

POSITIVE ENERGY

by Eddie Hughes

Every sports fan has a favorite athlete. Every Red Waver has a favorite Bulldog. The question is how do you choose?

Does he or she play your favorite sport? Wear your favorite number? Play the position you used to play? Come from your hometown or high school? Maybe he or she is simply the best player on your favorite team?

That's all good. But how many of you look deeper — beyond the field — and consider the athlete's character before anointing your favorite?

How many magazines take that into account before deciding whom to write about? *FresnoState Magazine* did. And this is a story about Karl Mickelsen, a Fresno State football player who cares.



KARL'S LITTLE HERO

Mickelsen, a senior linebacker at Fresno State, is perhaps best known for his hair. He has big hair that explodes beyond the restrictive confines of his Bulldogs football helmet and dangles down the back of his jersey, covering most of his last name. He also has a big personality, big aspirations (NFL) and is one of the team's biggest hitters. Oh, and he has a big heart (metaphorically speaking). Just ask his Little Hero, 6-year-old Maya.



Maya roots for her "Big Hero," No. 43, Karl Mickelsen.

Mickelsen — she calls him Karl — met Maya during his freshman year at Fresno State when he went bowling with her family. Her brother was a patient at Children's Hospital Central California and both children were involved in the Big Heroes Little Heroes program. Now a senior, Mickelsen, Maya's Big Hero, has stayed in touch with the family ever since.

The program is a collaboration between Fresno State, Children's Hospital and the Fresno Downtown Rotary. It spawned from the California Bowl in the 1980s when players were matched with patients who were invited to come watch the bowl game formerly held at Bulldog Stadium. Today, more than 50 Fresno State student-athletes from various sports are paired with patients for special activities from pizza parties and bowling to carving pumpkins and attending sporting events together.

Mickelsen seeks opportunities to participate in all types of community outreach. He says former Fresno State punter Andrew Shapiro encouraged him to get involved in off-the-field activities by inviting him to read books at elementary schools — and now Mickelsen does the same with his younger teammates.

"As a student-athlete, it's all about time management," Mickelsen says. "You've got time to play football, time to be a student and you've got time to be helping out in the community."

Mickelsen often speaks to children about the importance of education, hard work and exercise. And, more often than not, he starts out by speaking to them about his hair. Think of it as a built-in, grown-out icebreaker.

"They want to touch my hair or play with my hair," Mickelsen says. "At first, the kids, like my Little Hero Maya, she was scared. All the kids were like, 'Oh my gosh he's a big guy, look at his hair.' But once we start hanging out, it's all good times, just staying positive and being silly."

POSITIVELY ENERGETIC

Positivity and high energy are common themes with Mickelsen. He talks about it. And people who talk about him talk about it — including coaches and teammates.

*"Karl has a great foundation as a human being," says Fresno State defensive coordinator Nick Toth. "He values caring for other people, he's got a big heart, he's unselfish and he doesn't cut corners. All those things combined create a guy who is consistent. And maybe the No. 1 thing about him is that he's a fun-loving, laid back, **energetic** guy. I don't know if you can ask for more **positive** characteristics than those things."*



*"Karl's a good leader. He's always got a lot of **energy**," says senior running back Malique Micenheimer, who learned about the Big Heroes Little Heroes program from Mickelsen three years ago and has participated ever since. "He's just a **high-energy** guy. He always has a **positive** attitude, so it makes it easier for him to lead."*



*"He's funny. He's a highly **energetic** guy to be around. He's got great spirit," says Fresno State coach Tim DeRuyter. "He's a natural leader in that guys are just naturally attracted to him because he's got a great personality and he's got charisma. And the fact that he wants to give back, I think just really says a lot about him."*



FLIPPING A SWITCH

Mickelsen's dedication to service certainly says a lot about him. But so does his play. He earned honorable mention All-Mountain West Conference last season in his first year as a starter, leading the Bulldogs with 97 tackles. He flies around the field sizing up ball carriers, delivering game-changing hits and celebrating with his traditional fist pump followed by a yell toward the sky with both arms flexed and outstretched at his sides.

"Everybody always asks me, 'Why do I see you as this crazy guy on the field?' But it's all about having a switch," says Mickelsen, standing in the south end zone at Bulldog Stadium.

"When I touch this field, I'm a whole different person. It's all about football and just running around, attacking people, hitting people. But when I step off this field, I'm just regular Karl, just a regular student-athlete going to class."

For the Fresno State defense, that switch can't have any electrical shorts this season, with star quarterback Derek Carr (Oakland Raiders) and record-breaking wide receivers Davante Adams (Green Bay Packers) and Isaiah Burse (Denver Broncos) all moving on to the NFL. Mickelsen and the Bulldogs defense will be expected to carry a bigger load if Fresno State is going to win a third straight conference championship.

"I love pressure. I love having the pressure all on me or on the defense," Mickelsen says. "I feel really comfortable. We all feel comfortable together because we have more experience."

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FOSTERING A CULTURE OF **GIVING BACK**

That experience, on and off the field, recently landed Mickelsen a nomination for the 2014 Allstate American Football Coaches Association Good Works team. The criminology-law enforcement major is up for the award that recognizes players whose charitable involvement and community services stand out among their peers.

Service is ingrained into the culture at Fresno State, where students, faculty, staff and administrators have volunteered more than 5 million hours over the past five years. And Fresno State student-athletes have been recognized each of the past two years with the Mountain West SAAC Community Service Award for the most volunteer hours by any school in the conference.

“It helps mature you and helps humble you, just seeing what these kids go through and seeing how blessed we are,” says Micenheimer, who has maintained relationships the past three years with two Little Heroes who are brothers.

Mickelsen is one of Fresno State’s representatives for SAAC, the Student Athlete Advisory Committee, which meets throughout the year to schedule volunteer activities, such as distributing food to the needy, and recruits others to get involved.

“We talk to our guys about being champions on and off the field, and he totally embodies that,” DeRuyter says. “He gets it. He’s a great leader for us on our field, and he wants to give back to the community every way he can.”

Now that Mickelsen’s time on campus is winding down, he reflects back to when he first arrived as a freshman from Morse High School in San Diego, ready to aggressively pursue his potential. His approach hasn’t changed.

“I’m going to make the best out of this that I can and take advantage of every opportunity I get,” Mickelsen says. “As a college student-athlete, a lot of people look up to you, even kids.”

And chances are, while you’re cheering for the Bulldogs this season, you might look up to Mickelsen too. Maybe he’ll even become your favorite player.



See video interviews with Mickelsen and DeRuyter

www.youtube.com/fresnostate



Karl Mickelsen takes the march to victory.

Cary Edmondson

WHO’S YOUR FAVORITE BULLDOG STUDENT-ATHLETE?

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 [#MyFavBulldog](https://twitter.com/FresnoState_Mag)

Winner will be selected at random on Nov. 21.