



Faded glory - Scandal taints memories of 'best ever' team

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On a chilly Thursday evening 20 years ago this week, Carter High football practice was interrupted by a bombshell bulletin.

A player had been declared ineligible, disqualifying Carter from the following night's playoff opener. As TV crews swooped in, shock and confusion boiled into anger.

"One of our guys picked up a rock and acted like he wanted to throw it at them," star linebacker Jessie Armstead recalls.

As it turned out, Nov. 10, 1988 wasn't the end of the Cowboys' season. It was the start of the Carter saga.

The defiant state championship run through opponents, legal challenges and "cheaters" taunts. The recruiting frenzy. The hot tub signing ceremony.

The 21 so-called "Carter robberies" by 15 teenagers, six of them Cowboys football players. National headlines. Packed courtrooms. Prison sentences. Shattered young lives. Friday Night Lights.

Two decades later, one of the most talented Texas high school teams ever assembled has prideful memories but, officially, no evidence of its dominance.

The state title was stripped in January 1991, the trophy returned, the record book revised. As Carter this week sends another unbeaten team into the playoffs, there are no plans to honor the '88 squad.

"No, it's all over," Freddie James, Carter's 72-year-old former coach, says ruefully. "I don't think they want to draw attention to it."

For many in the Carter community, on Dallas' southwest fringe, the anniversary dredges deep-seated emotions.

Pride in the team's success. Bitterness that the title was taken. Shame from the robberies. Lament that the actions of a relative handful stigmatized an entire team, school and largely middle-class black community.

"That's part of our past," says Gary Edwards, Carter's standout cornerback, running back and leading scorer that season. "I'm sure there is some hurt because people heal differently."

Edwards, 37, carries more scars than most. It was his disputed algebra grade that caused the University Interscholastic League investigation that ignited the firestorm.

And it was the June 20, 1989 arrest of Edwards and teammate Derric Evans, shortly after they robbed two video stores at gunpoint, that helped police trace the string of robberies that had begun five days after the state title game.

Sentenced to 16 years in prison, Edwards was paroled in 1993.

"Even today, I can be at the barber shop or in line at the grocery store and I hear people talking about us, most of which is incorrect," he says, adding that one fact is indisputable.

"People always ask, 'How good was that team?' I tell them we were the best ever."

A melting-pot school

In his 1990 best-seller, *Friday Night Lights*, author H.G. Bissinger chronicled Odessa Permian's 1988 season, which culminated in a 14-9 state semifinal loss to Carter.

Carter players take little issue with the book, but some resent the 2004 movie adaptation, saying it depicts them as dirty-playing thugs.

Actually, they were middle-class, poor, honor students, truants, teetotalers, drinkers, clean-cut kids and street toughs. And exceptional athletes. Fifteen of the 36 seniors earned major-college scholarships.

Armstead, safety LeShai Maston and cornerback Clifton Abraham went on to NFL careers. James says he is convinced Evans and Edwards would have, too.

"Yeah," sighs Evans, who served six years, 11 months in prison and lost his University of Tennessee scholarship. "I screwed that up."

The eternal question - why? - echoes as the Carter kids enter their late 30s, some with teenagers of their own.

When parents, educators and court-ordered psychologists initially combed for answers, they noted that the robbery participants came from both sides of the tracks - or in this case, Camp Wisdom Road.

To the north was Oak Cliff. After the early '70s integration of Dallas public schools, the former suburb attracted black professionals, politicians and pro athletes. All white when it opened in 1965, Carter was 95 percent black by 1988.

"When I got to Carter as a freshman, a lot of the pictures on the wall were of white football players," quarterback Robert Hall says. "When we were there, Oak Cliff had hard-working people, two-parent homes."

Students living north of Camp Wisdom fed through Atwell Middle School. Those to the south went through Hulcy, including kids from The Woods - 10 parallel streets, each name ending in "wood."

"We were rougher," Maston says. "If 'it' was going to happen, it was going to happen over there. You've got apartments, dope houses. We grew up fighting and stuff."

Carter started the '80s with football seasons of 5-6 and 3-7. James arrived in 1982, melded clashing Atwell-Hulcy personalities and made that season's state semifinals.

