

# Devin Wyman has gone from drugs in East

# Palo Alto to tackling opponents in the NFL

BY GWEN KNAPP

On Sundays, when the television screen would fill up with big men, playing football and looking like true heroes, Devin Wyman made a promise to himself that he would be in their place someday, beamed from an NFL stadium back into the family living room in East Palo Alto. Many adolescent males do the same, but Wyman's vow had weight, literally, behind it.

He came into the world exceptionally large, 10 pounds of baby destined to boost his mother's grocery-store bills for years. She would go off to work, thinking she had provided properly for her four sons, and then Devin's brothers would place an emergency call at mid-shift. "Mom," they'd say, astonished and frustrated, "he ate a whole loaf of bread!"

In his teens, he devoured opponents in football and wrestling. He reached 6 feet, 7 inches. He drove scale needles in mad circles, to 300 pounds and beyond. He felt justified in promis-

ing that he would soon be on television. federal agents surrounded his mother's house, bringing dogs, a helicopter and a warrant for a massive 18-year-old named Devin Wyman, one of about 60 suspects rounded up that day in a vigorous sweep of the city, where drug-dealing had contributed to a soaring homicide rate.

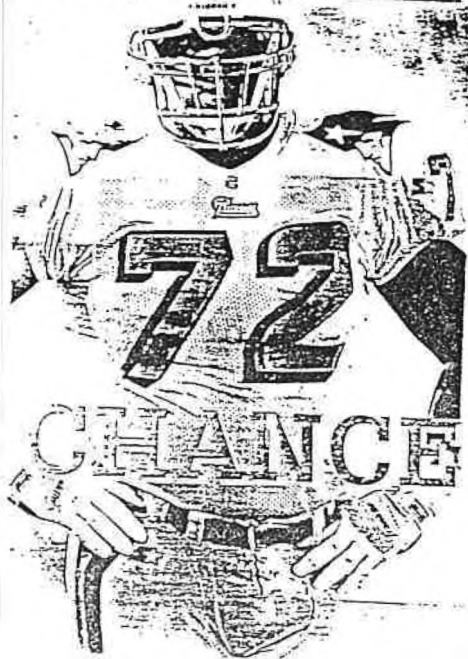
The evening news shows ran the footage of Wyman in handcuffs. And that was how he made his television debut, not by keeping a grandiose promise to his family, but by breaking a covenant with his mother, not as a hero, but as a villain, the symbol of a community's disarray.

That video clip would play again over the years. CNN dug it out to illustrate a feature on East Palo Alto, murder capital of the United States in 1992. Nobody bothered to ask what had happened to Wyman; no one understood that the picture was a caricature.

They didn't know that the house in the background belonged to a woman who rose before 5 every morning to go to work in the ad-



Even as a boy, Devin Wyman loomed large for his age.



# SECTION

ing that he would soon be on television.

But while Wyman's body grew in the right direction, his mind was a prodigal. Aimlessness took him into lawlessness, crack-dealing on the streets of East Palo Alto. He says he spent at least a year in the illicit business before accountability arrived at his doorstep.

On an August morning in 1992, police and

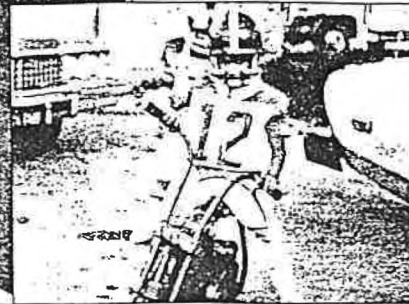
mitting room of a local hospital, who held regular roundtable discussions with her children. Nobody knew that the villain had done his time, that he was almost grateful for his incarceration, because it forced him to confront what was going on in his life. Nobody knew that he had already started planning his second television appearance.

Left and right: Four years after a brush with the law, Devin Wyman, No. 72, was a member of the New England Patriots

PHOTO BY GUY AROCH/NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS



It happened last summer, four years after the bust. This time, instead of handcuffs, he wore a helmet. Devin Wyman, Inmate No. 1006062 in the corrections system of San Mateo County, had become Devin Wyman, No. 72 for the New England Patriots.



