

in a garbage bag sweat suit? Why?

Was I being punished for something? Wasn't the running, sweating, hunger and pain enough? What more did they want? I suddenly realized that I'd been knocking myself out for something I didn't even want to do in the first place. It was then that I decided that I didn't have to do it anymore.

My heart fluttered and my stomach flip-flopped, but I finally stood up on wobbly legs and walked out of the sauna. At the time, it didn't exactly seem brave. It just seemed right. It made sense. I had finally realized that there was no law in the world that said I had to keep knocking myself out just so Coach would have another strong player and my Dad could have extra bragging rights!

"Did I say you could get out of there?" Coach bellowed when he returned from the pool deck a few minutes later and saw me sipping on a cup of water and enjoying one of his glazed donuts.

I shook my head, but Coach was waiting for an answer. So I told him.

"I quit," I said in a shaky voice that had nothing to do with heat stroke.

"You quit?" he fairly laughed, looming over me. "You can't quit. What would your dad think? Don't you want him to be proud of you anymore?"

But that was just it. If my Dad couldn't be proud of me for just being me, then what was the point? I was a good kid. I stayed out of trouble, made good grades and even made him a Father's Day card every year. Did I have to torture myself, too?

I shook my head and told Coach it was over. All of it. I wasn't going to starve myself anymore. I wasn't going to make myself try to throw up anymore, or run around the practice field in a garbage bag dress while the rest of the team pointed and laughed.

That was when he called my dad. But it didn't matter to me anymore. I had finally made up my mind. It was time to be proud of myself for a change, no matter what anyone else thought.

After Coach had explained the situation to my dad, he grunted and handed me the phone. Although my hands were shaking, I was glad I wasn't doing this face-to-face!

"Sor," my dad said quietly. "Is what? Coach said true?"

"Yes," I whispered into the phone.

"You don't want to play football anymore?" he asked simply.

"I never did," I gasped. Well, if I was going to do this, I was going to do it right.

Dad's laughter surprised me. "Then why did you go through with all of those shenanigans?" he asked. "I thought you wanted to be the next big football star!"

I hung up the phone and headed for my bike. Coach just stood there fuming as I pedaled away.

I started carrying myself differently after that. Respecting myself more. I grew a little, shaped up, learned a lot, and eventually, the name Fireplug just seemed to fade with time.

Except for one night, that is. My family and I were waiting for a table in a local restaurant when Coach sauntered in. He greeted my Dad rather coolly and then eyed me with open disdain. "What's the word, Fireplug?" he asked. Dad looked at me for an instant, and then he finally corrected Coach. "You meant 'Rusty,' right, Coach?"

Coach grumbled something through the mushy cigar in his mouth, but it didn't matter. Our table was ready and Dad kept his hand on my shoulder the whole way there. And no one ever called me Fireplug again.

Rusty Fischer