Thumbs up

Ex-Lion Utley inspires Brother Rice students

BY GREG KOWALSKI

STATE WATER

Mike Utley said he rarely swears but he did as he throw the doctor out of his hospital room.

The doctor had just told the 6-foot-9, and yound Detroit Lions offensive guard that he would never walk again. Utley had broken his neck in a game against the Los Angeles Rams and was paralyzed from the neck down.

That was in November 1991.

On Tuosday, Utley rolled his wheelchair into the auditorium of Brother Rice High School in Bloomfield Township to deliver the message to students that any obstacle can be overcome if you try hard enough.

"I couldn't even brush my teeth." Utley said about his condition after the accident. Now he has regained most of the use of his arms, which are still as thick as tree limbs. And his broad upper body dwarfs his wheelchair.

He can lift his body up off the hold is said and extend his legs straight out—a major accomplishment for a man who once had to wear a "Frankensten" brace to hold his head in progress to reach his goal of walking again. He knows he will neven had once had to deal and he had he had be accord.

coach.
"I need less and less help every
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Utley said he deean't like asking for help and it was tough for a man of his size to become so dependent on others to do things most of us take for granted.
But he never gave up. That was a point he stressed to the Brother Rice students.
"I go a million miles an hour. If I fall down, I get back up," said Utley. He has the bruises to prove it. He has matching scrapes on his knees from a recent spill from his wheelchair.
He gets around a lot despite

■ On Tuesday, former Lion Mike Utley rolled his wheelchair into the auditorium of Brother Rice High School in Bioomfield Township to deliver the message to students that any obsta-cle can be overcome if you try hard enough.

being chairbound. He even has tackled stairs.
"Going down a flight of stairs is not the hard part. The landing is," said Utley. "As an athlete, I say I've been hurt before and I'il come back again."

Since the accident, Utley has been undergoing intensive physi-cal therapy at a spinal injury clin-ic in Denver, and is becoming a national symbol of determination.

Utley has been going around the country promoting the Mike Utley Foundation, an organiza-tion dedicated to raising money for spinal cord injury research.

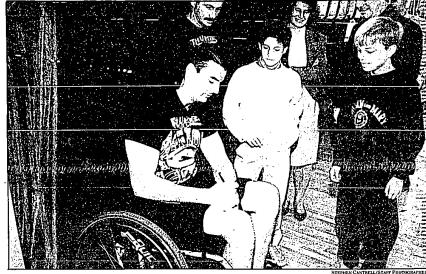
His trademark is a raised thumb, which reflects his positive

"Thumbs up means being the best you can be," said Utley. "Never look back. You have to keep pushing."

He said he misses football "terribly." He added: "I miss it now more than I did the first year (after the injury). Every year I don't play is going to be harder."

Utley said he has down days like anyone else, but he set goals for himself and is working to

"Don't quit," Utley said. "Not with just injuries, but with any-thing you're challenged with."



Playing hooky: Mike Utley fans Matt Holcomb (left) and Nate Meyvis skipped classes at their Birmingham schools to get a lesson in perseverance — and autographs — from Utley.

The advice had special meaning for Brother Rice junior Trip Finnegan. His cousin, Steven Vankerchove, was injured in an auto accident lest August and broke his neck like Utley. Finnegan asked Utley to visit Vankerchove, who is in Pontiac Osteopathic Hospital. Coincidentally, Utley and Vankerchove's doctors were at the Lions game Sunday and had asked Utley then to visit him, and Utley had al-

ready agreed.
"I think it will be a big boost," said Finnegan, who added he was surprised by Utley's progress. "It's just incredible what he's done."

done."
Senior Chris Sanders said he was impressed with Utley.
"He's a good man. He represents everything that's good

about the game," said Sanders, who plays on the Brother Rice Warriors football team.

Sanders said he has never been injured in a football game, "but you know that an injury can happen. It's in the back of your mind,"

"He gave a great talk," said senior Scott Everly. "He showed



