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Boy inspires Moorman's charitable works



By John Wawrow, AP Sports Writer | August 10, 2005

PITTSFORD, N.Y. --Taylor Speth watches the Buffalo Bills practice from inside a VIP tent along the sideline, trying to get punter Brian Moorman's attention.

Moorman is too far away to hear, but after the training camp session ends, he makes a beeline to where young Taylor is standing in a No. 8 Bills jersey -- Moorman's number -- that hangs almost to his knees.

The boy eagerly greets the punter, who has an autographed ball in hand and a smile on his face.

For all the stars on the team to choose from, it's not often a 10-year-old embraces a punter as his favorite player. But you don't know Taylor, a bright-eyed boy with a Clay Aiken-style haircut who can talk your ear off if you let him and, who Moorman says, is the person that changed his life.

Taylor is a cancer survivor, successfully treated for a brain tumor he had four years ago. It was then that he met Moorman during a Bills charitable function for young patients of Buffalo's Roswell Park Cancer Institute.

They've been inseparable since.

"Taylor's a special one," Moorman said. "I sat down with Taylor and we hit it off and became really good friends. ... He inspired me to get involved with kids from Roswell. And the rest is history."

Moorman was so inspired that, with his wife Amber, he established the charitable PUNT Foundation in 2003, raising money to help pediatric cancer research and provide social programs for kids. He also makes weekly visits to Roswell to meet with children, while also being involved in other charitable works such as Habitat for Humanity and participating in the team's annual Thanksgiving lunch at Buffalo's City Mission.

This week, Moorman was recognized for his efforts, receiving Pro Football Weekly's seventh annual Arthur S. Arkush Humanitarian Award.

"The award goes to those kids, really," Moorman said. "They're the ones who deserve that stuff. They're the ones that are fighting that disease. They don't ask for anything. They just want to have fun. They want to be kids like their friends, and I just want to be a friend."

Moorman's got that and more.

Ask Taylor what the best gift -- footballs, jerseys, help on a school project -- he's ever received from Moorman, and the youngster provides a poignant answer.

"The neatest present he gave me is probably being a friend," Taylor said.

The answer blows Moorman away.

"He's never said that to me," Moorman said. "But to know he feels that way means the world to me. And that's exactly why I got into what I got into."

Moorman is entering his fifth year with the Bills, having emerged as one of the NFL's top punters. He holds two franchise records and finished third in the AFC last season, averaging 43.2 yards a punt. Not bad for someone who has to kick into the strong winds that swirl at Orchard Park.

That's a big turnaround to how Moorman's pro career began after he graduated from Pittsburg State in his native Kansas in 1999. After two years of failed training camp attempts with Seattle, Moorman was ready to give up on a pro career when the Bills invited him to camp in 2001.

Living alone that first season in Buffalo, Moorman was looking for something to do when he signed up for a few team charitable events, which led him to meet Taylor, the first of many relationships he's developed at Roswell.

"The thing about Brian is that he's so genuine," said Chuck Collard, who's daughter Carly died two years ago of the same brain tumor that Taylor had.

Collard is the founder and chairman of Carly's Club, Roswell Park's charitable foundation, which works with Moorman's foundation.

"Too often when kids are going through this, people want to pity them, feel sorry for them, and they don't want that," Collard said. "And that's what makes Brian so remarkable. ... He makes them feel special."

Bruce Speth, Taylor's father, sees that firsthand with Moorman.

"Here's a guy that has the gift of athletics, who for some reason has chosen to share his popularity to help kids, make them feel better and make their families feel better," Bruce Speth said. "I feel that there's somebody I hope that Taylor's going to be like someday."

It just might happen. Taylor Speth is already working on his punting technique.

"Yeah, I've been practicing," Taylor said. "But most of my balls go off to the side."

Moorman, who has no children of his own, is ready to help.

"We'll work on it," he said.

"To think that I can put a smile on a kid's face because I wear a uniform on Sunday afternoon is beyond me," Moorman said. "I've had the opportunity to get involved in the community and these kids. And my life's changed forever."

On the Net: brianmoorman.org ■