Linebackers hit low notes as well as QBs

By NANCY SMIRL JORGESEN

James Antony, a high school senior, is 6 feet, 1 inch tall. He weighs 205 pounds, and possesses the broad shoulders and muscular arms of the football player that he is. His physique is continually being refined so he can achieve the best performance possible.

This linebacker has two coaches. Today he works with only one coach, who is asking that he concentrate and control the muscles of his back and abdomen. The request is that he spread the shoulder blades, which will give his body the ability to breathe more deeply. As the shoulder blades broaden, the rib cage expands, and the muscles of the abdomen extend downward, all intended to give the athlete better control over his breathing, which in turn makes it easier for him to perform at the highest level.

On this day, the football star serves as an example for his peers. He is asked to demonstrate while his friends and teammates observe. The coach’s hands briefly touch the areas of his torso that control the necessary musculature. After the appropriate preparation, the young man takes his breath and, mouth open, demonstrates today’s lesson: an Italian aria.

The linebacker has two coaches. More about his football coach later. Today he works with his vocal coach, Maria Hansen, an elegant, statuesque soprano who has performed in Europe and America, and is now preparing young singers to reach their potential through the music and drama of opera.

One hundred and fifty students are in this high school audience. They are my vocal students, members of the most elite choir in a program my colleague and I have built over the last 20 years. Many of the young men and women are like the student at the front of the room. They have numerous interests, and several of them are both athletes and musicians. The bass is singing today for a number of his fellow varsity football teammates. Some of them also study voice. On football game days, the tenor and bass sections are a sea of red as players don their jerseys to publicize the evening’s game. These athletes sing like they play football: with enthusiasm, aggressiveness and sometimes a bit of rowdiness. They also know how to shape a phrase, create an emotion and appreciate the dissonance in a contemporary harmony.

I have not observed the singer in a practice session with his other coach — the one who specializes in touchdowns. I do know that the football coach respects his players’ musical pursuits because their playing time is in jeopardy should a lapse in discipline be reported to the athletic staff. And while the WIAA football schedule has never been changed to accommodate the musical theater calendar, it is possible for varsity football players to do double duty during football playoffs.

Not an easy task to start with two-a-days in August while also attending dance rehearsals for the musical, these boys finish up the season by playing leading roles every night in November. When not on the football field, they are on the school stage in dramatic singing roles.

Is this scenario an anomaly? Is it an irregularity that football players also study voice and have a passion for music theater? Have we found a glitch in the high school culture that allows a linebacker to consider a career in opera performance? We can only hope so.