

Gladiator

Rebecca Trimpe

The first time he caught the ball, he was playing in the neighbor's front yard. Got taken out by a pissed-off bigger kid who thought he saw an easy interception. Who gets beat by a 6-year-old? Tackle. Left elbow smashed to the concrete. Says he's fine. Wants to go in, stretch out on the couch. Johnny Bravo's on. At the ER: Broken. Dislocated. Surgery around 2 a.m. Drunk guys in knife fights go first. Pins. Four months in a cast which has to be changed once because he's growing like a weed. Scar looks like a train track. Arm won't straighten out completely for months. Still wants to play. Can I sign up for PAL football? They don't have it in our neighborhood, we'd have to move, and we ain't doin' that, baby doll. Uncle played for the Packers for like six minutes in the '80s. Tells him he's not big enough. Says he should wait 'til high school. Kid listens. Mom thinks they're safe. The high school he'll go to doesn't have football. Until it does. Dammit. Kid she used to work with said his old lady bought him a silver trumpet and stuck him in the high school band to keep him off the team. She doesn't want to be that mom. Defense coach first year: Can't you hang some more meat on that boy? As a freshperson, he's five-foot nothin' and weighs less than the family Newfoundland. The second time he caught the ball, he was wearing the yellow cleats his mom bought so she could find him in the scrum. Five-nine and a buck-ninety as a senior, if you believe the program. Built for speed. Those thighs are original equipment but the shoulders and the biceps are not. Lived in the gym at school, and in the basement at home where they put the weight machine. He switched sides. Middle linebacker. Knew what the quarterback was going to do before the poor kid got up that morning. Didn't want the ball. Claimed he didn't know what to do with it. Just wanted to take out the kid who had it. Then he had it. No concrete around this time. He crossed the white line.