

# USF student prevails as a 'waking miracle'

■ Tyler Sexton has been beating odds since the day he was born. Cerebral palsy still affects his movement, but not his spirit.

By DEMORRIS LEE  
Times Staff Writer

Tyler Sexton sat in a restaurant, munching on a chicken sandwich with iced tea, his conversation veering from his plans for the summer to the quality of play in the NBA and NFL.

Normal, casual talk typical of a 19-year-old who had just polished off his freshman year at the University of South Florida. But when it came time to leave, the normal changed. Out came Danny from under the table; then came the stars.

None of that bothered Sexton. Smiling broadly, he put a harness on Danny, a golden and Labrador retriever mix. With a visible limp, the 6-foot-4 youth with blond, mousse-spiked hair made his way to the counter.

People often assume Sexton is blind, but the dog is simply his helper, his independence.

A Palm Harbor native who has cerebral palsy, Sexton is believed to be the first person in the country to get around with the aid of a service dog and a two-wheeled Segway scooter.

To him, it was fate, a flight delay and God's will that brought him and Danny together.

"He's like a counterbalance," said Sexton, who travels the country giving motivational speeches. "If I fall backward, he leans forward. Going down hills, he slows down because I can't stop my momentum. But most of all, he's my constant companion, he's my best friend."

For him, merely walking is an accomplishment. Going to college, an achievement. Being alive, a miracle.

"They told my mom that they would keep my body warm so she could hold me for the first and last time because I was going to die," he said. "I should have been blind, mentally and physically handi-

capped, in a wheelchair. But by the grace of God, I am here."

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Sexton was in his mother's womb only 28 weeks before entering the world. His father, Kevin Sexton, could hold him in the palm of one hand.

A normal pregnancy is 40 weeks. During the helicopter trip to a hospital's neonatal unit, Sexton's lungs collapsed, further complicating his delicate existence. At 18 months, he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy.

He is a spastic diplegic, which means his condition affects his balance and motor skills from the waist down. Because of the balance problem, Sexton used to fall four or five times a day. He broke a wrist, ankle and many fingers. He cracked a rib.

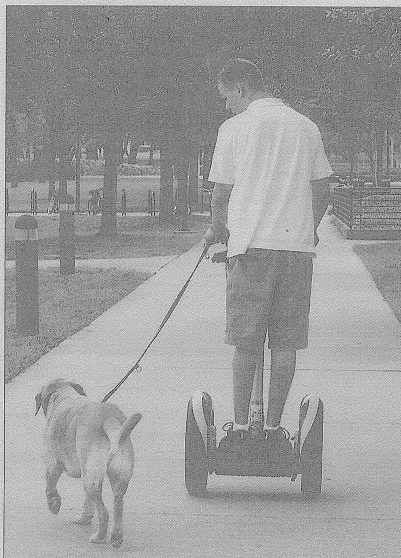
He was in a cast from the waist down for six weeks. He has been in the hospital for weeks on end. He has had to crawl, use wheelchairs, walkers, his parents' shoulders. Through it all, he kept his smile.

"From the time he could talk, he was a kid who always had hope," said his mother, Lisa Sexton, whom he calls "Sweet Potato." "When you live with a kid like Tyler and watch someone fall down 15 times a day and watch his body hurt and cramp up from falling on the floor and to watch him smile through that, it's very, very hard to have the spirit of giving up. He has brought hope and faith to us."

Coming to grips with giving birth to a handicapped child was hard for the Sextons. Lisa Sexton was 21 at the time and full of excitement for her firstborn son. Kevin Sexton lay forward to a son who would play basketball and scuba dive with him.

"You have these big dreams, but then you hear CP (cerebral palsy)," Lisa Sexton said. "All those dreams come crashing down real fast, and we were devastated. But I believed in all my heart that Tyler was worth fighting for."

