HEART & SOUL
OF THE SEAHAWKS

Cabrillo College duptog manager Jerry Skolnik, right, shares a high-five with Seahawks coach Bob Kittie.

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APPROXIMATELY Jerry Skolnik takes his duties on Cabrillo College's baseball team seriously, which means he's a good fit. That's why he's passed through the dugout in the midst of an elimination playoff game Saturday holding a sign that reads, "Fear the close." Skolnik — a 5-foot-7, 115-pound sophomore at Santa Cruz High — doesn't speak, though he is capable of torturing a few basic words. He has Intellectual Developmental Disabilities.

But often at Cabrillo — using hand gestures — he is the voice of reason. When coach Bob Kittie walks back to the dugout, Skolnik often enters the mix, points to Kittie and then to a nearby chair, hinting that the heated coach needs to sit down.

Needless to say, the players trust him.

SUPER REGIONALS
NO. 7 CABRILLO (23-16) AT NO. 3 SANTA ROSA (37-7)
Best-of-three series
Game 1: Friday, 2 p.m.
Game 2: Saturday, 1 p.m.
Game 3: Sunday, noon
If necessary...

It's not as if he doesn't speak, Kittie, who became friends with Skolnik while teaching a physical education class at Santa Cruz last year, said. "The genius of Jerry is he understands everything. You remember alto Julius Caesar? Well, he's my Ed McMahon. He has impeccable timing. He laughs hysterically. He just has some special knack that brings out the best in people."

For sure, he brings out the best in the two-time defending Coast Conference Pacific Division-champion Seahawks, who have advanced to the Super Regionals as a second straight season. When Cabrillo (23-16) takes on host Santa Rosa (37-7) in a best-of-three series beginning Friday at 2 p.m., Skolnik will be there, doing what he does best — lighting the mood and keeping the players loose.

Kittie spoke with Skolnik's father, James, midway through last season and invited Skolnik to join the team on an official capacity. James agreed and the Seahawks got him, turning a 5-8 start into a 17-4 finish.

"It's our little luck charm, you can say," said front Mercer, the Seahawks' third baseman. "Ever since he's been around, we've been on a tear."

Kittie added that Skolnik, who SKOLNIK PAGE 2

Cabrillo College baseball manager Jerry Skolnik, right, lines up with the team during the announcement of the starting lineups.

also earned his bachelor's degree in business administration in 2010. This year, he is earning a master's degree in administration.

He takes P.E. and photography in addition to his special education classes at Santa Cruz, known as "the other school." "He knows when to do it and when not to do it," the coach said.

This past summer, Skolnik enrolled at Henry Perkin Baldwin High in Maui and worked with their sports programs. He and his family returned to Santa Cruz for personal reasons.

"We treat him as an equal, as he should be. He's one of the players," Kittie said. "This is easy. I don't know why more teams don't do this. There are a million kids who do this. We all get the same benefit."

Kittie scoffed when asked if he was initially concerned Skolnik might be a distraction.

"He's not even close to a distraction. It's an addition," Kittie said.

Kittie said Skolnik sometimes attends practices and wears his No. 31 jersey to games, home and away.

In the dugout, he's often dancing for teammates, pointing to his heart, giving one-finger salutes, or blowing kisses to his favorite player.

"He's very special," said Skolnik's father, James. "There are a lot of other Jer- ries. It's just a win-win for everyone the happy-go-lucky kid for- ever."

As for the clown sign, it belonged to Skolnik's father, who showed up to the game with a friend wearing clown masks.

James, a retired real es- tate developer, was clean- ing around Santa Cruz High when he stumbled across a scary bust statue of a mor- bid-looking clown. After cleaning it up, he gave it to the Seahawks as a good-luck charm to turn around the team's struggling offense. It worked. The Seahawks often position the clown so that it stares down opposing pitch- ers and hitters and brings bad luck.

Skolnik got the attention, and laughs, from his teammates with his sign-toting antics.

"He loves being the center of attention," Mercer said. "When bad things happen for the Seahawks, there isn't much roaring."

"We gaze him a minute to be selfish and then they have to be a team player," Kittie said.

On the rare occasion a player vents excessively over a strikeout, or mental or physical error, Kittie will tell him to visit Skolnik for counseling.

"I told one of the kids, 'Go- tell Jerry why you're pout- ing, because he can't play baseball,'" Kittie said. "He was ashamed.""}

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