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## MIAMI LIGHTHOUSE FOR THE BLIND

# Football for the senses

When seeing a game is hard, touching the field and some of the equipment can help fill in the gaps.

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Two high school boys jumped into a heated conversation Sunday morning about hard tackles in NFL games.

"You can hear the helmets hit," said Peterson Simon, 17. "It's CLAP. POW. Whooooooh!" countered Davonte Pollard, 16.

Typical sports talk between friends, for sure, but note the absence of anything they saw.

Simon and Pollard both have eye conditions that limit their sight, so they follow the sounds on the field more than most. On Sun-day morning, they got their first chance at the feel of the field, too, as part of a VIP tour of Sun Life Stadium for their fellow students in a local program for the visually impaired.

"I actually feel like a Dolphin right now," said Frankie Young, 18, as he stood by the 20-yard line about three hours before kick-off on Sunday morning.

Young cares more about music than football.

He writes rap lyrics in Braille and performs as JFreez, the name that's on the cane he used to help maneuver past the goalpost on a freshly painted end zone to the 20-yard line.

His biggest revelation Sunday morning came from handling regulation NFL equipment for the first time.

"I was surprised at how heavy the helmet was," he said after handling Dolphins headgear weighing about seven pounds.

Like the other students from the Miami Lighthouse's weekend program for the visually impaired, Young is somewhere between sightless and legally blind, said program spokesman Cameron Sisser.

The dozen visiting high schoolers seemed mostly familiar with the basics of the football field before them, even if it was one that few people in South Florida get to experience first-hand and up close.

Shawn Burgess, 15, who has cataracts, said his main hope for the day was to "see Reggie Bush score five touchdowns."

Pollard has an eye condition that he said restricts his vision to colors and shapes.

Pollard used to be a Dolphins fan, but switched to the Colts after playing that team again and again in the Madden NFL video game. He's a running back for Braddock High, and in October, his first possession (a hand-off for a few yards) prompted its own story in the Miami Herald.

Burgess and Pollard said they prefer the television play-by-play to listening to a football game on the radio.

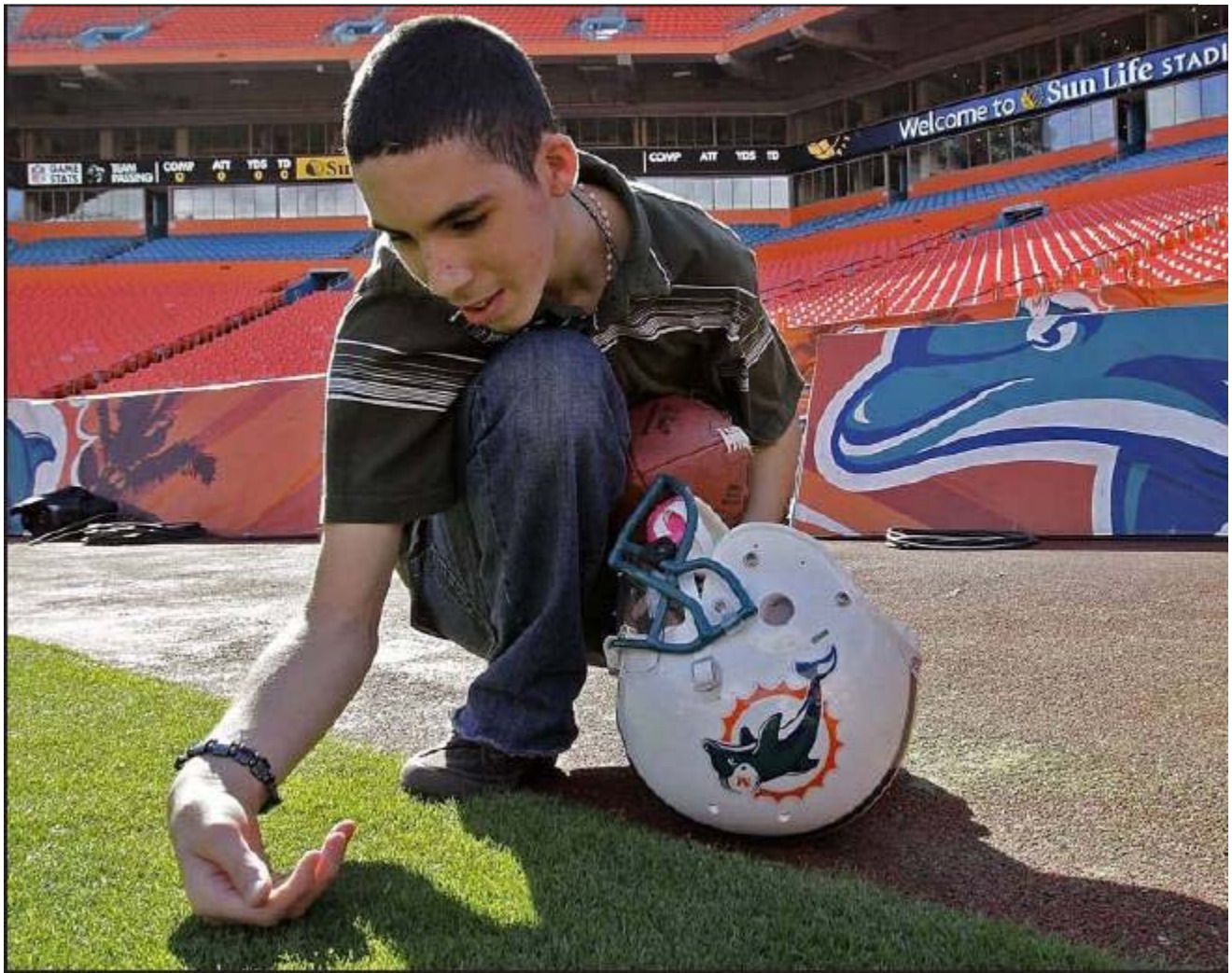
Burgess hadn't been to a Dolphins game before, but Pollard had — though not in the box arranged by the Dolphins on this Sunday.

The boys had the added perk of being able to handle freshly trimmed clippings of the field's Bermuda grass, walking the distance between the front row and the first yard line, and touch the playing field itself.

The idea was to give the students a chance to feel the nuances of an actual NFL playing field that might be missed without normal vision.

"I wanted them to be able to personally connect with the football experience," said Marcus Bach-Armas, the Dolphins employee who was the morning's host and tour guide for the Lighthouse participants.

"They've been able to touch the grass and feel the goal post and see how much the helmet weighs," he said.



PHOTOS BY CARL JUSTE/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

GETTING A FEEL FOR THE FIELD: Eric Ortiz, 15, who is visually impaired, touches the grass on the football field at Sun Life Stadium Sunday.



A FOOTBALL IMMORTAL: Eric Ortiz, 15, left, assists Frankie Young, 18, in touching the engraving on the statue of former Dolphins coach Don Shula.



CARL JUSTE/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

THE WAY IN: Robert Gacko leads his wife, Virginia, CEO of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind, with guide dog, Kieran, as the group enters Sun Life Stadium.