Boy, Age 10, Lost His Limbs, But Kept His Spirit and Football
Dave Hyde, Sun Sentinel, 2010

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — His legs are new. They arrived a week ago. His body outgrew the old pair, as happens every few months, and so he warms up on the new pair now by running back and forth in the grass behind the bench.

“You ready?” the coach asks, pulling down the helmet on the kid’s head because he can’t himself, then snapping the chinstrap for him.

A younger girl once asked what happened to his hands. He said they were invisible. To prove it, he moved the arms that stop just below the elbow in a clapping motion. A friend secretly clapped behind him.

The girl was fooled. The boys laughed. And that’s the sound which should rise above the tears and the prayers as you hear the amazing story of Michael Stolzenberg, that sound of laughter, kids’ laughter, the kind a happy boy makes especially when doing something he loves such as running on a field into a game.

It doesn’t matter if it’s the final minutes, the score long settled. It doesn’t matter if he’s not that athlete he once was. Heck, at age 8, he was the starting quarterback of his traveling youth team in Weston, Fla., — but that was two years ago, before it all happened, before his limbs were taken, before his year from hell.

What matters as he runs on the field is what matters to any defensive end on any team at any age across any football field in America.

“Let’s stop “em,” he later says he was thinking.
Game on.

This is a story about more than how it all can change in a second. It’s also a story about what you keep amid what you lose. And it started more than two years ago with this worry:

“There’s something wrong with Michael.”

His parents, Keith and Laura, heard that over the phone. This was the summer of 2008. They were out of town on a quick trip, and came back the next day to see he had a bug bite near his belly button. And a flu.

He was taken to the doctor, given an oral antibiotic and told he’d be fine in a few days. He wasn’t fine. He was worse. Laura rushed him to the emergency room and, while there, Michael went into septic shock.

His breathing stopped. His body began to shut down. Another hour or two, the doctors said later, and he would have died. As it was, he was put on a ventilator. Then dialysis.

He was diagnosed with a rare immune disease called chronic granulomatous disease. The treatment was equally rare. A medically induced coma. Fifty-one days in intensive care. And, as a last recourse, when oxygen deprivation proved too much, his limbs were amputated.

But, remember, this is a story about what you keep amid what you lose. And it was a while before anyone was sure just what he kept. His heart was fine, they could see, by how he fought for life. But his mind? Was that affected, too?

When he came out of the coma, his mom tried searching how he was by asking if he wanted to see a good friend. He nodded. She asked if he wanted to see another friend. He nodded.

“Then I thought maybe he was just nodding at anything and asked if he wanted to see someone he didn’t really like,” she said. “He made a face like, “Are you crazy?”

So his mind was fine. And slowly, over months, his spirit returned, too.

Everyone saw it. There was the first day back at Eagle Point Elementary School. Laura was a wreck, the way any parent would be. Picking him up, she tentatively asked how it went.

“Great, mom, we have no homework!” Michael said.

And he moved forward like that. When Keith or Laura would try to park in a handicapped spot to spare him a long walk, he’d tell them to save it for someone who was truly handicapped.

When his religious class asked for any extra money to help less fortunate kids, Michael took some, telling his parents there are kids without food and homes and
toys.

Do you see what he kept? Heart? Mind? Spirit?

And something else: His community. Kept it? He added to it. At a time when South Floridians lament not knowing their neighbors, everyone seemed to know the Stolzenbergs.

It wasn't just the word of him people passed around like answered prayers: He's out of the coma now. He's out of intensive care now. He's home now.

It was fund-raisers, too. A friend organized a walk-a-thon. Others did for volleyball tournaments and go-kart rides. The MichaelStolzenbergTrust.org was set up to take donations.

It wasn't just money, though. It was emotion. At the Weston youth league where the family has been involved for years, every team even ran extra sprints after practice in Michael's name, the coaches yelling for players to run harder, run faster because Michael couldn't. A video was given him of that in the hospital.

Then last season, Michael walked to midfield for the pre-game coin flip each game of the 110-pound team. When the team won the Super Bowl, every player received a jacket. The coach, Todd Green, inscribed Michael's jacket with the word, "Captain."

The world moved on. And the Stolzenbergs moved with it. Everyone grew accustomed to the way things were, even when Michael would come inside from playing something like "Manhunt" with his friends and say the socket on his artificial leg broke. That didn't mean a calamity. It meant another $200.

Then, this August, brought another big decision. August in the Stolzenberg house meant football season was coming. They're Gators. They have Dolphins season tickets.

For years, the family has spent Saturdays with their sons' Weston teams, too. Keith often coached. Michael grew up watching the games of his older brothers, Harris, 15, and Justin, 13. Then he began playing, too.

So: Did Michael want to play again? Could he? The parents saw the benefit of sports, even just to trying them.

"When you're on the field, you're taught to give everything you have and can't ever give up," Keith said. "I think that's one reason why Michael survived all this. He's never gave up through anything."

When Michael said he wanted to try football again, they supported the idea. Keith volunteered to coach his 100-pound team. The family brought a tent, a couple of lawn chairs and a full cooler to Saturday's games, just like any other year.

And Michael began to play again. He hasn't starred, the way he once did. This isn't a Disney script, after all. What happened was tragic. A kid's world was
shattered. A family's, too.

But football, it turns out, is something else he kept. Something that's fun to him. And, as he said after running on the field recently for a few plays at defensive end against the Fort Lauderdale Jaguars: “They didn't run at my side, did they?”

As for the future, well, there are “bionic” hands he can be fitted with if there's enough money. In the past couple of years, several hospitals have performed hand transplants, too.

So there’s physical hope ahead. As for the other part, the mental part, Laura tells of a routine that's developed. Each night, she tucks her youngest son into bed and asks, “Michael, did you have a good day?”

“No, mom, I had a great day,” he says.

That attitude doesn't surprise his parents. Not anymore. In fact, Laura brings up the nickname of her son's youth-league team and how it's fitting he isn't a Dolphin, Buc. or Jaguar.

Her son, she points out, is a Warrior.

**Demonstrate Understanding**

1. If you were trying to summarize this article for someone who had not read it, what would you say?
Demonstrate Understanding
2. What was Michael's life like before he became ill? How did his life change after? Use examples from the article to support your answer.

Develop an Interpretation
3. What lessons can we learn from Michael's experience?
Develop an Interpretation
4. Based on information in the article, what do you think is likely to happen next?

Analyze Text
5. There are many direct quotes in the article from different people. Write out two of the quotes and explain how they helped you as a reader.

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<thead>
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<th>Quote from person in article</th>
<th>How this helped me understand</th>
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Analyze Text
6. The author repeats the line, “This is a story about what you keep amid what you lose”. Why do you think he uses this technique of repetition?