He wasn't a villain anymore, but then again, he never really had been. Shoulder pads didn't transform him into a hero, but then again,

never needed anything. There might have been things they wanted and they couldn't get, but they weren't needy."

So there was no easy way for Devin to rationalize his decision to enter the drug trade. A good day of business on the streets of East Palo Alto, he said, could net \$1,500. "But it wasn't for the money," Wyman said, struggling to explain what had happened to an outsider. He was susceptible to cultural influences, and in his world at that time, status accompanied this particular profession. The way Wyman sees it, at least now, he didn't decide to join the drug trade so much as lapse into it.

they probably never could. Wyman fell somewhere in between the two extremes. He was a work-in-progress, the beneficiary of a spectacularly fruitful second chance — part given, part hard-earned and, most definitely, part thrust on him by caring and willful elders.

It wasn't easy to live a double life. He still lived at home, and had to hide the spoils of his work from his mother. New clothes were deposited at a friend's house for safekeeping. Arvie became suspicious anyway, but her questions and warnings were met only with assurances that nothing was wrong.

The day that the police and dogs and helicopter came, Arvie was at work, feeling uneasy for no specific reason. All four sons were at home, and when they heard the commotion outside, they wondered who had brought such avenging wrath into their neighborhood. Even Devin, fresh out of the shower, couldn't figure it out. He didn't see himself as a genuine bad guy, worthy of all this fuss.

**P**atsy Arvie sat at her dining-room table, tugging at a gold pendant in the shape of a helmet, decorated

with a diamond chip and the No. 72. She ordered four of these necklaces last spring, after her third-born became a sixth-round draft choice of the Patriots. One went to her mother, one to the defensive lineman himself, and one to her youngest son, Kevin.

Her home is tidy and comfortably furnished, a handsome black leather couch in the living room, a late-model van parked in the driveway. Devin grew up here in relative comfort, always able to load as much cereal as possible into a Pyrex mixing bowl. "I never saw him eat out of a regular cereal bowl," his mother said, smiling.

Her job in admitting at Stanford Medical Center saw to the family's needs. "We live in the ghetto," she said, "but we aren't poor. My sons

He didn't know that one of his recent buyers happened to be an undercover officer equipped with a video camera. When the authorities looked at that tape, they saw an enormous young man dealing crack, 300 pounds of menace to society. To them, he must have seemed as genuine as bad guys get.

Besides, this sweep was intended to be a statement. A discreet arrest would have accomplished only part of the job.

The knock came, then the handcuffs, and then the walk into unfortunate, film-at-11 posterity. But the really hard part was left to his brothers — Shaun, who is now 29, Roderick, 27, and Kevin, 17. They had to contend with their mother, and they had a pretty good idea how she would react.

"I always told them if you go to jail



in top left: Mother Patsy Arvie with baby photo of Devin. Devin, A, on bike. The family (from 2nd row left); godson Larry Hughes, Patsy, Shaun; (first row) Kevin (with glasses) and Roderick. Agent Donovan Blythe, with football.

for drugs, do not call me, do not contact me," she said. "Because that's not a lifestyle I live, and they weren't brought up to live like that, either."

Damage control did not go well. Naively, the three brothers thought that they could hide the incident from Arvie, or least bail Devin out of jail before she knew.

At work, still sensing something funny, Arvie received word that police dogs had appeared near her house. She called home and tried to pull information from Kevin. His older brothers had already learned that Devin's bail would be \$25,000, so he relented. "Don't tell them I told," Arvie recalled her youngest saying. "They got Devin."

She planned to follow through on her vow. She wouldn't see her outlaw son, wouldn't speak to him. He had been arrested on Aug. 25. Four days later, he turned 19 in the Redwood City Jail, awaiting trial. "It was nice and sunny outside, and I was locked up," Wyman recalled.

As his court date approached, his mother's resolve started to waver. Her own mother told her: "You know you have to be there." She decided to go, to cope with the pain and anger and humiliation.

With varying degrees of sternness and affection, she had always tried to micromanage her sons' lives. "If they wanted to go for a ride with someone, I wanted to know: Is this person insured?" she said.

