

JUMPING

RIGHT IN



Battlefield's Kehler Hamilton (No. 22) celebrates his grand slam with a slam dunk. Hamilton's homer helped the Bobcats beat host and previously undefeated Colgan 7-4 in the Eddie Hope Memorial Tournament championship game April 13. **BILL KAMENJAR|FOR INSIDENOVA**

Despite a hearing impairment, Battlefield's Kehler Hamilton excels in two sports

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Joe Swekosky felt lost. On the first day of Battlefield's baseball tryouts in the spring of 2021, Swekosky struggled to fit in with teammates he barely knew after spending the previous year at Patriot High School.

But then Kehler Hamilton introduced himself during warm-ups and Swekosky's outlook changed.

Sensing his fellow sophomore's discomfort amid the unfamiliar faces, Hamilton did what came naturally to him: He reached out to the newcomer and welcomed him. The gesture went a long way.

Swekosky experienced a wave of excitement. Hamilton's kind act eliminated his anxiety and turned his attention to something unimaginable only moments before.

"I couldn't wait for the next day of tryouts to get to know him," Swekosky said.

Hamilton affects people that way. Anyone who meets him can relate to Swekosky's story. The two-sport standout with the 3.9 grade-point average effortlessly exudes life. He was, as his father Lance put it, "born with a smile."

His coaches call him a dream. Powerfully built with a rangy frame, the 6-foot-2, 205-pound Hamilton has



Battlefield linebacker Kehler Hamilton scored a team-high three defensive touchdowns last season. **BILL KAMENJAR|FOR INSIDENOVA**

serious athletic talent. More importantly, though, he has the right attitude. He listens, works hard and does his job without grumbling or excuse-making.

So when someone mentions Hamilton's hearing impairment, the topic is almost an afterthought. Yes, those who know the 17-year-old junior's background know he was born deaf and has worn cochlear implants in both ears for most of his life.

But the physical disability is almost impossible to detect based on the way he acts in social circles and performs in the classroom and on the athletic fields, where he's earned all-district recognition as an outside linebacker for the Bobcats' football team and as a right-fielder for the baseball team.

The key, Hamilton says, starts with a proper mindset. When it became clear Hamilton had lost his hearing, his mother, Leslie, imparted to him wisdom that still guides everything he does. She told him he must adapt to the world instead of the other way around. The more proactive Hamilton became, the more success he would have.

Hamilton faced bumps in the road, including bullying at a young age when, for example, he ended up in tears after other kids deliberately left him by himself.

But Hamilton remained steadfast in living out his mother's advice. Giving up or giving in were not options. "I'm glad my mom did that," Hamilton said. "It made me who I am."

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FINDING A WAY

The first warning sign showed up immediately when Hamilton failed his newborn hearing test at the hospital. The hospital recommended his parents follow up with an audiologist. After a series of tests, the audiologist told Hamilton's parents he was fine based on the standards established by Virginia law.

"We were not sure what that really meant, but we accepted their professional opinion since we had no hearing loss in the family," Leslie said.

Their pediatrician also told Hamilton's parents he was fine at Hamilton's 12-, 15- and 18-month-old checkups. The doctor led Hamilton's parents to believe this was a developmental issue because Hamilton was a boy and the couple's second-born child.

Still, Leslie and Lance remained concerned their son was not speaking or responding to sounds.

Then just before Hamilton's second birthday, his parents had Hamilton evaluated by the Prince William County Parent-Infant Education Program. The results began to clear up the mystery.

"We were told he was developing above normal motor skills but his speech was significantly behind and he was not responding to sound," Leslie said.

Upon the program's recommendation, Hamilton took a hearing test called the Brainstem Auditory Evoked Response (BAER) that determined he had moderate to severe hearing impairment.

Hamilton received hearing aids when he was 2, but they helped only so much.

After searching out options, his parents decided to have Hamilton surgically receive cochlear implants at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Hamilton was approved for the procedure after undergoing a series of evaluations.

Cochlear implants connect a sound processor attached behind the outside of the ear to a receiver placed under the skin behind the ear that transmits signals to the auditory nerve (known as the cochlea) in the form of an electrical charge. The signals ultimately send audio to the brain.

Hamilton underwent three surgeries. At age 3, he received a cochlear implant in his right ear. At age 4, he received a cochlear implant in his left ear. In 2018, he received a second implant in his right ear due to a rare internal device failure. The switch made his hearing in his left ear stronger than the right.

After he received his initial cochlear implants, Hamilton began going once a week for two years to Johns Hopkins for speech and hearing therapy.

Although he was three to four years behind other kids in developing his speech and hearing skills, Hamilton still began kindergarten on time. By then, Hamilton was already talking, a result of a tireless, year-long effort to ensure he stayed on the same school schedule as his peers.

Leslie said each school Hamilton attended provided support, including the elementary and middle school levels where Hamilton received speech and



Kehler Hamilton received the MVP award for his performance in the Eddie Hope Memorial Tournament. **BILL KAMENJAR** FOR INSIDENOVA

hearing therapy twice a week.

This experience inspired Leslie to ask Battlefield about offering American Sign Language as a class. In 2019, the school added ASL to the curriculum. Hamilton is in his third year of ASL.

