

Breaking barriers

■ Plainfield man coaching with sign language

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PLAINFIELD — It's kind of like a fantasy football draft.

Each fall, the Plainfield Optimist Youth Football League begins its season by evaluating the pool of roughly 350 players, then allowing each coach to select a squad of players.

There's one that coach Dennis Middleton was especially hoping to get — third-grader Eric Long.

At first glance, the shaggy-blond Long is not unlike any other player his age.

He constantly smiles.

He has plenty of energy.

As Middleton puts it, "his football IQ is off the charts."

Long just happens to be deaf.

"He signed up for the season and we knew in advance of his situation," said Middleton, a 40-year-old Plainfield resident. "I was kind of hopeful that I'd get him in the draft, as an opportunity to take on a challenge and hopefully give something back to the kids."

Middleton selected Long to his Plainfield Redhawks.

It helped having Long's



KEVIN LEIBROCK/FLYER PHOTO

Coach Dennis Middleton and the Redhawks of the Plainfield Optimist Football League display their team sign. Team members are Wesley Cragen, Brandon Denbrook, Charlie Drake, Drew Greiner, Cameron Grider, Evan Hoy, Jalen Hoyt, Eric Long, Luke Middleton, Joseph Nysewander, Tanner Penry, Levi Petro, Reis Spradley, and Carson Wright.

father, who is also deaf, serve as an assistant coach, but Middleton had no way to communicate with his new player just two weeks before the first practice.

So the coach opened a book, and began learning sign language.

"I just started reading," Middleton said. "I thought I was pretty well prepared for the first practice, but it was challenging. I don't want to say it's easy now, but it's become just another part of coaching."

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Middleton continued to improve his sign language vocabulary as the season approached. But there were plenty of challenges, as Middleton said translating little words such as "with," "am," and "is" would often trip him up.

The first practice came, and Middleton had learned enough to communicate with Long. The team's playbook now included as many signs as it did words, such as hand signals for "fake" and "toss."

But 13 other 8- to 10-year-olds suited up for the Redhawks that first day, and it remained to be seen how they would react to having a new teammate like Long.

They couldn't have been more excited.

Middleton said the team simply saw Long as No. 43, their new running back and linebacker. The other players took an immediate interest in sign language, and often ask Middleton how to sign questions for Long, such as "how are you?" and "do you want to play keep-away?"

There's no question sign language has helped bring the team closer together. Like most teams after a practice or game, the Redhawks stack hands in a huddle and shout, "one .. two ... three ... Redhawks!"

They still do that, but have now added a team sign, which consists of

crossing their hands to form a bird shape.

"That's kind of our cheer," Middleton said. "That very first practice we did that, and it kind of brought everybody together."

Middleton admits he never had much exposure to the deaf community earlier in his life. He now finds himself signing plays on the sideline, sometimes forgetting to shout the formation.

"I think it's a good opportunity for these kids to have some exposure to the deaf community early," Middleton said. "They'll have a better understanding that it's really not a big deal. It's not like it's these guys, then Eric. We're a team."