

LIONS from B1

tage Grove seventh and eighth grade football players, Erick and Dylan were put on separate teams by their coaches. In the final minutes of the contest, Erick's team had a one-point lead but Dylan's team was putting together a drive when – somehow – Dylan suffered an injury.

"I was like on the ground, and I went to get up and then," Dylan says adding the sound of a hand getting stepped on with cleats "right on my hand. And it like started to bleed."

"I remember going in, sacking Dylan or something and getting up and stepping on his hand on accident. It was on accident I promise," said Erick with a brief pause and a slight grin. "It, uh, actually wasn't on accident."

Despite pleas from Dylan that this act was done on purpose, he was sidelined with an injury to his throwing hand and Erick's team was able to secure a victory. After some brief tension between the friends, they moved forward and have been on the same side of the field in games ever since. But their next challenge was their biggest yet: high school football.

"Probably the biggest thing I remember about them, and the memory is similar for both of them – man, if these kids can get taller because they are both vertically challenged... they'd be really good because they are really good athletes," said Cottage Grove football head coach Gary Roberts. "That was my first memory of both of them is just that they were tiny little guys."

Dylan entered high school around 5-foot-4 and pushing 100 pounds on a good day while Erick walked through the doors of CGHS at nearly 5-foot-3. Feeling like they were swimming in their football pads, the pair – that eventually grew to 5-foot-10 and 5-foot-6 respectively – prepared to be varsity athletes.

After being the only freshmen to attend football camp in their first year, both players took meaningful strides during their

sophomore seasons to become the impactful players that they are today. For Erick that came by earning a starting role.

"Coach Marty Johnson, said, 'Hey, I think you can play a big role on our team this year.' ... And by big role, I thought he just meant special teams, play a little bit of kicker," said Erick. "But then our first scrimmage came and he was like, Giffen, you're starting at slot. And I just remember my eyes lighting up and I was so excited to get in."

Erick scored in that first jamboree game – despite running the wrong route – and continued to find the end zone in the regular season including a game with three touchdowns.

"I just remember Dylan on the sidelines and like all my friends on the sidelines, all my young friends because I was the only sophomore (playing). I just remember all of them, every time I scored like pushing me and hyping me up and I just remember the crowd noise and stuff and I just thought it was the coolest thing in the world to play varsity football," said Erick. "It was crazy."

The Lions rolled through the season with the lone loss coming to North Bend in the State Championship. Along the way Erick was named as an honor-

able mention defensive back and slot receiver in addition to second team kicker in league.

Dylan was sidelined for the season with academic ineligibility but was preparing for his opportunity. Showing up at practice every day as a slot wide receiver, he received some shocking news when starting senior quarterback Blake Sentman informed him that he would be taking over as quarterback the next season.

"I was like, 'What? There's no way, you're messing with me.' And then I kind of felt pressure on myself," said Dylan. "A lot was in my head. It was like 'Oh, you better step up your game.'"

When he confirmed that this was not just a mean joke, Dylan, with Erick at his side, got ready for the upcoming season. With a talented team coming back for their junior year with the expectation of competing for a state championship, it was, indeed, time to step up.

"He didn't even play quarterback and now we're like, okay, well now this kid is going to have to, trial by fire, as they say," said head coach Roberts. "You know, learn how to do this on the fly. And he did a good job."

With a heart-to-heart conversation with assistant coach Jordan Johnson and a pair of first

team all-state wide receivers to throw to in Jacob Woods and Hayden Glenn – in addition to honorable mention receiver Erick – Dylan was able to get the job done as the Lions went on to win state and he was named first-team all-state quarterback.

After soaking in the success of winning the school's first football title, it was back to work for Dylan and Erick. The lone returning starters on the team, they were getting the attention coming in, and throughout, the season.

"We had good seasons last year but we were going to have to step it up to have a good season this year. And I just remember all the people like around the community that would talk to us and just telling us how we're going to be terrible next year," said Erick. "And how me and Dylan are like all we have. Me and Dylan are going to do good this year but our team will be terrible and I just remember wanting to prove them wrong."

After having a wealth of talent and dominating each and every game last season, this year has indeed been different. The Lions have been tested. In week one it was a heroic comeback victory but in week three it was a comeback that came up just short. It was three consecutive losses to

finish September before a pair of blowout victories in the last two weeks. But through it all, Dylan and Erick have relied on each other.

"Me and Dylan are definitely the tightest out of any duo in the state," said Erick. "I just feel like I could trust Dylan in any situation whether it be fourth and 20 or 3rd and 1, I can trust Dylan's abilities and I feel he trusts my abilities to do whatever it takes whether it be on offense, defense or special teams."

It hasn't been an easy season and while a cast of characters across the team has stepped up to help the team get to their 4-3 record, at the core it comes down to number three and number four out on the field.

"We talked to them about how fair or unfair, you are the two main guys that played a bunch last year and target is going to be on your back," said Roberts. "You're going to have to make plays for us to be successful. The games that we've been successful in, they've done a pretty good job at making plays and we've had a couple of hiccups here that we probably needed them to make some more and they didn't. But overall, they've done a good job."

With one final game to play in the regular season, the Lions,

who just have to beat a winless Junction City team that has given up at least 49 points in each of last five games, have all but guaranteed a spot back in the playoffs.

And while the end of this Cottage Grove season looms in the distance, it may not be the end for Dylan and Erick playing together on a football field. With aspirations to play together at a small college, possibly George Fox, the pair of friends continue to have their sights set on more.

Whatever they do, now or in the future – Erick wants to be an athletic trainer and Dylan a police officer – they plan on always having the other one near them or just a call, or text or FaceTime, away. Their friendship was forged in the fires of middle school and solidified every day for the past five years. They have their friendship now, and in their eyes, maybe forever.

But before forever comes Friday night.

Senior night: a night of celebratory posters, heartfelt Insta captions and maybe some tears. It's when the "lasts" that accompany senior year start to become a reality.

"It's going to be emotional," said Erick. "It's going to be a weird feeling. It's just crazy."



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Total Points for the Sunday Night Game: _____

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WIN \$20 EVERY WEEK

With the Football Contest

Fill out the form below for your choice of winners. The TIE-BREAKER game is the Sunday night game. Guess the total points of this game. In the event of a tie-breaker tie, the winner will be determined by a drawing. Entries must be received by Friday, 5 pm at the Cottage Grove Sentinel, 116 N. 6th Street, (P.O. Box 35), Cottage Grove, Oregon 97424. Mailed entries must be postmarked by Friday. Employees of the Cottage Grove Sentinel and their families are not eligible to win. In the event of multiple winners, final weekly winner will be drawn at random from preliminary winners.

ATTENTION: Tiebreaking Process - the designated tie-breaker game will be judged on total points ONLY. Please estimate the total points for the tie-breaker game.

One entry per family.