

The game of their lives was 25 years ago. They're still replaying it in their minds.

[Chuck Culpepper](#) PRESTONSBURG, Ky. —



Matt Porter, 42, in the garage of his Kentucky house with his Prestonsburg High letter jacket. (John McDonnell/The Washington Post)

On a curious day last month, nearing 25 years since a football outcome of absurd meanness, Matt Porter's 15-year-old son, Jonah, came home with a novel answer in the annals of what-happened-at-school-today: He told his dad that he and a buddy had "watched you

all play in that state championship."

Jonah steered his father to a hinterland on the World Wide Web, to a game the father had played yet never dared watch. That's how the 42-year-old former Prestonsburg High linebacker and running back came to revisit himself as a 17-year-old in pads and in Louisville and in brooding rainfall.

Then, with 8:32 left in the fourth quarter, this railroad bridge mechanic once dubbed "HazMatt" by local cable broadcaster Freddy James — his hits constituted "hazardous material" — did the understandable.

He clicked off the thing and got the hell off the page.

Had you witnessed the 1993 Kentucky 2A football state championship game at prosaic old Cardinal Stadium, and had you brought some understanding of what a title would have meant to an unassuming Kentucky mountain town, even your objective guts might have roiled. That late afternoon might have dwelled in your head as a singular excruciation.

When the scoreboard wound up howling its 13-12, the Prestonsburg Blackcats joined a subset of Americans who walk around with a high school loss haunting enough to loiter in their memories for good. By their early 40s, many have houses, spouses, children, jobs and the occasional winces and cringes. They know there's a tricky divide between a simple 15-0 and a complex 14-1, and they often mix a mounting appreciation for what they experienced with a flickering devastation for how it ended.

Maybe you haven't lived until you've sat across from a 42-year-old

former two-way lineman and current prison officer, nobody you'd want to fight, seeing his tears derail his sentences repeatedly as he speaks lovingly of his high school coach, his teammates and their heart-wrenching last day as a unit.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," he says when the answer is, of course, nothing.

"You know it's going on everywhere, in every part of the country," said Paul Leahy, a retired coach from the part of Kentucky clear out near the Mississippi River. "There are so many communities where the whole heart of the community is on the line every Friday night."

Anybody who coached for 31 years knows the nights of torment that never stop flaring in the brain, but Leahy also knows the empathy. He, after all, won that 1993 Kentucky 2A championship.

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THE WASHINGTON POST

The town

That year in Prestonsburg — population 3,941 then, 3,438 now — they had themselves an autumn many gumdrop towns never get to savor. In a mountain region that often yearns for sports triumphs to offset condescension from urban snobs, in a burg tucked two hours east from Lexington and two hours west from Charleston, W.Va., in a place that knows what it means when coal mines close, in a handsome downtown with a Blackcats letter jacket displayed at a flower shop, people remember a team with soaring camaraderie that forged a town with soaring camaraderie.

They tell of store windows decorated with shoe-polish words urging on the Blackcats, or how they reveled in James's Saturday morning cable show with its assorted guest Blackcats, or how a radio station

reworked "Cat Scratch Fever" into "Blackcat Fever" and played it unsparingly.

Haircuts for players and coaches went inconsistently charged. Two-way lineman Brad Wells, nowadays a radiologist, stood in line one day, probably at Hardee's, when a stranger maybe 60 years old up and paid for his food. Assistant coach Randall Hager, nowadays a head coach in Michigan, remembers taking the team for an afternoon meal and finding "80 or 90" enthusiasts happening by.

"I can remember we would go into Walmart, and that's when you bought music in Walmart," said Amy Hyden, then the girlfriend, now the wife, of Seth Hyden, who was the star running back-defensive back and is a local pediatric dentist. "You'd buy your tapes. It wasn't even CDs then. It was tapes. And I can remember being, he and I were looking at music, and then these little kids would look up, and they'd see him, and be, like, 'Aah! That's Seth Hyden!' And then all the sudden they'd come rushing up to get autographs."

"We had people I didn't even know come watch us practice," linebacker Rob Risner said.

Thursday practices became a staple, with townsmen lining the field for Friday nights, their bloodstreams bustling with pride and maybe frolicsome liquids. When the machine used to line the field would go kaput, the hardware-store owner would appear with bolts or washers.