When the boys played Pop Warner football, she helped at the snack bar and handled logistics on the field. When the Peewee squad needed more supervision, she became an assistant coach.

But in the late summer of 1992, her strongest bond with her third-born was a mutual dread of seeing each other again.

Behind bars, Wyman thought about his misdeeds and squandered chances. Colleges all over the country had written to him when he played football and basketball at Carlmont High School. His grades weren't good enough for him to proceed directly to a top athletic program, but he had been talking seri-

ously with junior colleges about playing football. At the moment, though, it was fairly clear that he would be unavailable in the fall. He knew he had blown it on several fronts, but none worse than this: He'd failed to be his mother's son.

In court, he saw her face and tried to hide from it. The judge couldn't possibly impose a sentence harsher than her unhappy gaze.

"When they brought him in," Arvie remembered, "he almost fell down because he was trying so hard not to look at me."

Wyman, who admitted his guilt, received six months in jail and three years' probation. He was sent to the hills of La Honda, where an old Boy Scout camp had been converted into a dual-purpose detention center.

Wyman began his sentence at the medium-security site, a corrugated-metal building dubbed the "Birdcage" because the interior is divided by material that resembles cyclone fencing. The inhabitants dressed in orange, the better to discourage potential escape artists. "I'm going to hate Halloween forever after that," Wyman said.

He welcomed his transfer to the nearby Honor Camp, an extremely minimum-security facility. "There are no fences, no bars, no locks on the doors," said Bill Buchalter, a sergeant assigned to the six-acre camp.

Inmates sleep in barracks. They can wear jeans and T-shirts, as well as standard-issue denim shirts. Each man is assigned to a job: Wyman went on the maintenance crew that tended the jail's grounds.

In their spare time, they can entertain themselves on a basketball or handball court, on a soccer or baseball field or in the swimming pool. Lights go out at 10 p.m. on workdays. They go back on at 6:30 a.m.

Wyman had plenty of time to think and, occasionally, someone worth listening to. A few older inmates, hearing of his football dreams, told him: "Don't come back here."

"The best thing that could have

happened to me was going to jail," Wyman said. "I really had no control. I wasn't the person wanted to be."

Back in East Palo Alto, his mother aghast completely. "I didn't worry about him," she said. "I knew he wasn't on the streets."

As 1992 ended, 42 homicides had been recorded in East Palo Alto. In sheer numbers, they didn't match New York or Los Angeles, but homicide rate per resident was higher than anywhere else in the nation.

On Dec. 21, 1992, the corrections system leased Wyman two months early, just in time for Christmas. His future belonged to him again as a singularly precious holiday gift. This time he would find constructive ways of being a man, a man widely feared by those who wanted to move a football up and down a field.

**I**t is Thanksgiving 1996, and Alex Wyman's nose has become a faucet. She is 2½, and she, her mother and baby brother have just moved from California to Massachusetts to be with her father.

"Blow, Alexis," Devin Wyman says, gently holding a tissue to his daughter's face. He sits under a large picture of himself in Patriots gear, hovering over the prone body of Dallas quar-

terback in the workout, Wyman placed a call to the delivery room, asked that the phone be held for Keene's ear and delivered pep talks.

"You can do it," he said from the Patriots locker room. On the pole holding her bag of intravenous fluid, Keene had taped up a picture of Wyman and a story about his progress in football.

These days, they live in a two-bedroom apartment in North Attleborough, Mass. Wyman makes the minimum rookie salary \$131,000, plus part of a signing bonus of roughly \$30,000, spread over the two-year life of his contract. But he has kept extravagances to a minimum. The living room holds a pair of jade-green leather couches and a large-screen television. The new Chevy Suburban sits in the parking lot. The apartment complex is modest; its chief asset is its proximity to the Patriots' stadium.

Many a 23-year-old professional athlete quickly outspend his six-figure income. Know it or not, Wyman's mother and his agent, Don Blythe, arranged to put him on a budget. Arvie took to most of the financial details of her son's new life, even writing and mailing the rent checks.

The two are determined custodians of Wyman's career, putting their guile, stubbornness and even sweat into advancing his cause. His mother, on one critical occasion, resorted to deception.

