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Pembroke Hill can't manage without Reed

The hard work he does off the field has been a big help to the football team on the field.

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Before practice can start, Coleman Reed must find the faulty water bottle. It's dark in the Pembroke Hill High School football film room, and there are many bottles to check.

Every day brings new challenges, which is why Coleman finds the job of team manager so invigorating. He'll take it as a personal affront if a player grabs a water bottle at practice, and the water leaks all over him.

"I try to make sure that the players aren't inconvenienced," Coleman explains. "That does not equate to a happy player."

Does a particular player like Gatorade or does he prefer water? Coleman knows. Where did an assistant coach go to college? Coleman knows. What play should Pembroke Hill call when the game is on the line? Coleman knows. He knows everything.

"Nobody works harder on this field," says senior Matt Ungashick, the Raiders' starting quarterback. "He sweats more than us. We do a lot of standing around."

Coleman does not stand around. He is a human blur, a leader in the fight against senioritis. He works because working has brought him so much joy the last three years. Coleman says he wasn't very popular in middle school, before this gig.

"Go ask anyone in the student body who the starting running back is, and they won't be able to tell you," says senior running back Chris Burcham. "Ask that same person who the manager is, and they'll say, 'Coleman Reed.' "

Pembroke Hill coach Sam Knopik talks to his players often about what their individual legacies will be, how they will be remembered. He doesn't waste any time talking to Coleman about such things.

"It might be selfish," Coleman says, "but I want to leave a mark, to set a precedent. I don't want to just be a face in the crowd."

Watching Coleman work at Tuesday's practice, you get the feeling that if he doesn't find that leaky water bottle, his legacy will be shot. Luckily, sophomore Alex Raridon, a first-year manager and Coleman-in-training, finds it.

"This is the one! This is the one! We've isolated it!" Coleman says. "Good work, Alex. Good work!"

Senior wide receiver Robert Powell's favorite Coleman story involves girls-against-girls powder puff football.

Powell and the other coaches appointed Coleman "assistant offensive line coach" of the team. Little did they know that Coleman had already appointed himself offensive coordinator. He drew up about 30 plays out of five different formations for the girls.

"He drew up a triple reverse screen," Powell says. "He's like, 'This would be great to run in this situation.' He wanted to take the girls' 40-yard dash times."

Growing up, Coleman only played sports to make his parents happy. He never liked football, assuming it was only a game for jocks. Then one day in seventh grade, he sat down with his father to watch some NFL action. Something clicked.

Coleman became fascinated by the game within the game, the intelligence of play calling. Suddenly, names such as Dan Marino and Jerry Rice weren't just names. Coleman began to study the history of football. He scoured the Internet for every stat. It was almost like he was 4 years old again, calling out the make and model of every car on the road. Only this time, Coleman's passion was football.

"His life's ambition is to be the GM or president of an NFL team," says Bruce Reed, his father. "That's his idea of a perfect job."

It must have been fate that Coleman was placed in Knopik's gym class his freshman year. The unlikely duo quickly formed a bond by talking football. When the year ended, Knopik had convinced Coleman to come aboard as his team's manager.

Coleman would come home from practice that first year and start drawing up trick plays. By his junior year, he had a full playbook, which he passed to Knopik to get his opinion.

You can tell Knopik feels a little bad about what happened next. He couldn't find the time to look at Coleman's plays. After a while, Coleman approached him.

"Coach," Coleman said, "if you're not going to look at my playbook, I need it back. You didn't offend me, I just need it back."

Maybe someday, Pembroke Hill will run Coleman's Statue of Liberty offensive tackle pass, or that triple-reverse screen.

"If you didn't love the guy so much," Knopik says, "you'd think he was a weirdo. But he's 100 percent genuine."

Sam Knopik's favorite Coleman story goes back to last season. One Friday night, Knopik asked Coleman to chart running versus passing plays in the press box instead of help on the field. Coleman couldn't handle it.

"Coach," Coleman said, "I just don't feel like I'm a part of it."

See, Coleman simply isn't a press box kind of guy. He needs to be on the field, with his teammates, cheering them on. It really might be the most important part of the job. It's certainly the most fun.

"I will miss Friday nights," Coleman says. "I swear to God, just being at those games, it just kind of puts you on a whole different level mentally. You come home at night and you're like, 'Wow, what an experience.' Win or loss, it's just being there."

Football, more than the chess club, the school choir or the student government, has allowed Coleman to be his exuberant self. Last Friday night, Pembroke Hill won its first game of the season, 25-24 over Wyandotte.

"I was on the brink of pure insanity last week," Coleman explains.

When the team took the lead on an Ungashick scramble in the last 3 minutes, Coleman dropped the water bottles and ran down the sideline, yelling.

"I thought he was going to tackle me," says fellow senior manager Caitlin Stadler. "He's the team cheerleader."

Thing is, Coleman would do the same thing if the Raiders scored a touchdown losing 35-0. Those times, his friends on the team can't help snapping at him. They always feel bad.

"He only knows one speed," Knopik says. "Sometimes, it's not the appropriate time. We're always pulling him back."

But most of the time, the team encourages him. Last year, after a tough loss in Tulsa, Okla., the bus was silent. Someone asked Coleman to do "Da Quad," a rap Coleman wrote about the quadratic formula. Coleman, of course, obliged. And after his first "negative B," the bus was rolling. Coleman was just getting started.

"I went to sleep," says senior Zach Buckner, an offensive lineman, "I woke up, and he was still doing it."

It's 6:30, and practice has ended. With the leaky bottle apprehended, everything went off without a hitch.

Matt Ungashick is quizzing Coleman about several random capitals around the world. Coleman knows every one.

"Coleman," Ungashick says, "God love you."

Ungashick's favorite Coleman story is from physics class. One day, Coleman was answering a question and got going too fast, as he often seems to.

"Coleman, stop," the teacher said. "Take a deep breath."

Twenty seconds later, the teacher looked up at a red-faced Coleman, who was still holding his breath.

"You can let it out now, Coleman," the teacher said.

Telling the story now, Ungashick and the other seniors laugh from their bellies. Coleman wanted to be remembered, and he certainly has accomplished that.

Sometimes, at games, the fans will chant his name when it's time for him to go to work. The other day, a group of seventh and eighth graders approached Coleman.

"They somehow know me," Coleman says. "It has given me an identity. These kids look up to me. It's flattering."

It's easy to assume that Coleman will want to manage in college, too. Knopik made a recommendation to several college coaches to consider taking Coleman as a manager. Washington University in St. Louis came calling, but Coleman declined.

"Coach," Coleman said, "no offense or anything, but I'm going to go to college, and I'm going to be a businessman. I don't want to make a career out of this."

He certainly could. Coleman is a veteran now, adept at filming practice and editing the tape for the coaches afterward. Twice during practice on Tuesday, he helped players treat their injuries.

Knopik likes to say that if they had an all-state spot for managers, Coleman would be unanimous.

But Coleman is only concerned with tonight's game against Sumner Academy. The Raiders could get to .500 with a win.

"This has been a three-year ride," Coleman says. "I don't think anything will be able to replicate it."