

In Pocatello

You hear plenty of guys and gals, former athletes, who when it didn't pan out say they hurt their knee. The other day a woman sports reporter on the radio explained to the host that she was a star growing up, but then wrecked hers, so she couldn't take it to the next level. This is just one example, and it's understandable. People can't admit they weren't good enough.

I was a pretty fair white guy receiver at Lincoln High School in Gainesville, Florida. What helped was our coach switched to the spread no-huddle my sophomore year and we threw it darn nearly every play. The spread was all about mismatches, and I had linebackers on me as much as DB's and I put some numbers up. My junior year I caught 72 balls for 1654 yards and 18 touchdowns, which landed me on the Max Preps top-20 wideouts list for the state of Florida. My senior year, my stats weren't as good, as teams were starting to figure us out and I didn't get as many touches. Of course the no-huddle spread is all the rage now.

I received over 30 recruiting letters in the mail my junior year, not as many after that. A few coaches came to my house, though they were grad assistants, not the high-up coaches. I compared notes with a friend of mine, a lineman who was making noise at Columbia, our cross-town rival, and he was getting visited by the real coaches and getting letters from the real D-1 schools, which opened my eyes that mine were all second-tier and probably tire-kickers at that.

The guys that did show up at my house, all of them about 22 years old, my dad sat down with and poured them a scotch. My dad didn't expect me to go anywhere, he expected me to go to work just like he did. He threw these guys off a little, interrupting their rehearsed speech with totally unrelated topics--Should you be able to go down to the corner deli and bet on pro sports; Should Obama take golf lessons; Are the Sports Illustrated swimsuit models too thin? When the dude got out of there, it's possible we stood out compared to other families he was visiting, but probably he just said *what the fuck*.

My senior year I took a video class and I made a three-minute highlight reel of myself, splicing together game footage of me at my best, and throwing in me talking to the camera in the weight room about how I was a team player (even though I was not). The clips showed me strictly making plays, never a guy throwing me off a route or running me down from behind, which did happen. I put the video on YouTube and it took some work, but they have these databases that help you out, and I emailed the link to every D-1 and D-2 coach in the country.

One guy did call me from the University of Colorado, the Pac-12, but I realized after a minute on the phone he had me confused with someone else. I heard from Albany State, which is not where you would think, but in Georgia, from Finley in Ohio, Lane in Tennessee, Upper Iowa and Western New Mexico. All Division 2, and I would never have known any of them existed except off that database.

Finally I heard from Idaho South, D-1 subdivision but still D-1. They'd played the real Georgia a couple years back, got crushed, but were at least on the field

with them at Sanford Stadium in Athens in front of 90,000. The head coach himself contacted me which felt good, a new guy named Harrison Frank, who they hired off the Washington staff for his progressive passing scheme. He said I could walk on but if I came back my sophomore year I'd have a scholarship.

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My college football playing career lasted half a day. We were going with helmets and shorts, the pace slow, everyone getting a feel for the July heat and altitude in Pocatello, and the third hour they lined us up on special teams. They had us staggered, no one familiar with their positions, and the ball was in the air and I was drifting back when a defensive end name Edgar Carney collided with me from the blindside, catching me in the back of the head. What that idiot was doing I'll never know. He lasted a year, got no playing time except a little mop-up, and I never saw him again.

I didn't lose consciousness or even go down right away but something didn't feel right. When they saw me walking toward the end zone when everyone else was on a water break, the trainers hustled out and I dropped to

a knee and they eventually put me on a cart and took me to Anderson Medical Center for tests. The doctor asked me a bunch of mental acuity questions, checking items off a list, and said I'd suffered a grade 2 concussion. Grades 3 and 4 were apparently worse. I was supposed to refrain from strenuous activity, and obviously contact, for two weeks and get re-evaluated.

I showed up for practice the next day, stood on the sidelines, and at lunch my receivers' coach told me the head coach wanted to see me in his office.