"ASL was important to me because I knew ASL would benefit many students in the community," Leslie said. "Many parents have thanked me. I hear it's a popular class."

JUMPING IN

Although he struggled to communicate verbally, Hamilton compensated visually by reading facial expressions, lips and body language. Hamilton also displayed a precocious dexterity from an early age. At age 2, he rode his bike without training wheels.

Both sports enthusiasts themselves, Lance and Leslie encouraged Hamilton to play sports. He began playing Tee-ball at age 5 and started playing football at age 7 in the Gainesville Grizzlies' youth program.

In both cases, Hamilton's parents felt comfortable with him competing. Hamilton took the necessary precautions to protect his head from a violent collision, especially in football, by wearing a skull cap and a headband inside his helmet.

An avid student of both sports, he also entered each contest as prepared as possible for any outcome. His athleticism only enhanced his ability to anticipate the expected and the unexpected.

His parents' bigger concern was the communication between Hamilton and the coaches and officials. Would he hear the whistle or a coach's instructions? Leslie and Lance wanted to make sure everyone understood ahead of time the circumstances so they all were on the same page.

So far, Hamilton has faced no major obstacles.

It helps Hamilton that both football and baseball rely on non-verbal messaging anyway when it comes to communicating strategy. Hamilton also knows to make eye contact with someone or to

be at the front of the line when a coach speaks to ensure he understands the instructions.

And when a potential issue arises, it's addressed without alarm.

Battlefield head baseball coach Jay Burkhart said he tells the umpires before the game about Hamilton to give them a heads up in case he loses track of the count while hitting or they need to speak to him.

After a miscommunication in an earlier game, they've also figured out how to best handle a fly ball hit between Battlefield's second baseman and Hamilton in right field. If the second baseman is in a better position to catch the ball, he starts waving his arms instead of shouting so Hamilton knows to back off.

And on the rare occasion Hamilton's earpiece slips off during a football game, he comes out of the game, re-attaches the piece and heads back to the field. It's no different than if he needed to miss a play to replace a broken chinstrap or mouthpiece.

"It's hard not to smile when you are coaching Kehler," said Battlefield head football Greg Hatfield. "He's great to work with. There's never a question of whether you are getting Kehler's best."

COMING INTO HIS OWN

As he continues to develop in both sports, Hamilton is learning to harness his raw abilities in becoming more consistent in his play. Colleges are following him, but they need to see more of him before offering a scholarship. At this point, Hamilton is open to playing either sport in college.

In baseball, Hamilton began to show signs of his talent near the end of his sophomore season to help the Bobcats reach the region final. This season, his first as a full-time starter, Hamilton is hitting .304 with two homers and 15 RBI through Tuesday for the 17-2 Bobcats.

"He's lightning in a bottle," Burkhart said. "He's a strong athlete and an infectious kid who wants to learn. It's cool to have. No one is going to outwork that

kid."

In football, Hamilton led the 2021 state semifinalists with three defensive touchdowns.

Steve Francese, Battlefield's defensive coordinator, has coached football for 30 years, including a 14-year stop at Robinson as part of two state championship teams. Hamilton is the first player Francese has coached who wears cochlear implants.

"He's the highest energy athlete I've ever been exposed to," Francese said. "Kehler is the nuclear Energizer Bunny. He's off the charts."

Hamilton's gung-ho, team-first attitude makes those around him better.

"I can be a little bit of a hot head if I'm not performing well," Swekosky said. "He's the complete opposite. If he goes 0 for 4 with four strikeouts, he's the same kid who walked out of the dugout earlier. When I lose my cool, he calms me down."

LIFTING SPIRITS

The baseball soared into left field, but Hamilton ran to first base without assuming anything.

It wasn't until he rounded first base and headed to second that Hamilton realized the ball cleared the wall. Overjoyed, he raised his right index finger and pointed toward the sky. Then after crossing home plate, he capped the celebration as every Battlefield player does after hitting a homer this season: He stuffed a small basketball through a hoop held by a teammate.

Hamilton had a number of reasons to bask in the moment. His grand slam sparked a six-run third inning that helped visiting Battlefield beat previously unbeaten and preseason Class 6 state champion favorite Colgan 7-4 on April 13 to capture the Eddie Hope Memorial Tournament title.

Hamilton was also named the tournament MVP after finishing the game 3 for 4.

In describing the grand slam afterward, though, Hamilton preferred to let the home run speak for itself. It felt good to deliver such a big hit, but Hamilton expressed appreciation for helping the Bobcats to victory. That mattered most.

Swekosky, though, saw something more. The left-fielder, who hits right behind Hamilton, witnessed a play that embodied Hamilton's best attributes.

Power displayed in clutch circumstances. A fired-up personality lifting his teammates. A humble attitude grateful for the opportunity.

In the seventh grade, Swekosky first heard about Hamilton playing sports with cochlear implants and the possibility sparked his curiosity: How could someone do this?

But now he knew the answer, and the Colgan game provided another example.

This was the person Swekosky immediately connected with that first day of tryouts a year ago.

This person became his best friend. What a gift to him. What a gift to everyone.