

SPORTS

GAME CHANGER Football helps Camas teen cope with mental health diagnoses

Papermakers lineman Noah Christensen opens up about depression, ADHD; shares his post-high school plans

By **DOUG FLANAGAN**
Post-Record staff writer

When doctors diagnosed their then 9-year-old son with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and bipolar depression, Josh and Sarah Christensen sought professional advice to help their son, Noah Christensen, thrive.

When a child psychologist suggested football might be a good outlet for Noah, the Christensens signed their elementary-schooler up for the Clark County Youth Football (CCYF) league.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Noah, now a senior at Camas High School, has played — and loved — the sport ever since and credits football with helping him cope with his diagnoses.

“Football, for me, has always been an outlet,” Noah said. “I’m a super antsy person, and I just want to have fun. The physicality of football is why I love playing on the offensive line — every play you get to give it your all and get some of that energy out. That was the early reason I played football, but as I grew older, I learned more and more about it, and I grew to love being a lineman and getting pancake blocks and trying to knock (the opponent) over on every play. I love it. I love the team aspect, and I love

how every position has its importance. It’s amazing.”

Today, Noah Christensen is one of Clark County’s best offensive linemen and a key leader for the Papermakers 2021-22 program, but his love of the game was on display from the very beginning. During Noah’s first year in CCYF, his parents would find their son in the driveway, in full uniform, two hours before his game was scheduled to start, eagerly anticipating the opportunity to step onto the gridiron.

“I mean this in all seriousness — no kid loves football more than him,” Sarah said. “He’s the first one to practice and the last to leave. I really don’t think anybody loves and identifies more with the sport than him. It’s a big part of his identity and who he is. And he’s a big guy, and he thrives on how strong he is. There’s self-identification there.”

Noah doesn’t watch the sport on television, however. He can’t relate to the game in that manner. He has to be on the field to enjoy it. Football serves as a “coping mechanism,” a healthy way to channel his energy and get through each day with a positive outlook.

“I think it’s more than a game for him,” Sarah said. “He knows it’s part of his mental health stability because he needs those endorphins. It’s like a medicine that keeps him going,

but it’s also a passion. It’s something he’s good at, and I think having something that he’s good at and that people recognize him being good at (has been great). It’s the one thing he counts on. I think football is always going to be a part of his life and who he is. I think it’s given him so much that I don’t ever see him walking away from it.”

‘It’s a part of him and who he is’

Christensen’s parents didn’t quite know how to react when their young son was diagnosed with multiple mental health conditions.

“It was all new then, so we didn’t really know what to think,” Josh said. “At the time, I think he felt different from his peers. I think every kid feels different, but with his condition he felt even more different. We were trying to make sure we were being as patient and supportive and empathetic as we could be.”

Noah’s bipolar depression manifested itself in two ways when he was younger. He would experience episodes of mania, during which he’d feel euphoric and highly energetic, and obsess over fantastical ideas, such as starting a company or singing in front of a large audience. And then he would swing into bouts of depression, during which he would lash out at anyone who angered him, become violent, feel helpless and lack motivation to perform his favorite activities. The ADHD caused bouts and impul-



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO COURTESY OF KRIS CAVIN

Camas offensive lineman Noah Christensen (56) snaps a football during the Papermakers' game against Clackamas High School on Sept. 10, 2021.

sive behavior and made it difficult for him to pay attention to things.

Noah, 17, said he now maintains his mental health with medication and the help and support of family members, friends and doctors.

“I still go through it every day,” Noah said. “I have a tool belt, and I always have to use those tools to help me get through each day. Each day I look forward to football, and that helps me get through the day even more. It’s tough. There’s a lot of stuff that goes into it, but I have a big team behind me, and I know that if they support me as much as they do, I’ll be fine.”

He gives special credit to his parents for “never quitting” on him.

“It’s taken a lot of family therapy. It’s taken a lot of medication. And it’s taken a village of support,” Sarah said. “But us

saying, ‘There’s absolutely nothing wrong with you. This is just part of who you are, and this is how we’re going to handle it’ made a huge difference. He never felt shamed by it. There’s never been a (feeling of), ‘You have a horrible diagnosis,’ or ‘There’s something wrong with you.’ We tell him, ‘We’re here to help you. It’s going to be tough. It has been tough. But we’re never going to leave you. We’re never going to quit. And you have nothing to be ashamed of.’”

Josh said Noah struggled with the thought of taking medication when he was young because he saw his father need medicine to treat cancer.

“We just explained it to him: ‘I take medication for my cancer, it’s something that I need for the physical part of me, just like you need to take a pill for the mental part of you,’” Josh

said. “We just tried to describe it in a way where he didn’t feel like he was all alone in going through that journey.”

Noah took those words to heart. Today, Noah has “safety protocols” in place for when he experiences a “dip” or manic episode. “And he is not afraid to implement them,” Sarah said.

“He’s turning 18 (this month) and he’s a lot more mature,” Josh said. “I’ve been amazed over these last two years at how much he’s matured and his ability to be disciplined in terms of how he takes care of himself because he knows how important it is. He has better introspection and figured out how to spot (his episodes). For example, he knows that not getting enough sleep is a trigger. He’ll be more disciplined about going to bed earlier because he knows that’s going to be super important for him to maintain his health.”

Noah is embracing the opportunity to share his story, which he hopes might help other people who are experiencing the same issues that he’s gone through. In fact, Noah said his desire to help others is a big reason why he wants to become a child psychologist.

