

## PLAYER DIARY

## 'I think they just wanted a buddy'

## About the author



**Eric Decker,**  
Minnesota  
**WR**

Decker ranks among the nation's best wide receivers for a second straight

season. He has 47 catches in 2009, five for touchdowns, and a Big Ten-best 731 receiving yards. The Gophers visit Ohio State on Saturday afternoon.

BY ERIC DECKER

For *SN Today*



PAUL BATTAGLIA / AP

Eric Decker enjoys making a difference off the field as much as he does on it.

One of the cool parts about being a Gopher is the way you get to help people in the Twin Cities area. A while back, our team had an event with HopeKids, a local group here that helps support kids who are fighting illnesses. The organization brought about 100 kids to the football complex, and we set up some stations for them to learn the game. There were kids from first grade through 11th grade, and I think everybody had a lot of fun.

We ran them through catching balls, being a quarterback, some defensive drills, and just tried to keep them active. I was in the ballhandling station, and after a few times through, it turned into a big two-hand touch football game. But the best part was definitely just hanging out with the kids, especially the little guys.

The whole time, you could tell the younger kids were definitely looking up to the college players. It

wasn't that they were in awe; I think they just wanted a buddy. There was one guy, he might have been in the second grade or so, who just kind of stuck by my side all day. The group he was in moved on, but he wanted to stay. Finally, I was like, 'Sorry, man, but you've got to go to the next station.'

Things like that have a big effect on me, too. When you step back and look at it, football is just a game. It's not your whole life, even though sometimes we make it seem that way. Being around those kids, I realized how fortunate I am to be where I am at Minnesota. I'm getting a degree, playing sports at the highest level, meeting a lot of people from around the country and the world. When you're caught up in football, and all the time we

spend with it, or you're worrying about your critics, you can forget those things.

I've always tried to get involved in giving back to the community when those opportunities come along. I've been asked to visit hospitals, work with the HopeKids, go to schools and read to kids. I just like having conversations with them and sharing my story. Every time I go back to my hometown, I try to help out there, too.

Giving back and helping out makes you feel great. You see these kids who need a little extra support, and you do the best you can to be a friend and a role model for them. It's that kind of stuff that you'll remember just as much as the big wins on the field.

— As told to Dave Curtis