

For the love of the game

The crowd roars at Chaparral Stadium as Westlake scores a touchdown. As the players and the crowd celebrate, one man rolls along the sideline in a motorized wheelchair. He looks out of place among the large, fit physiques of the players and coaches.

However, Brent Dixon is not out of place. In fact, Dixon is in his element. He is a huge asset to the team and an inspiration to all.

Dixon has spinal muscular atrophy, a disease that affects muscle movement and is passed down from generation to generation. As he gets older, the muscles in his body will deteriorate at an advanced rate.

"I was diagnosed at 13 months old after [my parents noticed] problems in my development," Dixon said. "They took a muscle biopsy out of my arm, and that's how I found out I had SMA."

SMA is usually diagnosed sometime within 18 months after birth. Occurring in an estimated one in 6,000 births, SMA is the number one genetic killer of young children. One in 40 people are thought to be carriers of the disease.

Dixon has never walked, never ridden a bike and never done many of the things that most people are able to do every day and simply take for granted. He is different and he has known it all his life.

"I knew I was different from the very beginning," Dixon said. "I remember watching my friends in Valdosta, Georgia learning to ride their tricycles and I was in my little wheelchair."

Growing up, Dixon never let that keep him down. He fought to be the best he could be despite what challenges were in the way. He made himself a promise to be something, no matter how badly the odds were stacked against him.

"I knew that I had to reevaluate myself and learn to do everything they could do, just in a different way," Dixon said.

As Dixon got older, he found his niche in life by becoming involved in many school activities, and served as the mascot for both his middle school and his high school.

"I was the first middle school mascot ever down there," Dixon said. "That was pretty cool, and that's kind of what got me involved in wanting to be around the football team."

Being the mascot was not all Dixon was known for. In 2007, while still in high school, Dixon was announced as the world record holder for "the largest collection of individual key chains," with 41,118. Guinness Book of World Records presented him with the title.

"In 2001, my mother won a key chain at a party and gave it to me," Dixon said. "She said, 'You should start collecting them.' At that time, I felt down in my life, so I started collecting them."

What started off as a small collection had become a widespread project with the intention of breaking the world record. The project "went viral," and Dixon began receiving key chains in the mail to help him reach his goal.



Football volunteer Brent Dixon rolls along the sideline just before the Cibola Steele game Sept. 21. Dixon has been a part of the football program since spring 2011, and he serves as a source of motivation for all involved in the program.



Football fan uses own disability to motivate team

"I started to receive key chains from all over the world. My favorite one was a 3-D model of the Twin Towers. The woman that sent it included a letter that she wrapped around it. It said that her husband was a fire fighter that went in to the Towers and died trying to save people. To this day I still have that key chain."

Dixon graduated from high school in 2007 and went on to college at Valdosta Technical College, where he earned his certification in Graphic Design and AUTOCAD, which is a type of software for computer-aided design.

After marrying his wife in 2010, work brought the newly-wed couple to Austin.

Dixon was ready to start over in a new town, a new state and as a married man. Two years after moving, he is not disappointed.

"We came over here ready to start a whole new life," Dixon said. "I love it in Austin. [In Valdosta], there is nothing going on. It is pretty much just a movie theatre and a bowling alley. But in Austin, there is so much to do."

In early 2011, Dixon contacted Westlake head coach Darren Allman about possibly becoming involved in the football program. His wife had told him he should try to get involved in something so he could get out of the house and do something he loved.

"I told him about my passion for football and told him my situation," Dixon said. "He answered me back within a week, and I started attending practices on that same day, the first day of spring football 2011. I love football and wanted to be part of a team and an inspiration [to them]."

He was named "motivational coach," and since then, he has been on the sidelines for nearly every game and practice. He talks to players and picks them up when they're down.

"I'm here to motivate and inspire every player and coach to be the best they can be," Dixon said. "They are blessed with ability to be out there on the field. Say a guy got intercepted or missed a tackle, I'll come over and say 'Focus on the next play' or something along those lines."

To the players, he is a big part of the program, and somebody who inspires them every day, no matter the circumstances.

"He is just a great motivator," senior defensive lineman Austin Carrasquillo said. "He can't play football, so whenever we play, we play for him, as well as our teammates and our school."

Senior cornerback Derek Cohen has been moved by Dixon.

"He plays football through us," Derek said. "He is a huge inspira-

tion to us and to the football team."

In Dixon's first year with the Chaps, the team won a District title and finished with a 9-3 record, their first undisputed District title since 2006.

"The District title made me feel at a loss for words," Dixon said. "After the game, the team was holding the trophy and celebrating, and then they started chanting my name. They got me in the photo with the trophy. It made my day. It made the whole season and all we put into it worth it."

Dixon hopes that he is able to witness many more District titles and winning seasons in the years to come.

"I plan on staying with the football team for as long as I can," Dixon said. "I never want to leave."

Dixon would also like to get involved with the football program at the University of Texas.

"I want to make sure that everybody knows to never give up...[I want to] be a positive influence on everybody and take each day like it's my last, and just have fun. God has really blessed me."

—Brent Dixon

"I would love to be part of the Longhorn football team," Dixon said. "[I would want to] be in the same situation that I am here."

In addition to being a huge Westlake football fan, Dixon is a huge fan of the sport. Growing up, he watched football every Saturday and played video games like Madden.

"When football season starts, my wife says 'well it was nice being married to you for the past few months,'" Dixon said. "She knows that I will be at practice and at games and watching games for pretty much the whole

season. I just love football, I don't really know why, it is just a cool sport."

Despite his disability, Dixon continues to live life, never letting anything keep him down. He believes that he can make an impact in the lives of others who are in similar situations. Because of this, he works with the Make a Wish Foundation as a wish granter.

"I get to go to people's houses, and talk to the kids about their wishes," Dixon said. "It is an amazing organization and I am glad to be a part of it."

Dixon believes that it is his job to help others, showing people that his disability does not define him. To students who are struggling and trying to find their place in life, Dixon would tell them to keep fighting, just as he has throughout his life.

"I want to make sure that everybody knows to never give up," Dixon said. "[I want to] be a positive influence on everybody, take each day like it's my last, and just have fun. God has really blessed me."

—Jacob Prothro

