

Former NFL star tells Proctor students to focus on dreams, believe in themselves

By LaTOYA NELSON

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UTICA — Walter Payton, the man who, as a running back with the Chicago Bears, became the National Football League's all-time leading rusher, spoke to Proctor Senior High School students Tuesday about focusing on their dreams.

Payton, who is retired from the NFL, told the students they have the ability to achieve their dreams if they put forth the effort. They should always give their best, be true to themselves and never let anyone get in the way of their goals, he said.

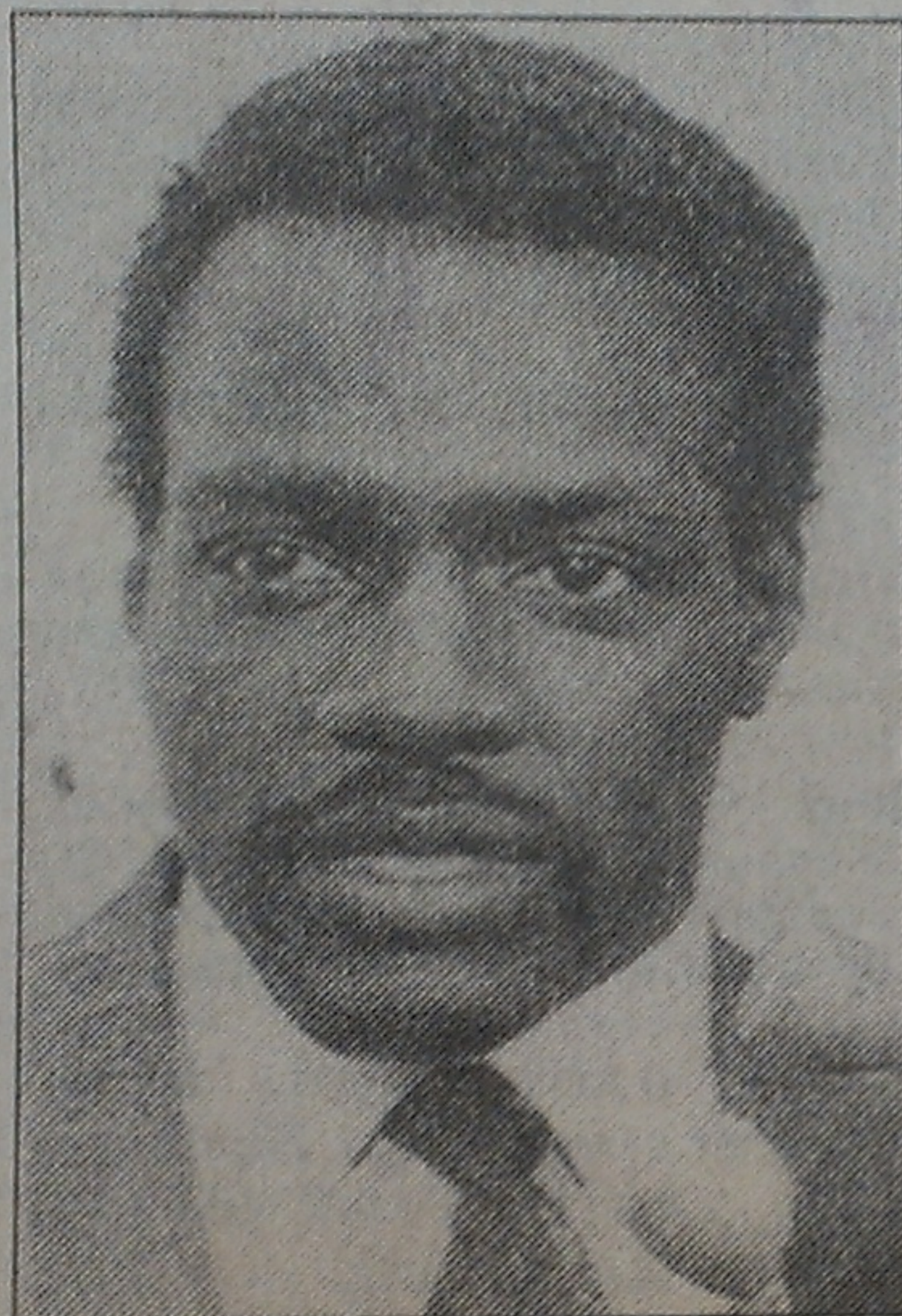
"The only reason your dream can't come true is because of yourself," Payton said.

He also talked about the importance of education and knowledge.

"Knowledge is more important than money, because with more knowledge you can make more money," Payton said.

Payton's message was a wake-up call to some of the Proctor students.

"He was very inspirational



AP file photo

and he made me realize that I have to focus," 10th-grader Jonathan Massoud said.

Penny Semaia, an 11th-grader, said: "It was like a smack in the face to stop playing around with your life."

As a chubby sixth-grader, Payton was called "Bubba" and was the last person chosen for teams. He was inspired by

"Kids are like dominoes. If one falls down, then the others start to fall. We have to make sure that they are steady enough to stand up on their own."

Walter Payton

— the NFL's
career rushing leader

his parents, who instilled in him the belief that he could become anything he wanted to.

He later became a successful businessman, and owns several businesses, including Northwest Community Bank.

The event was organized by the Utica Chapter of the American Red Cross and funded by the Community Foundation.

This is the second year that the Red Cross has done a program in which a speaker comes to talk to high school students.

"We provide a positive influence and programs to youth and having a role model really puts the message forth to them," said Barbara Horst, director of community relations for the Red Cross Utica chapter.

The purpose of the program was to reinforce the lessons that the Red Cross is trying to teach youth.

"We do programs like this to help young people get the message to stay in school and work hard and you'll be successful," said Michael Cianfrocco, executive director of the Red Cross Utica chapter.

Payton said he speaks to students because he believes it is his responsibility, as well as that of other adults, to be a positive role model.

"Kids are like dominoes," he said. "If one falls down, then the others start to fall. We have to make sure that they are steady enough to stand up on their own."