Said Bill Letton, the beloved head coach from central Kentucky: "The community, all the dads, most of them had played there, the majority of them. That was the only show in town, you know, Friday night football. . . . The moms would cook meals for the kids for Thursday

nights when we would get done with practice. The dads would get the paint out, back when you had to paint fields, and I'm sure there were several coolers around. They would enjoy themselves. But everybody pitched in. Everybody wanted to be a part of it."

After Paula Goble's photography studio created a window display with scrolling football photos set to music, Letton said: "People would go in her parking lot and park and watch the photos scroll by. It was insane."

"After hours?"

"It reran all night, so . . ."

He paused at his desk in suburban Atlanta, in his fifth season at great-big Walton High.

"Aw, it was great."

Josh Hyden, Seth's older brother and a former Blackcat, remembers "an electric feeling" of unprecedented unification. James called it "very, very contagious and uplifting." Assistant coach Jack Goodman said: "It was like something out of a movie, if you've ever seen 'Hoosiers,' the way this town came together. It was something very unexpected. The whole town was painted. Mythical."

When the Blackcats stood 13-0 and began the 2-hour 45-minute bus ride for a state semifinal at Danville, a colossus with a 42-game winning streak, fullback Dewayne Garza said: "I remember looking up on the overpass, up there coming out of Prestonsburg. I remember somebody had a sign up there, 'LAST ONE OUT, PLEASE TURN THE LIGHTS OFF.' "



Route 321 into Prestonsburg, in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. (John McDonnell/The Washington Post)

The team

A chunk of the team had played together since fourth grade, beginning under Goodman. Their total of seniors stood at 18. Players knew each other intricately. Garza recalled lead-blocking for Seth Hyden, who “would have his hand on my shoulder pad, and I could tell you just from the way he was holding his hand, which way he was going to go.”

The main coaches were just 28 (Letton), 31 (Goodman) and 29 (Hager), the latter two former Blackcats. Letton had been hired at 23, and his players still speak of him with an authentic, gigantic fondness.

"Coach Letton's that guy that, literally, if he called me right now and said, 'Hey, I need you to come to Georgia to get me,' I could call 10 guys," Seth Hyden said. "They would load up, right now, and go get him. I mean, he's just that guy."

"He's, uh . . ." and here Ryan Elliott, the two-way lineman and senior officer specialist for the Federal Medical Center prison in Lexington, wept. "He's a real, real special guy, and I" — another pause — "would do anything in the world for him."

Then: "I hate that we didn't win a state championship for him."

Their defense ruled Kentuckian earth. No opponent scored in double digits for 10 regular season games and the first three playoff contests. Nobody scored at all until the fourth game, when Belfry's storied team made a field goal that nudged over the crossbar in a manner Elliott resented.

"We didn't even want to give up first downs," he said.

A beast of a linebacker, Larry Morris, patrolled. They had fast, pugnacious linemen, and Seth Hyden once barked to Porter from cornerback, "Tell the linemen to miss a tackle so we can get some action back here!"

Only twice in life did Josh Hyden see his father, team doctor Alan Hyden, cry: at Alan's father's funeral and on that drizzly night in Danville. Prestonsburg avenged Danville's 37-6 victory from the previous year and ended Danville's 42-game winning streak with a monumental 16-15, double-overtime upset.

Letton hyperventilated all the way to Danville's closing two-point-conversion attempt. Fans packed the field's edge, and linebacker Porter said: "Danville's in the huddle. I turn around in the end zone, and as far as the officials would let people come, it was like, everybody I ever knew was packed behind that end zone."

Danville quarterback Colin Rogers went right, and Tim Lewis, a junior linebacker with a lamb's disposition, leveled him.

Porter leaped. Risner cried in his helmet. James made a renowned broadcast call about the Admirals' ship sinking.

Championship week blurred by. They bused 55 miles to practice on artificial turf, at Marshall University in Huntington, W.Va., to simulate the turf of Louisville. A townsman with a plane jetted to Memphis to buy the team proper cleats. A send-off drew such a throng that Hager pictured a town otherwise empty and thought, "I can't think of anybody I don't see here."



Seth Hyden with a team photo of the 1993 Prestonsburg Blackcats taken from that year's team program. (John McDonnell/The Washington Post)

The game

The final opponent, Mayfield, from six hours away in the elongated commonwealth, had pedigree — five state titles, five other finals. It also had less mustard than usual, having rebounded from a 2-3 start to 11-3. Said Leahy, then the first-year head coach at Mayfield, "That team was probably, and I wouldn't even worry about hurting somebody's feelings over this, was probably the least-talented [Mayfield] team to win a state championship. But they did it with will and determination."