No Dallas ISD team had won a UIL state football title since Sunset in 1950. With college coaches flocking to recruit Carter athletes, the Cowboys seemed destined to end DISD's drought, but from 1983-87 they failed to advance past the second round.

In 1988, though, Carter flourished behind its acclaimed "11-Man Posse" defense, entering the playoffs with the No. 5 state ranking.

"That was a smart, well-disciplined team on the football field," James says. "Now, they did some crazy stuff. Sometimes I had to get on their behinds and put a board on them. They knew they couldn't mess with me."

But on the eve of the playoff opener against Plano East, TV trucks mobilized on Indian Ridge Trail, bordering Carter's practice field. The news was all over the radio.

"At first, they weren't saying my name," Edwards says. "Everybody was like, 'Dang, who is it?'"

'An amazing chapter'

His name came out that night when incensed players and parents packed the Carter cafeteria, seeking answers.

They were told that a day earlier, the UIL had received an anonymous tip from someone it believed to be a Carter parent. The caller suggested that the UIL investigate Edwards' first-six-weeks algebra grade of 72.

A joint investigation by the UIL and Texas Education Agency found that Edwards' grade should have been 68, below the eligibility standard of 70 set by Texas' no-pass, no-play law.

So while the Cowboys practiced, unaware, the District 11-5A executive committee ordered Carter to forfeit three games in which Edwards played while ineligible and gave Carter's playoff spot to South Grand Prairie.

But while that school celebrated, Carter and DISD officials galvanized in the cafeteria. The 36-year-old attorney hired to represent Carter parents could not have fathomed the fight's eventual scope.

Or that seven months later he would serve as Edwards' criminal defense lawyer. Or that today he would be in his 15th year as Dallas County's state senator.

"It was an amazing chapter," Royce West says. "There was no one in the state of Texas who followed football who didn't know about the Carter Cowboys.

"It wasn't just about Carter or DISD. It was the total Dallas community. You had the issues of no-pass, no-play. You had the black-white issue. You had the issue of students being involved in criminal activity. All those subplots played out."

A backdrop of chaos

On the morning of Nov. 11, DISD officials announced they had found evidence that Edwards was, in fact, eligible.

They reinstated Carter for that night's playoff game. At lunch, Carter principal C.C. Rousseau stood on a table to announce the news, sparking "We're going!" chants.

At South Grand Prairie, students marched out of the lunchroom and onto the football field in protest. A UIL hearing was set for the following week, too late to stop Carter from meeting Plano East in the second game of a Texas Stadium doubleheader.

It was after midnight when Edwards, wearing a towel with the words "Beware of Me," scored twice and intercepted a pass during the final 3:23 of a 21-7 victory.

"Once I got on the football field, it was actually pretty easy," Edwards says. "Games were when I could just be me."

Off the field, the chaos was just starting.

The next Wednesday, the UIL ruled Carter eligible. But hours before Friday night's playoff game against Samuell, Plano and Grand Prairie district lawyers convinced education commissioner William Kirby that Carter had violated no-pass, no-play.

Two hours later, a state district judge ruled that Kirby did not have authority to decide eligibility. The legal wrangling pushed the Samuell game to Saturday, with Carter again winning.

"Maybe it wasn't us against everybody, but it sure seemed like it," says Armstead, who returned an interception 70 yards for a touchdown in the 28-0 victory.

Each playoff win brought more hearings and legal challenges. It became routine for James to spend weekdays traveling to Austin to testify while his team practiced.

As they advanced, the Cowboys took on a mystical aura, especially after the quarterfinal victory over Marshall,

when Armstead was inserted to catch the game-winning pass with seven seconds left.

The day before the semifinal against Permian, the UIL announced there would be no more legal challenges during the playoffs - but promised to renew the fight after the season.

After five weeks of overcoming all challenges, the Cowboys had just one left. Players recall feeling invincible as they practiced for the title game against Judson.

"Seventeen- and 18-year-old kids, in the paper every day," Maston says. "Girls come up to you like you're a rock star. All the dopers wanted to hang out with us."

On Dec. 17 at Texas Stadium, the starters ate cake on the sideline as subs finished the 31-14 rout.

As UIL athletic director Bill Farney joined James on the victory podium, James eased the awkwardness by joking that the winners' certificates were probably printed in disappearing ink.