It happened in the summer of 1995. Back in Troy, Aikman. The photograph came from an exhibition game. Wyman had flourished in training camp and the exhibition season, far beyond the expectations for a sixth-round draft pick from Kentucky State, an NCAA Division I school.



Devin's brothers Kevin, left, Shawn, and agent Donovan Blythe at the dining room table with mother Patsy Arvie.

Wyman had completed two years at the College of San Mateo, playing football under coach Larry Owens.

"I knew Devin when he was in (Carlmont High School)," Owens said, "and there were people who told me not to recruit him — 'He's a troublemaker; he'll destroy your program.' But I believe in seeing things for myself, and Devin was never a troublemaker here. He did everything I asked him to do."

On his first day of practice at San Mateo, Wyman nearly led the pack in wind sprints, beating players with lithe frames built for speed, players who hadn't been out of football for a year. Owens knew that Wyman was fast; he didn't know that he would put so much effort into a practice session. "All of the coaches were impressed with that," Owens said.

But after community college, Wyman seemed reluctant to take the next step. He had attracted attention from recruiters at four-year colleges, but he was deeply attached to Tamara and their little girl. Going off to a four-year school would surely mean separating from them for a while. He did not pur-

sue the scholarship offers.

As Devin grew more and more inert, Arvie became more and more frustrated. He was a loving father, yes, but how could he hope to provide the best for Alexis if he wasted his potential?

Arvie knew that she needed to push him, just a nudge. He would take over then — a body in motion stays in motion. An assistant coach for Kentucky State, Orlando Dean, called the house and asked whether Wyman planned to come out. It was the middle of August, and he had no idea what Wyman had in mind. Could his mother clarify? Arvie told him: "Let me get back to you."

She went to a travel agent, bought a plane ticket and then called her son at Keene's house. This school wants you, she said, and your plane leaves tomorrow morning. She let him believe that the coach had mailed the ticket, that a scholarship had been secured. Neither was true.

Wyman seemed excited, prepared to go. A family shopping expedition to K-Mart yielded sheets, towels and other assorted dormito-

ry needs. Still, Arvie had her doubts. His brothers weren't sure he could leave. He went out that night for a farewell to his daughter and her mother. Arvie, a friend of hers and Kevin waited for him in the living room, holding a vigil.

"One a.m., he wasn't there. Two a.m., he wasn't there," she recalled. She worried that he would back out. Finally, at 4:30 a.m., he came into the house and found his mother still fully dressed and awake. She was ready to take him to the airport and to tell him the truth.

"I bought your ticket," she confessed, admitting that there were no scholarship guarantees: He would have to earn that. She promised that if he hated

This is today's crossword solution

A	F	E	W	V	A	N	E	S	W	A	S	G	O
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N	N	E	L	L	A	S	I	S	A	A	B	O	R
K	E	P	T	E	E	H	I	T	T	H	E	R	U
T	Y	S	Y	L	V	A	N	I	A	H	O	N	E
S	T	O	P	S	E	E	P	S	I	N	A	L	B
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A	N	A	S	G	O	T	T	O	A	A	U	T	O
B	L	N	D	E	N	G	U	L	F	S	W	A	N
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C	A	P	S	I	N	E	W	O	U	M	I	S	S
A	M	U	S	U	N	S	E	L	L	E	N	I	N
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"Blow, Alexis," he says again.

Wyman had always vowed: "If I have kids, I'm going to be with my kids. I'm going to be with their mother and take care of them."

His own father had been a stranger to him. His two older brothers came from a marriage that foundered, and his mother moved on to a relationship with Ben Wyman, a carpet-layer from New York. They lived together in the East for awhile but the match didn't have staying power, and Arvie moved back home to the Bay Area. Devin spoke to his father by phone, but never saw him. When Ben Wyman died in 1994, Devin and his mother flew cross-country for the funeral.

"The first time I saw my father was when we buried him," he says wistfully, without a hint of rancor.

The same year, Devin became a father. Wyman and Alexis' mother, Tamara Keene, who are planning to marry this year, became a couple immediately after his release from the Honor Camp. Their son, Devin Jr., was born Oct. 1 at Stanford. In New England that day, a certain rookie lineman practiced anxiously. During every

## Second Chances

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Kentucky State, she'd bring him home; she just wanted him to try to stick with football and school.

