

Trojan horse: Clarenceville's Walter Ragland will go down as one of the school's best all-time athletes, but it's his qualities as a person and student that separate him from the rest. He has overcome some personal adversity and become a role model for his fellow classmates.



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HAWLEY

Clarenceville's Ragland a 'one of a kind' person

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When the name Walter Ragland comes up at Clarenceville High School, his exploits on the football field are well documented.

A starter since his freshman year, the 6-foot-1, 200-pound senior is rewriting the Trojans' record book.

He will carry 3,567 total rushing yards into Saturday's key Metro Conference game against unbeaten Macomb Lutheran

North.

Clarenceville, sporting a 5-1 record, is enjoying its best season in recent memory, and Ragland, who goes both ways (he also plays linebacker), is one of the big reasons why the Trojans are competing for a championship.

But Ragland is more than a good high school football player and wrestler.

He's a study in perseverance, a student-athlete who has beaten the odds, somebody who has become a leader at the Class C school on and off the field.

"Very sincere, rational and pretty mature for his age," is how Clarenceville football coach Chuck Donaldson describes his captain. "Morally forthright, hard working on both sides of the ball, always pays attention to detail, very focused."

Ragland's words come at you in rapid-fire delivery. He has a slight speech impediment. A hearing disorder was caused when cotton balls, lodged inside his eardrum as an infant, were later discovered and then removed.

But that doesn't stop Ragland at all in the classroom. His hearing is now normal and he carries a 3.3 grade-point average and is a member of the Student Congress.

Ragland, who just turned 19, has fulfilled a majority of his high school requirements. He attends a three-hour sociology class each Monday night at Schoolcraft Community College to get a head start at the university level.

Ragland wants to study sports medicine and play college football.

But Ragland's family situation has been anything but normal.

Born in Wisconsin, Ragland came to the Clarenceville community as an elementary school student. (As a seventh and eighth grader his middle school teams went undefeated.)

His natural father (Walter), whom he has little contact with, lives in Georgia, while his remarried mother (Ruth Ann DeBot) recently moved to Flint. He is of mixed race. His father is black, his mother is white.

Ragland and his sister Karriann now live with Jeff and Keitha Cowen. The Keithas have two children, Alex and Andrea.

Ragland also spent time with the Hernandez family before moving in with the Cowens.

"My daughter (Andrea) and Karriann are good friends and when Karriann moved in with us in September she missed having her brother around," Keitha Cowen said. "Walter's mother had just moved into a trailer near Flint."

"My husband and I just hated to see them move away from their friends and schoolmates, along with all the activities they'd be missing together their senior year. Walter's family was having a tough time. We're a Christian loving family and we felt the right thing to do was let Walter stay with us, too. Walter moved in two days later."

Ironically, Karriann and Andrea Cowen, escorted by Walter, both stood on Clarenceville's homecoming court.

"My husband and I agreed we'd let them stay here until they graduated and got their high school education taken care of," Keitha Cowen said. "His mother works in Farmington and she stays here with us some nights."

"It's worked out."

Ragland's mother attends most of Walter's games and school functions. During Clarenceville's homecoming game, his uncle Robert and aunt Lillian drove over from Sullivan, Wis. and watched the Trojans score a 49-12 win as Walter rushed for 152 yards on 14 carries. His grandfather David Whitney, who revived Ragland as a 5-year-old when his heart momentarily stopped while swimming, also was in the stands.

When Ragland is asked who his favorite football player is, there's no hesitation: "Barry Sanders."

Why, the reporter asks.

"Because he doesn't showboat," Walter says. "He just does his job and is a great athlete. He doesn't hoot and holler, he just holds it back. But don't get me wrong, I can get excited."

But most who know Ragland say he's quiet, reserved and polite.

"He's never stepped over the boundaries," Keitha Cowen said. "The rules around here are you don't drink, you don't smoke or screw around."

The moments that define our lives don't take place on the grand stage of public view ~ but rather in the warmth and love of the place we call home.



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