

Five years ago, the York Region Lions partnered with York University. The non-profit football program adopted the York University colours and coaches and executives connected with the players for football and academic opportunities.

Current head coach of the York University Lions Warren Craney is the man responsible for bringing in Tavares' son Hagan Douglass at the age of 13.

Douglass learned very quickly that if he simply did his job on the field everyone liked him. There are 87 jobs on the football field at any given time, so everyone has responsibilities that are crucial to the team. As a defensive tackle, Douglass played exceptionally well and players on the team began taking care of him.

Some made sure he wasn't in the changeroom alone and another player insisted on escorting him to semi-formal in his first year in high school. Douglass no longer felt the world had shut him out. Football was the gateway into having a place in this world.

?Football has changed his life and changed mine. And changed his sister's. It's given him a reason to belong that he didn't have before, and it wouldn't have happened if Warren hadn't taken him for those three months,? Tavares said.

Douglass is now at York University. He engages in his classes and plays as a defensive tackle for the varsity football team.

The same situation occurred for the now-vice president of the York Region Lions Michelle Trelford. Her older son couldn't seem to find a sport to love until she brought him to this game.

?No other sport was working for him. It wasn't a good fit. So, we found the York Region Lions and we went out to a community camp day. He instantly fell in love,? Trelford said.

?I was just a mom in the stands for a season. By the second season, I wanted to help. So, I joined the board back in 2018. My other son now, Jackson, he's five, and he wanted to play because big brother played. And he's met some of the York University coaches. It's shock and awe. This person is famous to him because they play football.?

For the past few weeks, the Lions held the Lions Winter Academy, recently hosted by the Aurora Sports Dome. Youth from six all the way to 19-years-old, came to the dome from Sunday, February 13 to March 6. York U varsity players were there to work with the youth.

Last Sunday, the held a CFL-like combine event. Punter for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers who played with the York Region Lions, Marc Liegghio, came out. Cameron End from UofT, York U quarterback Noah Craney and UofT receiver Nolan Lovegrove all came out as well.

?You can guarantee that any person of any ability, of any knowledge, has a job on that field. I've seen kids grow that have never been given an opportunity in sport before. Because it's less inclusive. Whether it be by physical ability or any other hindrance or possible hinderance to them,? Trelford said emotionally.

?[Our club has] run programs in the community for different groups. We have partnered with Autism Ontario before to run programs for them, to let kids come out and give them an opportunity. You cannot be more inclusive than football.?

Ahead of the 2022 season, both Tavares and Trelford said football is a cost-effective sport. Thanks to this program, all equipment is provided to the players. There are programs in place to also purchase cleats.

And with a cost-effective program, both Tavares and Trelford hope this promotes the youth to join at the grassroots level. They also hope it begins to expose local clubs all around the GTA.

The more the grassroots level grows, the more pathways are created for players looking to go to university and college. And maybe into the CFL.

?Now what we need is a really robust partnership with the CFL. It's simple community engagement; that's all that needs to be done,? Tavares said.

To learn more about the York Lions program, please email Tavares at jodine.tavares@gmail.com and Trelford at yrfa.vp@gmail.com.