Rain menaced the game on Friday, Dec. 3, 1993, in Louisville, governing a scoreless first half. Yet when Prestonsburg quarterback

Thomas Ratliff fled left 13 yards into the end zone on fourth and eight with 8:32 remaining, the Blackcats led 12-0 on a soggy day with the best defense in Kentuckian creation.

The yardage-chain guys flashed to Letton the title rings they won at nearby Trinity High and said, "You're about to get one of these."

"You know, I might," Letton said cautiously.

"Eight minutes 32 seconds away from glory!" the Q95 radio team broadcast to the Kentucky mountains.

Who can explain what followed? There was Mayfield's first pass of the day, a sudden 58-yarder to the 3-yard line to set up a touchdown, from a formation backward to what Prestonsburg had studied in a season of Mayfield film. Then followed Prestonsburg's first bad punt snap of the season to arrange a sudden 13-12 deficit.

Next Hyden embarked on a storybook kickoff return weaving up the left side until an unnoticed chaser caught him 24 yards from forever; four sweeps later, with about two minutes left, he ran four yards for a touchdown. Fans hopped in the rain and Hyden hugged two teammates and exclaimed, "We did it!"

They hadn't noticed the flag for holding.

Then came Hyden's swell lollipop of a halfback pass that glanced off a tight end's lunging hands in the end zone and, finally, for peak cruelty, Ratliff's 33-yard field goal attempt with 1:52 left. It rose at a heinously promising angle, tricking the sideline so that some leaped jubilantly and a spotter on the field in a yellow raincoat signaled "good" for

James's and Darryl Leslie's broadcast.

"And I mean it barely, barely misses," wide left, Letton said. "And those were college goal posts, and if it were high school goal posts [thus wider], it would have been good. So there were a lot of 'ifs' and 'buts' in that one."

Some plays proved deathless. The holding call against fantastic lineman Kyle Fitzpatrick has howled for 25 years in Prestonsburg's consciousness, often lamented as occurring too far afield to matter to the play, or not occurring at all, or flagged too early or late, or violating the credo that refs don't decide games.

"Kyle, truly, I don't think he ever got over that," Amy Hyden said.

"I don't think so, either," Seth Hyden said.

While the referee, George Yeast, believes he made the correct call, he lived then and now with his own high school horror. He still blamed the referees in Bardstown, Ky., in 1974, for his Harrodsburg team's lost chance to play for a state title, when an 8-6 loss groaned with his own two touchdowns called back.

"When he [Hyden] crossed the goal line, my head went up, and I said, 'Oh, my god, he scored,' " Yeast said, knowing it wouldn't count. "It made me sick, too. And I thought, I'm taking away a perfect season. . . . I'm still sick to my stomach when I think about it."

The spiteful scoreboard stayed 13-12, and "the tears were falling with the rain," Amy Hyden said, "and you're just like, really, 'I can't believe that this is how it's ending.' "

Players sobbed in their hands, pounded the turf. Wells tried to help up teammates who wished to stay down, then, "I looked up at the scoreboard one last time to make sure that this was actually real."

The Hyden brothers hugged, neither able to speak until the older said, "You did all you could," and the younger sobbed. It became a photo on their mother's wall, of which Amy Hyden said, "Most of the years, I couldn't even look at it."

"I just remember this image," Letton said, "and I don't know how they got so strewn out on the field . . . but it looked like a bomb had gone off, and there were just bodies strewn out all over the field, just inconsolable."

When finally they gathered in a locker room, Letton told them he loved them and that the sun would return and that their 14-1 season had ended at the ideal location.

Sitting in an adjacent room, Yeast said: "I could hear them crying, hollering, screaming, the coaches upset and stuff. I did. I did feel compassion. I really did."

"And you knew that that win did not mean to Mayfield what the loss meant to us," Amy Hyden said.

"Yeah," Seth said. "No way."

"Thirty-one years" coaching, Letton said, including a Kentucky state title won with Lexington Catholic in 2007 while waving to several elated former Blackcats in attendance. "I think that's the one thing if I could change, give up a lot for, it would be to have that group of

people, you can't fathom how much it would have meant to that community, you know, to be called state champions."

