

## Placer High football star, a foster youth, overcomes and inspires

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AUBURN – Dalton Dyer insists he's just a normal kid now. He has a home, a family, and a promising future. He was introduced to snow last winter and went on a trip to Canada last summer. He is planning for college. He is consumed by schoolwork, Placer High School football and the California Interscholastic Federation playoffs that begin tonight.

"I'm a nervous wreck on game day," Dyer says, with a grin.

Just a normal kid? That's not what others think. His story is so extraordinary that he has been nominated for the first annual Rudy Award, an honor to be bestowed upon the nation's "most inspirational" prep star on March 6.

But Dyer isn't just a prep star and a good student. He's a foster youth who changed the rules of the game. His attorneys argue that he changed the world – the one inhabited by youngsters shuttled among houses and relatives and, sometimes, among strangers.

When a paperwork snafu regarding his transfer from Vallejo's Bethel High School to Placer made him ineligible for three games and temporarily cost his team a playoff berth last season, he stubbornly fought back. He went to court. And Saturday he celebrates an anniversary: Exactly a year ago, the senior running back stood nervously in a crowded Oakland courtroom, dressed in a white shirt, gray slacks and a tie borrowed from his coach, and heard a judge rule in his favor.

The ruling – which restored Placer's playoff eligibility – held that CIF regulations regarding foster youth transfers and extracurricular activities were burdensome and violated state law.

The repercussions were swift and dramatic, ripping through the foothills, the Central Valley, the CIF and the state. Postseason games were rescheduled, with Placer bumping Colfax from the playoffs. The Sac-Joaquin Section commissioner, Pete Saco, took immediate steps to revise the bylaws, easing the burdens on foster youth transfers to comply with state statutes.

A bill strengthening protection for foster youths was subsequently introduced and passed by the state Legislature – and is now referred to as "Dalton's Law" at the National Center for Youth Law in Oakland, which represented Dyer during the legal proceedings.

There is more. There is Dyer, a delightful young man on the cusp of adulthood and flourishing in his new life. On the field, he is an undersized muscular power runner in Placer's three-running-back set with Asher Gotzmer and Josh Turney.

Everywhere else, he savors what he refers to as "a peaceful" existence.

"I hardly see Dalton during football season," laughed his aunt, Muriene Spinks, a day care owner who gained custody before her nephew's junior year. "But when he comes home in the evening, he comes over and gives me a big kiss. He's so happy. School is going very well for him this year, too, and that makes me happy."

Dyer, 18, is visibly calmer and more relaxed than a year ago. His face is still as round as a cherub, and an additional 20 pounds is packed on his thick 5-foot-6, 185-pound frame. He can sit in a chair and chat for an hour without fidgeting his way to serious weight loss. His hands toy with a cell phone that is as much of a throwback as his team's wing-T offense. His legs no longer dance anxiously, nor does his body contort in any number of uncomfortable positions.

Dyer said he still plans to attend Sierra College and dreams of playing for the University of California, Berkeley, but suspects he will earn his teaching credential at a local university. He plans to become a football coach for sure, he says, and already has talked with Placer head coach Joey Montoya about retaining ties with Placer High.

The two remain extremely close. Montoya, who says he would have adopted Dyer if necessary, remained at his player's side throughout the legal proceedings despite resentment from some of his peers.

"I've never seen a kid handle such a tough situation so well," said the boyish-looking Montoya, his dark hair spiked and a day's growth of facial hair framing his features. "You could see the relief after the ruling. You just saw the change. But he's such a thoughtful, selfless kid. He's the type of kid who steps up for the outcasts.

"At our junior prom, there was a special needs kid, a small kid, standing off to the side, not dancing with anyone. Dalton grabbed a bunch of people and they danced with the kid the entire night."

Dyer's popularity apparently extends to the Bay Area, where attorneys from the National Center for Youth Law hold him dear as well.

Attorneys Leecia Welch and Bryn Martyna drove from Oakland last summer and took Dyer on a tour of California State University, Sacramento. Both lawyers also offered to assist Dyer with his SAT prep and college applications, and though not a football fan, Welch has Raiders tickets for two.

"Dalton is one of those people who draws you in," Welch said. "I could talk about the changes in the law until I'm blue in the face, but it's never going to have the impact of hearing him talk about what he has overcome."

His journey through the foster care system is too familiar, Welch said. Dyer's father died in Oakland before he was born. Unable to care for her infant son and his seven siblings, his mother relinquished custody to Dalton's grandmother.

Before his grandmother died a few years later, she arranged for Dalton to live with a friend.

When the friend was diagnosed with cancer, the youngster moved through another series of foster homes – "I think there were seven homes in all," he says – before Spinks was awarded custody.

The details remain bruising, but Dyer refuses to run. Though uncomfortable speaking in front of large audiences, he addressed a gathering of social workers and educators at a conference last February at Sierra College. In May, he participated in a youth education summit at a Sacramento hotel, and later that day, he presented Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg with an award for his efforts on behalf of youth in foster care.

His own role model, he says, is diminutive San Diego Chargers running back Darren Sproles. The 5-foot-6, 185-pound Sproles reminds him of himself: small, quick and tenacious.

"He's got a lot of heart," Dyer praises. "He gets hit, but he gets right back up."

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