

The Struggle for the Tinted Visor

By Wendy Williams



When Josiah grew to 6'3" and 290 pounds, football seemed the reasonable choice. Being born with ocular albinism has always presented Josiah with challenges, but nothing was going to prepare us for the mountain we were about to climb in order for Josiah to pursue his love of football in college.

Josiah played football in high school, where he achieved 2nd Team All-Region, a place on the All-State team, 1st Team All-Conference, and was voted Power of the Unit, meaning teammate of the year. Scouted by several colleges, he chose to receive a football scholarship to Arizona Christian University. His dedication, hard work, and talent won him, as a freshman, a coveted position on the main squad. That is, until he was asked to remove the tinted visor he needs in order to see in the sun or under the bright lights of the stadium.

According to the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) and the NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletes) tinted eye wear of any kind is not allowed in college football. No medical exceptions are allowed! To quote the reporter, Kent Somers, who wrote an amazing article on Josiah in the Arizona Republic and the online edition azcentral, "It's not the entirety of the rule that keeps Josiah from playing the sport he loves. It's the last five words of it."

Learning the needed steps to fight such discrimination nearly finished Josiah emotionally, so we wanted to share what we learned to make the path easier for the rest of you who may have dreams of football futures.

Step 1: Proper paperwork

The needed paperwork includes documentation of a thorough eye exam from an ophthalmologist with detailed information

about the visual impairment clearly stating the need for proper eyewear. We made sure to have all that paperwork submitted to the university before the football season even started.



Step 2: Clear communication

The college athletic department needs an understanding of the visual impairment. This is where we failed. Josiah did not want in any way to be favored or discriminated against by the coaches. He received the scholarship based solely on his talent and he didn't want to draw attention to his visual impairment (of course he was receiving accommodations in his classes, but that was different). Even though we had passed on to the Athletic Trainer and Director all the paperwork from the ophthalmologist, we didn't know that they didn't know what to do with that paperwork.

Step 3: Actively advocate

Don't be afraid to step in on behalf of your child. Once the no-tinted visor ruling was passed down to Josiah at a game in Texas that was being televised on ESPN 2, we realized we had not advocated enough. That was on September 7, 2019; for the next two months we received a crash course on how to get an entity as large as the NAIA/NCAA to listen to the Americans for Disabilities Act of 1990.

Make sure the athletic department knows that they need to be contacting the NAIA/NCAA asking for accommodations well before the sports season begins. This was an area we didn't know about, either.

Thankfully, Arizona Christian University is small enough that the athletic department was easily accessible. Even with that, we had to be pretty persistent. There is not a way for parents or players to contact the NAIA/NCAA, but all the university athletic directors know the proper channels. Pressure them to contact the needed commissioner(s) requesting accommodations well before the sports season.

Step 4: Look for a disabilities lawyer

As the University received word back from every level of the NAIA/NCAA that there

were NO EXCEPTIONS ALLOWED, we reached out to the Arizona Center for Disabilities Law. That should have been the first place we turned after Josiah was asked to remove his visor, because he lost half the season while we figured out how to navigate the system. The lawyer quickly put together a case, sending a letter informing the NAIA/NCAA of their responsibility to uphold the Americans with Disabilities Act. Within eight days, Josiah was granted the needed accommodations.

Step 5: Media mob

We flooded social media with the injustice that Josiah was facing. We started a hashtag #justice4josiah. I posted a Facebook article which was shared 300 times. My husband tweeted a local sports commentator and that reached the reporter Kent Somers, who wrote a brilliant article on the issue. In the end, the lawyer let us know that we did everything we should have done. In today's culture social media is a great tool for putting pressure on impersonal entities such as the NAIA/NCAA.

Remember, steps 1-4 need to be done before the sports season even starts. Then if you are still denied the needed accommodation, be sure to use the media in your favor.

It is unjust when a person who has the ability to do something is not allowed simply because of a needed accommodation that doesn't give an advantage nor hurts another player. Not providing such accommodations is discrimination. Being asked to remove his visor resulted in Josiah being removed from the main squad, causing him to question his ability and love of something that brought him a small sense of belonging. Even in Josiah's darkest days, he would say that if no other person ever had to face the humiliation that he was going through then it would be worth it. Here's to Josiah's fight, in hope that no other athlete with a visual impairment will have to endure being asked to remove a tinted visor.