He left with \$25 in his pocket. "I didn't know what was going to happen," he said. The school sits in Frankfort, small, quiet and Southern, home to the Jim Beam bourbon distillery, the very antithesis of East Palo Alto. Loneliness and fear could easily have overwhelmed Wyman, but the optimist in him took over.

"I looked out the window at night, and all I could see was the moon and the trees," he said. "It was the right place for me, because I had some thinking to do."

**Instead of handcuffs, he wore a helmet.**

**Devin Wyman, Inmate No. 1006062 in the corrections system of San Mateo County had become Devin Wyman, No. 72 for the New England Patriots.**

He thanked his mother for sending him, won a scholarship and played outstanding football, leading the team with nine sacks, and intercepting two passes. His family — mother, grandmother, girlfriend, daughter and little brother — flew out for homecoming, and the president of the university told Arvie that her son was a wonderful young man, who was thriving off the field as well as on.

He was also just a few weeks away from bringing his mother to tears again. After the football season, he came home for the holidays and said that he didn't intend to go back. He was declaring himself available for the NFL draft the following April, a precipitous move for a young man with an abbreviated football resume from a small school. Arvie recognized the risk factor and mourned lost hopes for a diploma. She hated the idea.

He consulted with Blythe, who also disapproved.

"If Devin stayed in school another year," the agent said, "I'm convinced he could have been a first-round draft pick." But he couldn't dissuade him, and they began the journey together, forming a most unorthodox alliance.

Blythe is an intense man, on a mission with every task, who sees himself as Wyman's mentor rather than his agent,

their relationship as more than a business proposition.

"I want to help Devin Wyman be more than a pro player," Blythe says. "I want to help him become a pro *person*."

That statement might sound like just so much spiel, except that Blythe has yet to extract a service fee from Wyman, even after negotiating his contract. Agents typically get three to four percent of a deal.

But Blythe says, almost boastfully: "I haven't taken a dime from Devin Wyman," and both Arvie and Wyman confirm the claim. Blythe said he hasn't decided when he will start charging Wyman, who is his lone client.

"A lot of people don't understand, be-

cause they think an agent is just in it for the money," Wyman said. "But he's more than an agent to me."

The two met about three years ago, when Wyman was playing for the College of San Mateo. Blythe had considerable influence in the local athletic community, based on connections from an array of professional ventures. He coached basketball, most recently at San Mateo High School, and ran a large summer basketball camp. He also worked for a while as an associate to Blaine Pollock, a Bay Area agent whose client list includes former 49ers running back Ricky Watters. Eventually, he left Pollock's firm and set up his own agency.

But his central job was running the St. Nicholas Group Home in San Mateo, caring for abused, neglected or troubled young men. The home consumed 12 years of his life, 11 of which he shared the responsibility with his wife, Marguerite. They and their 7-year-old daughter, Britney, virtually lived on the site, all but ignoring their own home until mid-1996, when Blythe decided fully to commit himself to the business of being a sports agent.

Still, the group home defined him and his relationship with Wyman. A friend of Wyman's had lived in the home, and he recommended meeting Blythe. He understood

athletes, related to young people with messy pasts. Maybe he could offer guidance.

Wyman eventually followed through, his skeptical mother watching from the wings. "I wanted to know, 'What did this man want from my son?'" Arvie says now. Her trust grew slowly, until she was confident that Wyman had as much to gain from the relationship as Blythe — and probably more.

In the months before the draft, the group home became Wyman's unofficial residence. He wanted to be under Blythe's constant tutelage, so that he could be in peak mental and physical condition when scouts came to test him, part of the NFL employment ritual.

His first workout in front of the scouts, during the week of the East-West All-Star Game in Palo Alto, went poorly. A few extra pounds and insufficient training disguised his potential.

After that, Blythe not only helped Wyman set up a training routine, but also participated in it. The Patriots returned for another scouting session later — encouraged by a conversation with the head coach at Kentucky State, George Small, who had played for the New York Giants when Parcells was coaching there. The second workout revealed Wyman to be more fit, thanks to his 36-year-old workout partner.