The rest of the school year felt numb, Wells said. Players got runner-up medallions at a gym rally, and Seth Hyden still dislikes all medallions. All had learned an odd human truth: Losing 47-16, as the 2001 team did in Prestonsburg's only other state title game, simply taxes the brain less than losing 13-12.

One year after 1993, Fitzpatrick, Hyden, Risner and another player attended a game in nearby Pikeville and saw Yeast, working. Fitzpatrick overruled Hyden's misgivings and visited Yeast at halftime.

"He came up to me at halftime and asked me if I remembered him," Yeast said. "I said, 'Son, I don't.' He said, 'You sure you don't remember me?' I said, 'No, I don't, son.' He said, 'I'm Fitzpatrick. I'm the guy you threw the flag on.' And he seemed like a good kid."

They shook hands.

"I guess Kyle needed to hear something," Risner said.



Seth Hyden with his old high school helmet. (John McDonnell/The Washington Post)

The memories

Twenty-five years after 1993, eight minutes dwell in the fully formed minds of Blackcats, several of them still around Prestonsburg, many scattered around Kentucky to Ashland, Lexington, Paducah, Orlando or elsewhere. Hyden has had dreams where his son, the Paintsville High quarterback, wins a state title — by one point. Some players spot value in 13-12: Elliott said it helped teach that life is “not all rainbows and sunshine,” and Wells said it taught him it wasn’t “all butterflies and rainbows.”

“Life can be nasty, you know,” Elliott said.

Risner has outgrown his 20s when he used to link tough days to the

game and presume himself cursed generally, but said, "I still think about it at least, I'd say, three times a week."

James focuses on the win at Danville and says of Mayfield, "I just pretend it didn't happen." Porter's wife, Angela, will catch him muddled and will say, as a former basketball athlete herself: "Suck it up. Don't worry about it." As he managed his son's middle school baseball team to a 2018 state title on a zany final out that went 8-2-6, he thought constantly of 13-12.

Hager, the assistant coach, refuses to fuse 14-1 with negativity, but at team reunions, he said: "I try to listen to them more. Because some of them, you talk to them, and you can see almost a somber look come over them. You know what I mean? . . . It's like something you can tell there's still a lot of importance to it after 25 years. It's not a casual conversation. There's still a seriousness to it when they talk about it."

"Sometimes," Hyden said, "I do play the, 'If we would have won, how would it have changed the outcome of lives?' You know, and I know that's crazy, but I do think about it!"

It's a mental tangle, but they have known worse. Center Jason Spencer died in 2012 at 35 in a motorcycle crash in Casper, Wyo. Tight end Jason Spurlock died in 2016 at 39 in a motorcycle crash in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Lewis, the linebacker, died in 2017 at 40 as a casualty of the opioid epidemic and rests in a pretty cemetery between treed hills on the edge of town, with Kentucky Wildcats insignia on the grave of a man whose tackle once electrified a town.

Last winter, Fitzpatrick was indicted on federal charges of distributing methamphetamine. Almost four hours west, where Kentucky starts to

look more like the Midwest, officials in the lobby at Grayson County Detention Center did not grant a request to interview Fitzpatrick during visitation hours. While Fitzpatrick's father stressed that the holding penalty was no alibi, he said, "It definitely didn't do him no favors."

Four Decembers ago, visiting his mother's house, with everybody out shopping, Garza summoned the gumption and stuck in the tape. He sat in a recliner. He felt nervous. He saw the game all the way to 0:00 but stopped there to avoid seeing the strewn bodies. He had a worthy cry over the ending of his high school football but worked his mind toward a worthy smile over the entirety of his high school football.

Porter stopped watching just before the first Mayfield touchdown, knowing he'd beat himself up again while yearning to go back and cover the halfback on the 58-yard play that set up the score. Letton hasn't watched. Risner's tapes perished in a flood. Seth Hyden, with a rich laugh and a personality a long way from morose, nonetheless carries 13-12 in his pocket, with the kickoff return saved on his phone.

"I'll catch him in his office, playing the game, the Mayfield game," Amy Hyden said.

Asked what he's looking for, he spoke as if for the thousands of Americans cringing at mean old scoreboards.

"I don't know," he said.



The grave of Tim Lewis, front, in Prestonsburg. (John McDonnell/The Washington Post)

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