For others experiencing ADHD or bipolar disorder, Noah said he would tell them to enjoy life as much as they can and to look forward to one thing each day.

“It’ll keep you going, and you’ll look forward to the next thing and the next thing, and you won’t stop,” Noah said. “I want to play football for the kids that don’t really understand what they’re going through with their mental (health). I feel like if I can play for them, it’s going to keep me going every day.”

Sarah said her son knows his diagnoses are a part of what makes him who he is.

“He understands that it’s a part of him, and it’s who he is,” Sarah said of Noah. “And he’s now finding the positives in that, knowing he can help other people. He’s very empathetic ... I think he knows he’s a lot further ahead in managing his disease than most kids are because he started so young. Now he’s seeing kids being diagnosed with things for the first time and that they need to have more understanding that they’re going to be OK and that there’s people to help them. He sees his availability to do that be-

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Football:

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cause he has walked the road for so long.”

‘He’s a guy the other kids feed off of’

Noah can recall his very first day as a football player with perfect clarity.

“It was my first time and they had no idea where to put me,” he said. “I didn’t really have the body size for a lineman at that point. They had me do different things for each position — throw the ball, run the ball, race. Then they finally had me snap the ball, and the first one I did was perfect. When they saw that, they said, ‘We need you there.’ Back in CCYF, not many teams could run the shotgun, so instantly they put me at center, and my whole offensive lineman career took off.”

Noah is one of four captains of the 2021-22 Papermakers squad, which won its first game of the season on Sept. 30 after starting the year with four straight losses, with a 56-6 victory over Battle Ground.

“He’s not real vocal around other people, but the other kids will listen to him because he’s one of our few returning starters,” said Camas offensive line coach Justen Wochick. “He just has fun out there, and the kids see that more than anything. He leads by example by having fun and being productive. He’s a guy the other kids feed off of.”

Josh and Sarah moved their family from Vancouver to Camas when Noah



Camas offensive lineman Noah Christensen (56) looks to block an opponent during the Papermakers' game against Jesuit High School on Sept. 17, 2021.

was in seventh grade, a change that he embraced due to the small-town atmosphere and emphasis on school sports, which he believed gave him an “identity” in his new surroundings.

But his Papermakers career got off to an inauspicious beginning; he didn’t start for the Camas freshman squad until the final contest of the 2018 season. “And I wasn’t even a starter until someone got injured,” Noah said. “I didn’t play much (that year) because they didn’t know who I was; my eighth-grade year I had a broken hand and was out half the season. I kept working and working and eventually got my start, and I had a pretty good game, but it was the last game of the season.”

Things started to change for him after the season, however, when he began to participate in early-morn-

ing workout sessions with older players.

“That offseason, when (the coaches) invited the sophomores to zero-hour weightlifting period, I just hit the ground running,” he said. “I was lifting heavy numbers. I worked so hard. I made a lot of sacrifices, but I knew (football) was what I wanted to do, and over the years I’ve just been grinding.”

His hard work was rewarded the following fall, when he was given a varsity jersey for the 2019 season, which the Papermakers capped by winning the 4A state championship game. His confidence continued to increase during the delayed 2020 season, when he earned a full-time starting role for the first time.

Now he believes he’s good enough to play at the college level.

“This summer, I went to about 20 college recruiting camps up in Seattle (and) in Portland,” he said. “Once I started going to those camps, I realized I was pretty high up there with that group of recruits, who got started a couple of years before I did. For me to go out there and learn so much and improve even more, that’s when I noticed that I have a shot.”

At 6-foot-2, 290 pounds, Noah is “a strong kid, real stout, with a good work ethic,” according to Wochick.

“He’s got ‘good weight,’ so he can move for how big he is, and that’s a plus,” Wochick said. “He’s also versatile — he’s played center and guard for us all year, and to be able to move from one position to the next is a big deal for us. He’s matured quite a bit. ... He’s identifying defenses better and being more of a leader. He’s really developed into where he needs to be as a senior.”

Josh and Sarah are proud of their son’s accomplishments, but take equal pride in his work ethic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the Christensens fitted their garage with a weight set, which Noah used “multiple times per day,” according to Josh.

“From doing his laundry, I can definitely say that he’s never come home without being soaking wet from a workout,” Sarah said. “He does leave it all out there, and he expects the same thing from his teammates. He won’t ever ask a teammate to work harder than he’s willing to work himself. ... We’ve never had to kick his butt to go to practice or the 6 a.m. workouts. He’s very self-motivated.”

Noah’s efforts are starting to get noticed. Before the year is over, Noah will participate in the Offense-Defense All-American Bowl, to be held Dec. 26-29 at SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles, home of the National Football League’s Los Angeles Rams and Los Angeles Chargers. In January 2022, he will play with Team Washington in the Junior Prep Sports America Paradise Classic in Las Vegas. And

he has already received offers from several college programs, including Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon; the University of La Verne in California; and Lewis and Clark College in Portland.

“If he wants to go to a (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics) NAIA school, that’s awesome,” Wochick said. “I think that’d be a great fit for him. There’s some great football (at that level), sometimes better than Division-II schools. There’s more of a family atmosphere, which we have at Camas. I think a guy like Noah would benefit from that aspect of it, a more family type of football. Wherever he lands, he’s definitely going to have fun.”

The Papermakers will take on the Mountain View Thunder at 7 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 7, in Vancouver. The Papermakers’ next home football game is against the Skyview Storm. That game kicks off at 7 p.m. Friday, Oct. 22, at Doc Harris Stadium in Camas.

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