"I spoke to that doc," Harrison Frank said. "You're good to go."

"Excuse me coach?" I said. "That wasn't what he told me."

"Those checklists," he said, "the NCAA gives us leeway. If you didn't get knocked out you can at least get back on the field. We'll make sure nobody hits you."

"I'm not all there yet, to be honest," I said. "I had a rough night. I'd prefer to go with what the doctor told me directly."

"Is *that* what you'd prefer?" Frank said, smiling at the receivers' coach who was standing there with me. "Get dressed and get on the goddamn field."

"Coach, with all due respect, I'm not getting out there today."

Frank got up from his desk and grabbed me by the earlobe. "Well ain't you a piss-poor excuse for that Florida toughness I'm always hearing about? . . . U Dub last year, we had a free safety coming off two concussions, probably got a third one sticking his head in there on a fourth-and-short early in the game--get this, cracks a *rib* in the third quarter, they x-ray him, tape him, he knocks down the Hail Mary as time expires and we beat Arizona."

I didn't say anything.

"That's how you identify who your winners are," the coach said. "Not just on the football field son, but in life."

I stayed in street clothes for the next two weeks and no coaches said a word to me, nor did many of the players except for a couple of LDS guys, Mormons, from Salt Lake City, who treated me fine but were also trying

to convert me. Aside from football, I was enjoying the place. The campus was beautiful, you could see mountains, and Pocatello was friendly. The dorm was ninety percent empty since school hadn't started and you only had athletes on campus so far (plus the cheer team which was a bonus), but the social vibe was promising.

This time the doctor was a young guy with a thin mustache who kept clearing his throat. I answered with an honest "no" when he asked about balance problems, neck pain, sensitivity to light, sadness and all that.

The doctor flipped the page on his clipboard and said, "Did you get hit hard, Scott?"

"No that hard," I said. "I took a couple worse shots in high school."

"That was my suspicion. So far you're checking out beautifully. Part of the problem, the media is so all-over the issue that we lose common sense."

Meanwhile I'm sitting on the examining table smelling the guy's cologne thinking you never played jack-shit, did you?

"We'll conclude with a brief word recall exercise," the doctor said. "You're probably familiar with it--I state five words and you repeat them back, in any order."

"I'll do my best," I said.

"Elbow, apple, carpet, saddle, bubble."

By this point I'd made up my mind.

"Bubble . . . carpet . . . album?"

"And?" he said.

"That kinda caught me off guard I guess."

"Fine. Let's try . . . candle, paper, sugar, sandwich, wagon."

"Wagon . . . camel, bigger, apple, saddle?"

"I see . . . how about baby, monkey, perfume, sunset, iron?"

"Okay I think it was . . . maybe, costume, fire . . . baseball, trump card?"

The guy put down the clipboard. "I must say, this is quite surprising, on the heels of your initial baseline result. Not to mention somewhat disturbing."

"Uh-oh," I said.

"What month is it?" the doctor said.

Without hesitation I answered December.

"What year is it?"

For some reason an oldies song popped into my head, where they kept going: 'In The Year 2525'.

So that's what year I said it was.

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We finished 3-and-8, a big improvement everyone was saying, over the last four years when Idaho South won six games combined. In the spring they held an end-of-the year banquet for all varsity sports at the local Red Lion. Coach was smiling and upbeat and some boosters made speeches and gave him gift certificates.

When the coach was back at his table and a three-piece country band had started up, players began stopping by and saying a few words to him. I guess it was a tradition. So I got in line.

Coach said, "I know it was a tough year for you, but you'll be good as new come next season. Right?"

I told him yes hopefully he was right, but at the moment I was still experiencing symptoms.

"You know what?" he said. "Get out of my face."

I noticed a girl at his table talking to a couple of the boosters' wives. I had her in a class, I realized,

Communications 101, where we had to get up and make speeches, the first one being tell us about your family and where you grew up and such. She never said anything about being the coach's daughter.

