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Masthead by Jacob Richman (12)

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Football Scholarship Saved!

from Howard Richman

The first wave of homeschooling graduates continues to meet and overcome obstacles. Jason Taylor, a 1992 homeschooling graduate from Wilkins Township, a suburb east of Pittsburgh is the latest to do so. He won a football scholarship worth about \$100,000 to the University of Akron, and made the starting team during training camp even though he was only a Freshman. But, just before the first game of the season, he had his scholarship revoked by the NCAA, an association of colleges which sets and enforces rules regarding college athletics. Less than four weeks later, after intervention by the HSLDA (Home School Legal Defense Association) and a sympathetic article in *Sports Illustrated* he got his scholarship back.

Background

Jason began homeschooling as a tenth grader shortly after the new homeschooling law permitted his family to teach him at home. Before that, the Woodland Hills School District often denied parents permission to teach high school age students.

His parents, Tony and Georgia Taylor, taught him at home using a curriculum from Christian Liberty Academy. In addition, Jason engaged in many service activities during his homeschool years including putting on puppet shows at Children's Hospital, a home for crippled children, nursing homes, prisons, and a school

for the deaf. When he was 14 he participated on a three week missionary trip with other young people to repair damage after a hurricane in Grenada. More recently he participated on a two week missionary trip to Central Mexico. On these trips he kept extensive journals.

Ever since he was 12 he has had his own landscaping and minor construction business. Much of his business involved volunteer work for single mothers and widows who could not do the work for themselves. The assistant pastor at his church showed him how to do such skills as bricklaying, and then he sharpened those skills through practice. He also learned how to use a spreadsheet program on his family's home computer to keep track of his costs.

One day, early in his eleventh grade year, the football coach of the Woodland Hills Senior High School passed him while he was doing landscaping for a neighbor. The coach was so impressed by Jason's physique, that he stopped to talk.

"Where do you play football?" he asked.

"I don't play football," Jason replied.

"Where do you go to school?"

"I don't go to school. I'm homeschooled."

That evening the coach drove Jason down to the practice field so that Jason could try out for the football team. His strength made him a

stand-out right away.

A few months before, the issue had been raised at the state level whether homeschoolers could participate in high school sports on public school teams. After receiving a letter from Joe Bard at the PA Department of Education, the PIAA (Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association) decided to permit homeschoolers to participate if the school district permitted.

Several school districts have decided not to permit homeschoolers on their athletic teams, and Jason missed the first game of his high school career because Woodland Hills had not yet decided. But with Jason in mind, the school directors held an emergency meeting and decided to let homeschoolers participate.

Many homeschoolers specialize at the high school level. For example, one recent Pennsylvania homeschool graduate specialized in carpentry, another in art. Jason specialized in athletics. He would usually complete his academic work in the morning and then engage in weight training and other physical exercise for about six hours each afternoon. He would also read books about different sports skills such as the stance in football and blocking technique. He also studied nutrition through library research so that he could design a diet for himself which would keep his body fat down.

During his junior and senior years, he took the Woodland Hills High School team to championships in basketball and football. At 6' 6" and 215 pounds, he was heavily recruited by major college programs and finally accepted a scholarship to the University of Akron.

In order to qualify for an NCAA scholarship, a high school student must have College Board SAT scores which combine to be at least 700. Jason scored at 830. Another provision requires students to maintain at least a C average, Jason maintained a high B average (G.P.A. of 3.85). However, the NCAA refused to recognize that his credits were valid.

They considered Christian Liberty Academy to be a correspondence school, and the NCAA like other organizations such as the military and the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) discriminate against correspondence schools. The military discriminates because their studies have found that correspondence school graduates do not do as well in the military as graduates of a regular high school. Until recently, the main group of people with correspondence school diplomas were former drop-outs. Perhaps these students have given correspondence schools a bad reputation.

About a year and a half ago, a homeschooler in Pennsylvania applied for a PHEAA scholarship grant for college. She was turned down when she presented her Christian Liberty Academy diploma. She was told that PHEAA doesn't accept correspondence school diplomas, and the only way she could get that grant would be to take the GED. Since that time, the *PA Homeschoolers* diploma has been accepted by PHEAA as satisfactory for obtaining a scholarship grant since it is not a correspondence school diploma, but is instead based upon the PA Home Education Law.

So, Jason's college scholarship was revoked by the NCAA on Tuesday, September 1. That Friday evening, Jason's parents called me. At that point it was too late to do anything until offices opened after Labor Day.

Jason was no longer allowed to practice with the University of Akron

team. On Saturday he missed the first game of the season. Monday was Labor Day. On Tuesday morning I called Mike Farris at the HSLDA, and I talked with Mike's secretary. I gave her the Taylor's number so that Mike could call the Taylors directly.

That evening I got a call from Mike Farris, who was already in Akron! He had flown out to deal with the issue right away. Mike was already planning a appeal to the NCAA which might save Jason's scholarship without going to court. His appeal involved me as director of the *PA Homeschoolers* accreditation agency. Jason's parents drove out to my home with Jason's portfolios for his three years of homeschooling, and I reviewed them to see if he had met the graduation requirements for a valid diploma under PA law. The next day I faxed a letter to the University of Akron which they could present to the NCAA. Mike hoped to get Jason out of the correspondence school diploma category into the valid diploma category.

Mike's appeal also got Christian Liberty Academy involved in substantiating the validity of Jason's grades, and got the Department of Education in Washington involved with writing a supportive letter. (The Department of Education has been very friendly to homeschooling throughout the Reagan and Bush administrations.)

The September 28 issue of *Sports Illustrated*, which actually comes out about September 24, was quite sympathetic. An article on page 10 concluded:

Mike Farris, president of the Virginia-based nonprofit Home School Legal Defense Association and the Taylor's lawyer on their appeal of the NCAA decision, insists the NCAA is misinterpreting its own rule. "[The bylaw] refers to a kid who has taken an extra course or two by correspondence," Farris says. "It doesn't mean that a student whose entire program is through home schooling gets zero credit. It just doesn't make sense."

Taylor's schoolwork more than satisfied the Woodland Hills, Pa., school district, where he

lives, and the NCAA now concedes that when it made its ruling, it was unaware that Taylor's home schooling was monitored by Christian Liberty. It has rightly agreed to reconsider his case and possibly restore the scholarship that constitutes Taylor's only chance of going to Akron.

It was clear that the NCAA was looking for a way to save face. Whereas earlier they had dismissed Christian Liberty Academy as a correspondence school, now they were accepting its grades as valid.

On September 25, the University of Akron received a phone call from the NCAA reinstating Jason's scholarship. Jason is now back to practicing with the team and looks forward to his college career and a possible professional career. Homeschoolers in Pennsylvania who want to see him play might look for him when the University of Akron plays Temple University later this fall. ●