With little money and a lot of faith and family support, the Sextons did what they could. When one doctor told them something couldn't be done, they found another. They never gave up on pro-



Times photo — MIKE PEASE

Tyler Sexton and his service dog, Danny, travel across the USF campus in Tampa for a little exercise recently. The Segway he rides helps him get around, and his dog helps with his balance problems because he is prone to falls. His first year at USF was a challenge. Some other students gave him a hard time, calling him lazy and cursing him. "I thought all the name-calling would be something for high school, but I've experienced more here. Just imagine if I was in a wheelchair."

viding a normal life for a disabled child.

Lisa Sexton, 40, remembers the turning point in her thinking. Tyler was about 5, and his physical therapist had been teaching him to bend down and pick things up. So Lisa took Tyler and his younger sister Emilee to an Easter egg hunt at North City Park in Safety Harbor.

"The gun went off and the kids began to run," Lisa said. "She

taught him how to bend down but not to run."

Tears in her eyes, she rushed to apologize to her son. Before she could say she was sorry, he had her look at all the eggs in his basket.

"While all the kids were running so fast, their eggs were falling out of their baskets and Tyler was slowly picking them up," she recalled. "At that moment, God told me that he (Tyler) might not be

## TO LEARN MORE

Guide Dog Foundation:  
www.guidedog.org; Tyler Sexton's  
Web site: www.tylersexton.com  
Sexton will speak Sunday and Friday at  
Bayside Community Church in Safety  
Harbor.

ways be first or may not always achieve what other kids achieve, but his basket will always be full of blessings."

On a high school field trip to Epcot Center, Tyler Sexton saw a demonstration of a Segway Human Transporter. The self-balancing machine moves when you lean forward and stops when you stand straight up.

He got one in April 2004. But it took Danny, the 3-year-old retriever, to liberate him.

Sexton travels the country and gives motivational speeches about never giving up. Returning home from a Colorado speaking engagement last June, his flight was delayed three hours. Sitting in the airport, he noticed a man walking a small pup.

The man was with the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind in Smithtown, N.Y. Sexton told the man his story and that he had been on a waiting list for another foundation. The man gave Sexton the telephone number for his foundation's chief executive officer.

"Six months later, I had Danny," Sexton said, giving the dog a rub. "With Danny, I have independence."

Unlike dogs that help the blind, Danny was trained specifically to work with Sexton's balance problems, to help him get out of chairs and pick up objects. Danny finds the safest route to get Sexton where he needs to go.

"With Tyler's sight and the dog's ability to guide, the two of them make a great team," said Mike Sergeant, director of field operations and program services for the foundation. Sergeant works in the Tampa Bay area and trained Danny.

The Guide Dog Foundation, in its 58th year of existence, trains and provides dogs at no charge to those with handicaps. Sergeant

said Sexton and Danny are the first known Segway/dog pair in the country.

"We are willing to think out of the box," Sergeant said. "The possibility of dogs assisting the handicapped ... gosh, the sky is the limit."

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Sexton's first year at USF was challenging. Though the Segway and the dog made getting from class to class possible, he still dealt with leaving home and living on his own. Then there's the ridicule he receives from some students.

"When they see me, some call me lazy or use curse words, or whatever," Sexton said. "I thought all the name-calling would be something for high school, but I've experienced more here. Just imagine if I was in a wheelchair."

He had a problem during his first semester of participating roommates. He worked out the problem by taking it up the university's chain of command and found another place to live.

Current roommate Bill Rossini, 21, said Sexton is extremely positive.

"Around here, he doesn't look that disabled," Rossini said with a smile. "He takes crap just like the rest of us. The best part of having him here is the dog."

Sexton, a certified scuba diver, is now focused on another milestone. He wants to graduate in 3½ years with a degree in biology, and he wants to become a doctor. He plans to do that at USF.

"You know when a doctor says, 'I feel your pain,'" Sexton said. "I can say that and mean it."

Watching Tyler Sexton battle life has made everyone around him stronger and there is no doubt, the man with the Segway, the dog, and love and smile for everyone will accomplish his dreams. And 19 years later, one, no, one knows that better than his mom.

"We are no better family than anybody else" Lisa Sexton said. "But love has covered a multitude of that. God has taken a tragedy and made something beautiful out of it."

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