

# Thumbs up: T-shirts send Mike Utley's message

By M.B. DILLON  
Staff Writer

Date: Thanksgiving Day, 1991.  
Place: Detroit.  
Once the football game was over, the thoughts of most Detroit Lions fans turned to turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, dressing and pumpkin pie. Not so for Jim Wauldron.  
The Plymouth resident, who operates Centrex Office Seating in Livonia, was so taken with Lion Lomas Brown's tribute to a fallen colleague that it moved him to action.  
The week before, offensive lineman Mike Utley was paralyzed in a game against the Los Angeles Rams.  
As he was carried from the field on a stretcher, Utley gave his teammates and fans a "thumbs up" sign. During the televised game on Thanksgiving, Brown announced to the audience that Utley was as much a part of the team as he ever was, and gave him the thumbs up sign.  
"I was thinking it was pretty remarkable," said Wauldron, "that here Mike was paralyzed, and he was giving the thumbs up sign as if to say, 'Don't worry about me.'"  
When Brown made the gesture, Wauldron was reminded of 1984, when sportscenter Al Ackerman christened the phrase "Bless You Boys" in reference to the world champion Detroit Tigers.  
It sparked an idea. After confer-  
ring with Ackerman, Wauldron printed and sold "Bless You Boys" T-shirts. Sales were brisk, and a large portion of the proceeds went to Easter Seals.  
"I saw that a 'Thumbs Up' campaign to benefit the Mike Ut-

ley Foundation was something that would work, because of how well 'Bless You Boys' went over," said Wauldron, who designed T-shirts for Canton Township's sesquicentennial celebration.

Wasting no time, Wauldron on Thanksgiving Day sketched a "Thumbs Up" design for a T-shirt and cap and approached a few people with a marketing plan.

"Within a day, NFL Properties called, saying they wanted to get involved. There was a tidal wave of support right away; it was an emotional thing. We called some retailers; Kmart, Dunhams and the stadium (Pontiac Silverdome)," all of whom agreed to sell the shirt.

NFL Properties granted Wauldron's corporation a Michigan soft goods license. Last August, the league gave his Livonia company, free of charge, a national license with a value of up to \$1 million. It permits the company to distribute "Thumbs Up" merchandise for all 28 NFL teams.

The NFL offered to donate to the Mike Utley Foundation for Spinal Cord Injury Research the full 9-percent royalty it receives for each "Thumbs Up" T-shirt and cap sold.

The Wauldron Corp. is giving away shirts as fast as it can print them. Thus far it has shipped 60,000 shirts to 1,000 locations across the U.S., said Ed Raschke,

vice president of operations and a West Bloomfield native.

Over half of the \$250,000 raised by the foundation thus far has come from T-shirt revenues.

The Thumbs Up shirt is the top-selling shirt at the Silverdome. Just about every NFL team, and stores including Foot Locker, J.C. Penney, Hudson's, Target, Kohl's and Wal-mart have expressed interest in carrying the merchandise. Detroit Pistons basketball player Ishai Thomas owns one and was filmed at the Silverdome wearing it.

## Upbeat despite injury

Thinking positive is the hallmark of Utley's character.

"The challenge we have is getting Mike's story in front of people," said Tony McDonnell of Livonia, vice president of marketing for the Wauldron Corp. "A lot of positive things have happened to Mike in the midst of a very difficult situation. His friends to work just as hard at this as he did playing football."

"The Thumbs Up theme fits in so well because of how hard he's working. It epitomizes the whole spirit of 'Let's not complain, let's get out there and do it,'" added McDonnell, former associate athletic director at Oregon State University.

Wauldron and McDonnell aren't teaming up for the first



DILL HANSEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Helping out: Ed Raschke (left), Jim Wauldron, Tom Wauldron, and Tony McDonnell hope their "Thumbs Up" program benefitting paralyzed Detroit Lion Mike Utley will help the former football player's foundation attain its goal of reversing damage caused by spinal cord injuries.

time. They graduated together in 1972 from Redford Catholic Central High School where they both played football. In a telephone interview from Denver where he is receiving treatment at Craig Hospital, Utley said the Thumbs Up program can be a winner.

"Our goal is to help everyone

who's been injured get back on their feet and walk again. With continued support of the Thumbs Up program, this goal will become a reality," he said.

Utley says he's determined to defy doctors by walking someday.

"My attitude is suck it up; go out and kick some butt. If my

doctors don't have information I can use, I ignore it," he said.

T-shirts are for sale at area stores and should be available before Christmas at all the above-mentioned retailers. They're also available by mail. Send \$14.95 to the Wauldron Corp., P.O. Box 87615, Canton, Mich. 48187.

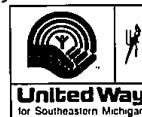
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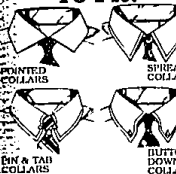
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