"Agents don't *do* that. He was really more like my brother," Wyman said. "If I had to run, he ran with me."

In return, Blythe got something of a role model for the residents at St. Nicholas. "They could see someone who made a mistake and was turning his life around," he said. "A lot of people know how he made it to the NFL, and it gives them hope."

Wyman, for his part, wanted to influence young people in a positive way. He hated the fact that his little brother, Kevin, had witnessed his arrest, and he wanted to make up for it. "That was the best part about draft day," he said, "seeing my brothers there, happy for me."

**A**sixth-round NFL draft pick can get lost in training camp, buried on the depth chart behind veterans and more vaunted youngsters. He can be cut so easily, just disappearing at the end of camp. He usually resurfaces with another team or waits until later in the season, when injuries make him look more desirable.

But Wyman's play reached out to the New England coaches, grabbed them by the collars and forced them to take note. His hands, it seemed, were always up, ready to

bat away a pass.

He won a starting job almost immediately, only the seventh rookie to start a regular season opener under the tenure of Patriots' coach Bill Parcells. Parcells likes to haze rookies, force humility on them. He demeaned his No. 1 draft pick, receiver Terry Glenn, at every opportunity. Glenn had to deliver water to the coach each day in camp, then read printed attacks on his ability and character — all of them wrapped in quote marks and issued by Parcells.

This did not augur well for a sixth-rounder who had left a Division II college early. Wyman also had to overcome a switch in position. He had always played defensive end, but New England needed a defensive tackle. The coaching staff inserted him into the slot, where the Patriots had been hoping to use their fifth-round draft pick, a true defensive tackle named Christian Peter.

But the club had dumped Peter three days after the draft. During his career at Nebraska, he had been arrested eight times and convicted four times, including once on a charge of third-degree sexual assault and once on a charge of disturbing the peace. He is also being sued by a woman who says he raped her. Unlike Wyman, he served only 10 days in jail, and he kept playing football.

Team owner Robert Kraft said he had not been aware of Peter's extensive history with the law when the Patriots picked him. If he had, he said, they never would have taken him.

Recently, the New York Giants have said that they plan to give Peter a chance on their team next year. In his time out of the game, Peter has attended counseling and taken additional college courses at Fairleigh Dickinson.

Meanwhile, in New England, Wyman was proving the value of second chances. During training camp, Parcells said one day, "We're pleased with him — it's almost too much to hope for."

Wyman started four games for the Patriots, then fell out of the lineup. Being a rookie, with less football experience than most, finally caught up to him, and the early enthusiasm couldn't carry him through an entire NFL season. But it didn't go away, either.

He has been an eager participant in community outreach programs. The week before Thanksgiving, he went to a local elementary school and read aloud to a group of first- and second-graders.

When fans ask for his autograph, he complies and adds a dollar sign on the

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## Second Chances

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straight side of the D. A teammate chided him, saying that only really rich players should adopt such flourishes. "It's just being creative," Wyman said, pointing out that his fiancée had suggested the stylistic device. He said that when he was growing up, watching the games on TV, he never knew how much his heroes earned. He didn't care.

"Devin's a great kid," said Nancy Meier, coordinator of the Patriots' scouting office. "We're having a great experience with him."

In the criminal justice system of San Mateo County, he is simply an old file now. When officers hear that one of the ex-inmates has made it to the NFL, their voices take on a lighter tone, expressing surprise and a pleasant relief. They rarely receive such happy updates. "I'm glad we've had a success story in this one," said Larry Boss, a lieutenant in the county sheriff's office.

The videotape of the arrest has apparently been retired. The last time a television station ran it, Arvie called and complained. Things had changed, she said, radically, and for the better. Didn't they know that was possible?

The teenager in that picture doesn't represent East Palo Alto's despair anymore. He plays in the NFL, reads to other people's children, adores his own. And the parallel villain, the city of East Palo Alto, has undergone its own transformation. In the ex-murder capital of the United States, as of Dec. 21, the fourth anniversary of Wyman's release, only one person had died by another's hand in his home town. ◊

*Gwen Knapp is a columnist for the Examiner sports section. This is her first story for the Magazine.*

