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Photo by Paul Floeckher

With help from his buddy and Effingham County High School head football coach Rick Tomberlin, 8-year-old Peter Osella shows off his football signed by members of the University of Georgia football team. The football is a token of their support for Osella, who has had three brain surgeries.

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signed football to his buddy.

Only 8 years old and just two months removed from his third brain surgery, Peter Osella can no longer play the sports he used to love.

Peter has suffered many seizures, including one in 2010 that was so prolonged that he suffered stroke-like symptoms and lost the motor skills on the right side of his body.

"That's been hard. That stopped him from doing all his sports, which he loved — playing soccer and baseball, and now he's not even able to be on a bike," said his mother, Ivonne Osella, a Spanish teacher at Effingham County High School.

However, Peter is now a special member of a well-known team, thanks to a gift from the University of Georgia football team. After learning of Peter's story, an assistant coach sent Peter a football autographed by head coach Mark Richt and several Bulldogs players.

Effingham County High head football coach Rick Tomberlin — who describes himself and Peter as "big buddies" — made a surprise presentation Thursday at an ECHS faculty meeting. With Peter accompanying his mom to school that day, Tomberlin presented the

"He's a sweet, nice little boy and we just love him," Tomberlin said. "We want him to get well and live a good, fulfilling, long, special life."

According to Mrs. Osella, Peter's problems began in 2008. Shortly before his fifth birthday, Peter came down with meningitis and encephalitis at the same time.

"They said it was a one in a million case," she said.

That caused Peter's brain to swell and, "when it went back to its original size, there was a misconnection, and he has been having seizures since then," Mrs. Osella said.

To try to stop the seizures, Peter underwent his first brain surgery last September at the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta. However, the seizures continued, and he went back to MCG in May for additional surgery.

Peter had two brain surgeries in a span of eight days. Doctors performed a left temporal lobectomy, a procedure that involves removing small portions from the hippocampus, a part of the brain that is involved in memory processing. Studies have shown that 60 to 80 percent of patients are seizure-free within two years of the surgery.

"We thought it was done, but now the seizures are coming back. So now we're back to trying to figure out what's going on," Osella said.

Through all the surgeries and physical and speech therapies, Peter has been a trooper. Peter's mom says he bounces back well after surgery and he is always "back to himself within a few days."

"He's very resilient. He's not down for any reason," she said. "He might be grumpy a day after surgery, and then the day after that, it's all over — and that's that."

Mrs. Osella has also remained remarkably upbeat, and she gives a great deal of the credit to her support network at Effingham County High School. She described the ECHS faculty and staff as a "great, great part of Peter's recovery."

"It has been a godsend," she said. "When Peter received the ball, I told the faculty I that I wish we never had to go through it, but I am so glad that God put us at the right place at the right time with the right support system around us. Effingham has been nothing but great to us."

Osella provides her ECHS colleagues with regular e-mail updates on Peter's progress. In turn, Tomberlin shared Peter's story with a number of college football coaches he knows.

Tomberlin said one of his e-mails got a response from Georgia linebackers coach Kirk Olivadotti, who said the Bulldog coaching staff was praying for Peter. Tomberlin then heard from UGA recruiting assistant Thomas Guerry, who said the coaches wanted to send a gift to Peter.

"Please know that we are praying for Peter and the rest of the family so that they may all make a full recovery," Guerry wrote.