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Honesty rescued Montclair Prep

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Montclair Prep's cooperation at private meetings with Southern Section officials probably saved the school from being expelled from the CIF, Southern Section commissioner Stan Thomas said Wednesday.

Montclair Prep was placed on probation for three years Tuesday by the Southern Section after admitting to recruiting "several players," Thomas said.

Thomas said the admission by James Blatt, Montclair Prep's attorney, came about the midway point of a 6 ½ -hour meeting between Thomas, Southern Section administrator Bill Clark, Montclair Prep principal Vernon Simpson and lawyers representing the school and the Southern Section.

"I give James Blatt high marks," Thomas said. "He saved the school's athletic program in my opinion. He was honest, forthright and professional, and he told the truth when the chips were on the table...that was their salvation from total exclusion (from CIF)."

Thomas said the admission was enough and set aside charges of grade tampering and non-payment of tuition.

The Southern Section launched an investigation after football players Derek and Leland Sparks left Montclair Prep and enrolled in Mater Dei in Santa Ana last September.

In a hearing to determine athletic eligibility at Mater Dei, Jerome Sparks, the player's uncle, told the Southern Section that Montclair Prep did not charge tuition, changed transcripts and illegally recruited the players.

Thomas said the investigation he headed came up with enough evidence to find Montclair Prep guilty of all the charges.

"I know we had enough (evidence)," Thomas said. "If we had gone to a hearing, I think it would have been a tough reach for Montclair Prep."

The school's football team, which won the Division X championship last season, was banned from the playoffs for three years, beginning next school year, as part of the probation. The ban can be appealed after two years.

Montclair Prep also won't be eligible to compete in the playoffs in any sport for the 1991-92 school years and the school will be expelled from the CIF if it violates any rules while on probation.

Montclair Prep assistant football coach John Hazelton, who Thomas said violated Southern Section rules against recruiting, may request a hearing within 30 days with Thomas and Clark to determine his future as coach at Montclair Prep.

With or without the hearing, Thomas will make a recommendation to Montclair Prep about Hazelton's employment as a coach, but the final decision rests with the school.

Thomas said termination is usually recommended in cases where coaches have violated recruiting rules.

Hazelton said he would take a few days to consider his options and declined further comment. Simpson said Hazelton has been a valued employee at Montclair Prep, but said he couldn't comment on the coach's future.

Montclair Prep head coach George Giannini's employment won't be reviewed by the Southern Section.

"I have no problem with George," Thomas said. "I think George got caught up in more of Hazelton's orchestrating, but that hasn't been proven."