

An Athlete's Instincts Are His Guide

By GRANT GLICKSON

All you have to do to find David Hopkinson on the Williams School soccer field in New London, Conn., is close your eyes and listen.

"He never stops talking," Coach Dennis Crowe said of the 6-foot-2-inch, 190-pound all-star back/sweeper. "He's always shouting, 'It's coming up to you.' 'Play the ball through.' 'He's mine.' 'I'm square.' He's always giving his teammates direction."

An amazing accomplishment considering that Hopkinson is the one who is practically playing the game in the dark. He has two visual defects, ocular albinism and congenital nystagmus, that were diagnosed when he was 4 months old. The combination of these uncorrectable conditions creates a visual impairment that is worsened by sunlight, artificial light, twilight and shadows. Hopkinson's measured vision is 20/60 and 20/70.

"When the ball is on the other side of the field, it's really small and I can't see it at all," is the way Hopkinson, a 17-year-old senior tri-captain for Williams, described the visual effects. "But I could anticipate what's going to happen. I know how long the goalie is going to kick it and I could tell what direction it's going to go by watching his leg swing. It's sort of a game of adapting to what's going on and how things are happening."

On the soccer field, one would never know that Hopkinson was visually impaired. Certainly, Amherst, Colby, Fairfield, Middlebury and William—colleges that are recruiting him—either don't know or don't care. His slide tackles often bring fans to their feet, and his two-handed overhead

throw-ins have enabled him to lead the Blues in assists in each of his four seasons.

"His throw-ins are so good that it's comparable to corner kicks," said Josh Crowe, a senior striker and son of the team's coach.

"He's a very dangerous weapon for our team. We're able to set up plays in front of the net because of his ability to get the ball there. And the first and second times that we do it, we always catch the other team off guard."

His proud father, Peter Hopkinson, added, "It's a very effective offensive weapon."

Hopkinson, an all-star defender in

A Williams senior anticipates what he cannot see.

The Western Prep School Soccer Association, has led Williams, a private school, to a 52-11-6 record and 41 shutouts since coming from nearby East Lyme Middle School in 1993.

Last season, Williams won the New England Prep School Class D soccer championship for the first time. Hopkinson proved to be the catalyst as he was selected to the all-Connecticut Independent Schools Athletic Conference team, the New England tournament team and the all-New London Day first team.

"I just decided that I was going to work my tail off and not let anyone tell me that I couldn't do something,"

Hopkinson said. "It's a prove-every-body-wrong kind of mentality."

Hopkinson has been doing just that from a very early age. When he was 4 months old, it was initially feared that he would become legally blind over time. That prognosis has since been changed.

As a pre-teen, Hopkinson was told that he would not be able to compete in sports or obtain a driver's license. But at 16, after passing a state vision test with the aid of corrective glasses, he received his driver's license after a police sergeant personally gave him a one-hour road test. The license is restricted to daylight hours.

"I really consider a lot of things in David's life to be miracles," said his mother, Jackie, a former team captain and most valuable player in field hockey at the University of Maine. "They have said that his impairment would never get better, and it hasn't. But he's doing better things than we ever expected."

Hopkinson, whose eyes grow tired as the day grows long, has maintained a 3.0 grade point average despite the fact that he can't see the blackboard from the front seat of the classroom. He studies with large-print books to ease the strain on his eyes.

"When he applies himself to visual tasks in academics, it takes a lot more of his concentration to focus on a book because he has this constant involuntary movement of his eyes," said Barbara Lutz, who was assigned Hopkinson's case four years ago as an educational consultant for children's services to the blind for the state of Connecticut. "Having books on tapes, which he does not like, would help relax his eyes."



Carl David Lubin/Inca for The New York Times

David Hopkinson has overcome two uncorrectable visual defects, to become an all-star and tri-captain at the Williams School in Connecticut.

Hopkinson, who is the president of the student body, said that his handicap has turned him into a better athlete, student and human being.

"I have always had to work harder than everybody else because of my problem and I never felt like I was getting ahead," he said. "But now I'm seeing that all my hard work is

actually starting to pay off. Everything is falling into place.

"I'm definitely hopeful for a cure. But at the same time, it's been 17 years and nothing has come about. I'm not going to think about it. I'm just going to continue doing what I do, and if something comes along I'll be the first to try it."