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## The heart and soul of the squad

By Andrew Crowley [acrowley@reporter-times.com](mailto:acrowley@reporter-times.com) Sep 8, 2018

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Jackson De Poy smiles as he is applauded after signing his letter of intent with Franklin College. Jackson, who was diagnosed with athetoid cerebral palsy a year after he was born, got involved with the team through Team IMPACT, a nonprofit that connects children with serious or chronic illnesses with local college teams. Photo by Andrew Crowley.

FRANKLIN — Jackson De Poy loves sports, especially basketball and soccer.

He comes from a family of diehard Indiana University fans, and his brother played on travel soccer teams and currently plays on the Mooresville High School soccer team. Since the spring, Jackson has been deeply involved with the Franklin College men's soccer team. He's been a steady fixture on the sidelines, cheering and admonishing members of the team as needed during practices, training sessions and games.

The 17-year-old Mooresville resident has athetoid cerebral palsy, which he was diagnosed with during the first year of his life.

On Wednesday, Jackson signed a National Letter of Intent and became a member of the team. He will continue to take part in team activities like practices, games, team dinners and other events. He was given team gear, posed for a team photo and celebrated with pizza after making it official.

This was all made possible through the Franklin Men's Soccer Program and Team IMPACT, a nonprofit that helps to connect children with serious or chronic illnesses to local college teams.

"I heard about Team Impact through a young kiddo at the bowling alley, believe it or not, and his dad was telling me about this program, and I was like, 'That's the craziest thing I've heard,'" Jackson's mother Lara De Poy said. "I'm an occupational therapist, and I never heard of program like this before. And so I checked into it a little bit and got the process started. Kind of didn't know what to anticipate, and it is has been an amazing, amazing experience."

Cody Graman, the men's soccer coach at Franklin, got an email from Team IMPACT asking if they'd be interested in including Jackson in the program.

"I was like, 'Of course we do, there's no question about it.' So we just emailed them back and got in contact with Jackson's mom and kind of set it all up from there," Graman said.

Graman and team captains gave Jackson and his family a tour of the campus in the spring, giving them insight into the life of a college athlete. They got to see where the students lived and where they attended class.

"We came and coach Cody and the five captains took us on a campus tour, which was amazing. They spent lots of time telling us about what the players do, where they go to classes — it was very personable," Lara said. "I knew from that point that it was going to be an awesome experience because they really put everything into it."

Graman said Jackson's positive attitude has an impact on the team.

"We are happy to have Jackson as part of the program. For us, when we look at the 26 other guys that are part of the program as well, a big thing for us is attitude, and you can see every time Jackson shows up, he has a big smile on his face, ready to play," Graman said. "I think it brightens a lot of guys' days whether they have a bad game or they have a bad practice after just looking at Jackson puts a smile on their face."

Jackson assists the athletic trainers and plays the role of motivator; he lets his teammates know when they're doing well and when they could step up their efforts.

"Whether he yells at them because he doesn't think they're playing hard enough, which is an actual thing. So it's good to have someone else say it beside myself, so they usually know if he says something, it's going to pull some weight around," Graman said. "We're just extremely grateful to have Jackson as a part of this program, and as long as he wants to be a part, we're going to take him on."

His teammates, like senior Trey Floyd, have embraced Jackson and the role he plays for the team.

"Out at practice, if you're having a real bad day, Jackson sits on the sideline, and he helps with water, and you come over, and he's there to pick you up, and he's there to really let you know what you're doing wrong," Floyd said. "He'll hoot and holler at you and he'll tell you. You just gotta tell him, 'I'll work on that, and I'll work harder.' And he keeps you going and gives you a little more motivation to work hard."

Graman said that he wants his players to be well-rounded, as there is life beyond soccer.

“After your four years, your college soccer is over. You kind of want to broaden your horizons and make everything count and have the best experience that you can,” Graman said. “We think Jackson brings that to us. He helps us at our training sessions, he’s going to help us in every aspect of soccer and being part of the program.”

Lara said she appreciates the way Jackson has been treated by the coaching staff and his teammates — that they weren’t focused on his disability but what he brings to the team.

“You hear so much about exclusion and not inclusion, and I think for our family, it shows us that there are still people that are willing to open their minds and their hearts to accept others for their differences. It’s taught us all a lot,” Lara said.

And though the soccer team lost their game the night before, it didn’t have impact on the celebration of Jackson.

“We played last night, and it didn’t go our way, but you can see that everyone’s here having a great time because we’re here for Jackson,” Graman said. “Because Jackson shows up to all of our stuff with a smile on, so we’re here with a smile on, excited to be here for him.”

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