But as the players hoisted the championship trophy, the prospect of having it taken was far from their minds. On the field, where it mattered, they were unbeaten.

What next?

"That emotional high and that adrenaline rush of stardom that we got every day, it came to a crescendo and all of a sudden it stopped," Maston says. "These days, they would try to have counseling, someone to mentor these kids.

"We were just let loose on the city."

The series

Revisiting the 1988 Carter football team, which was stripped of its state championship and stigmatized by players who turned to crime.

TODAY: Academic controversy mars Carter's 1988 run to the state football championship.

MONDAY: A community is stunned as star athletes are implicated in robberies.

TUESDAY: The 1988 Carter Cowboys today: Some have thrived, some have not.

WATCH VIDEO of 1988 Carter players Gary Edwards and P.K. Williams discussing their team's fall and the positive activities in which they're involved today. dallasnews.com/sports

TIMELINE Carter's state title journey

1988

NOV. 9: The UIL receives a tip that Gary Edwards' first-six-weeks algebra grade was changed from failing to passing.

NOV. 10: The District 11-5A executive committee rules Carter must forfeit three games and its playoff spot. NOV. 11: The Dallas ISD reinstates Carter, which defeats Plano East in the playoffs that night.

NOV. 18: Texas Education Agency commissioner William Kirby decides Carter violated no-pass, no-play. The UIL reinstates Plano East into the playoffs. State District Judge Paul Davis issues a temporary injunction restraining Kirby from determining eligibility and directs the UIL to restore Carter to the playoffs.

NOV. 19: In a second-round playoff game delayed a day because of the legal wrangling, Carter defeats Samuell, 28-0.

NOV. 26: Carter defeats Lufkin in a regional semifinal, 31-7.

DEC. 1: After several hours of testimony, Davis says DISD's lawsuit seeking to make his restraining order permanent will drag into the following week. The delay clears Carter to play Marshall in two days.

DEC. 3: Carter scores with three seconds left to defeat Marshall, 22-18.

DEC. 6: Davis rules that Kirby does not have authority to determine player eligibility, clearing Carter to play Odessa Permian in the state semifinals. Kirby and other state officials vow to appeal.

DEC. 8: The TEA and UIL lodge appeals of Davis' injunction to the 3rd Court of Appeals. The filing automatically earns the TEA a stay of Davis' injunction, restoring Kirby's ruling. The UIL, however, remains under the injunction and powerless to stop Carter from playing.

DEC. 10: Carter defeats Permian, 14-9.

DEC. 17: Carter beats Judson, 31-14, for the Class 5A state championship.

1989

JULY 18: In a final order, Davis reaffirms his ruling that Kirby abused his power in citing Carter for violating no-pass, no-play. Although this preserves Carter's state title, Kirby vows to appeal.

1990

JUNE: The Legislature passes, and Gov. Bill Clements signs, a school reform law that restricts future lawsuits against no-pass, no play. The new provision also makes the TEA commissioner's decision final in no-pass, no-play cases unless a school district can prove the decision is arbitrary and capricious.

OCT. 3: The UIL says it will strip Carter of its 1988 football title after the 3rd Court of Appeals dismisses DISD's 1988 suit against Kirby and the TEA. The court's action has the effect of reinstating Kirby's original ruling that Carter violated no-pass, no-play.

1991

JAN. 10: Carter's football title is officially stripped with a unanimous vote by the UIL's executive committee. Carter is ordered to return the championship trophy and attempt to collect and return individual player medals.

Caption: PHOTO(S): 1-3. (FILE 1988/Staff photo) 1. Derric Evans rejoiced with his teammates following Carter's 31-14 victory over Converse Judson in the 1988 Class 5A state championship game. Carter was later stripped of the title. 2. Gary Edwards (2), celebrating with Derric Evans (80) and Cedric Buckley during Carter's state title victory, was at the center of the grade controversy that would cost the team the championship. 3. Edwards answered questions on Nov. 11, 1988, two days after the grade controversy broke and the day Carter was reinstated in the playoffs. 4. DERRIC EVANS spent six years, 11 months in prison. 5. FREDDIE JAMES says his team was disciplined - on the field. 6. LeSHAI MASTON went on to play in the NFL. CHART(S): 1. The series 2. DIGITAL EXTRA 3. TIMELINE Carter's state title journey

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