

# Legally blind Hitchcock youth pursuing dream to play kicker with help from Bulldog big brother

By JAMES LACOMBE The Daily News | Posted: Saturday, September 17, 2016 11:00 pm

## HITCHCOCK

A little more than two years ago, Grant Thiem was at a Hitchcock Bulldogs football game to support his older brother Hunter, then a sophomore.

The observation was made that the kicking game was not exactly the strength of the Bulldogs' team. Grant knew then and there that kicking field goals and extra points would be his ticket to the Friday night lights experience when he became of age, so he began pouring himself into learning the finer points of playing the kicker position.

"I decided I wanted to try it out, and it just happened," Grant, now 11, said.

It wasn't quite as simple as Grant makes it seem, though. He's taking on this football dream despite being affected by Stargardt disease, a genetic disorder that drastically impairs vision. Like most with Stargardt, Grant is legally blind, with his central vision largely blurred and peripheral vision less severely hindered.

The fact that Grant wanted to follow in his footsteps as a Hitchcock football player is something Hunter, who plays on Hitchcock's offensive and defensive lines and serves as the team's long snapper, said he really took to heart as he began diligently training and coaching his younger brother.

"I really wanted to help him out," Hunter said. "I took it as a compliment, and if he wanted to work, I was going to help him get in the work and get him as good as he could be."

That commitment has resulted in the Thiems being the only family on the block — and probably a much wider radius than that — with a life-size field goal post on their front lawn.

Hunter, his father and grandfather, a lifelong welder, constructed the post and assembled it in the wee hours of the morning two Christmases ago as a surprise for Grant.

Although he had his suspicions as he spotted some telltale clues, Grant said he was still surprised to see the final product fully constructed that Christmas morning.



## Hitchcock's Thiem Brothers

Hunter Thiem, a senior on the Hitchcock High School football team, watches as his brother Grant, 11, boots a football through the uprights at Bulldog Stadium Thursday, Sept. 15, 2016. Grant, who suffers from Stargardt Disease which causes progressive vision loss, hopes to kick for the team once he reaches high school.

“I kind of knew it was coming,” Grant said. “I kept asking for it, and then I saw the pipes in the yard before Christmas. I didn’t know what it was going to look like, but I knew it was going to be a field goal.”

“He gets to put his work in,” Hunter said. “He can do it every single minute that he wants.”

Grant now boasts a top field goal distance of about 35 yards, which puts him among the state’s best for his age group, according to his own research scouring the internet. Next year when he enters seventh grade, Grant plans to take the field as a member of Crosby Middle School’s football program.

Because Grant has had to work so hard to overcome his visual impairment in pursuit of his football dream, Hunter feels like that effort should actually give the prospective kicker a leg up on his peers.

“He’s got so much on everyone out there it’s not even funny,” Hunter said. “At practice, he runs the hardest. He just does everything to the best of his ability just because of what he’s got. His eyes make him do all that.”

When it comes to his own football exploits, Hunter calls Grant — as well as younger sister Georgi, a sophomore cheerleader who also suffers from Stargardt — his inspiration.

As Hunter traversed all corners of the state to attend college camps this summer in hopes of getting a scholarship, Grant was by his side to serve as extra motivation while displaying his skills on the O- and D-lines, at long snapper or any other position at which a college team will take him.

Knowing, for whatever reason, he was spared of the genetic disability affecting both his younger siblings, Hunter and the Thiem family have adopted a “no excuses” credo.

“I didn’t get that drive like he has,” Hunter said. “He’s my drive. Him and my sister are my drive because I see what they go through, and it just makes me want to work twice as hard to do what I can do to help them out.”