The band wasn't bad, and they were slowing it down, working the intro of 'My Old Friend' by Tim McGraw. I asked the girl to dance. Her name was Helen. She was nervous and wasn't particularly attractive but she smelled like coconut and smiled the whole time.

"I play for your dad," I said.

Helen said, "I know who you are. I think you frustrate him."

"Yeah . . . but what frustrates *me*," I said, "my all-time best forty, laid down nice and loose on a warm day in Jacksonville? A four-nine."

"So? You have good hands, I've seen you on film."

"Is that right . . . You help with the game plan then too?"

"C'mon Scott, I'm just saying."

"What it is though? I'm pretty sure I don't want to get hit anymore. Most specifically in the head."

"I like your honesty at least," she said, quieter. The band was playing 'Amarillo By Morning' by George Strait, the lead singer not perfect but pretty darn close with the inflection, and Helen put her head on my shoulder.

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The next day I went to see a guy in the athletic department named Link Gailey who handled NCAA compliance stuff.

"Pretty sure Coach Frank isn't going to honor my scholarship next year," I said.

"Nor should he," Link Gailey said. "You're dicking us around."

"That may be your opinion, but the Anderson people see it differently. One way or the other, you know I'll be at every practice."

"You're a loser," he said. "When I played here--"

"I know . . . You got concussed, right? Then you got a stinger, then you got your nose broke and a finger in the eye where you couldn't see . . . but you sucked it up and stayed in there and made plays."

"Fuck you. But that's actually pretty close."

I said, "How about I give you five words and you repeat 'em back, in any order you want?"

Link Gailey said, "I see you walking around at night, I may truly kick your ass."

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A week later Helen said, "My dad, he doesn't want me going out with you." We were watching a women's softball game, Idaho South versus Weber State, the field pristine, the right field foul line angling toward the wide open Snake River Valley in the distance.

I said, "You'll have to make a decision then, won't you?"

"You dancing with me and so forth, that was because of him, wasn't it?"

"It was . . . Nothing personal, but I wanted to piss him off."

She said, "Well I like you. A lot. But why couldn't you have torn your ACL?"

"You mean a *real* injury?"

"That's not . . . it came out wrong."

"I get it, that's okay . . . Problem with a knee, you may never come back as strong, no matter how hard you rehab it."

"Don't I know it. I played travel soccer in high school, I tore mine."

"And with it, your college playing aspirations, they got derailed."

"Well yes, that really is what happened."

"You know something?" I said. "What a crock. You weren't good enough, plain and simple."

"You have a lot of nerve," Helen said.

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A couple things happened that summer. The first week of practice, three players--probably our best three athletes--a tailback, a linebacker and an option quarterback, all from LA, got caught shoplifting snacks in 7-11. Coach kicked the three of them off the team and out of school that day. There was backlash from the alumni and local media, saying give them a warning, suspend them, okay, but Jeez, that's it?

Maybe it was the stress from that or the heat or just the way he was, but a couple days later Coach got into it

with a senior guard named Walter Gaston who he thought was dogging it during pass-blocking reps. He grabbed Gaston by the facemask, let him have it, and then shoved him away. Gaston fell down, possibly on purpose, and the film guy caught it all from on top of the scaffolding. Everyone said even so, Coach would have survived the incident except that on break he went and tracked down the film and got rid of it.

They promoted Dean McInerny, the defensive coordinator, a big fat guy who had been at ID South through four regimes and seemed kind of out of it. The next three years we won six games. I never suited up once. They gave me the scholarship, provided I got re-tested every 90 days, which was fine by me.

Now I work for the city of Gainesville. Not the most interesting job, but not the worst. The water department. Now and then, someone on my route recognizes my name and mentions they saw me play at Lincoln back in the day. When they ask if I kept it up after, I tell them yes I did, out in the Big Sky Conference, though I hurt my knee which held me back some.

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