

The Exciting Life of a Division 3 Athlete

I've played football my whole life without ever making a tackle. Tackling is such an unnatural act. It takes a special mind to be able to be able to use your head as a weapon, I could never do that. Call it being soft or call it being afraid, I just could never will myself to inflict pain to someone else. I saw no purpose in hurting myself to hurt another. I was always called the softest player on the field growing up, and I really didn't mind it that way.

What I did love was catching a football. To me, there was no feeling in the world like the rip of the leather into your outstretched hands. There is an unmistakable pride in your quarterback's eyes as you come back to the huddle. Even the most perfect throw needs a catch, and even the most perfect quarterback needs a receiver they can trust. I loved the act of catching, but I loved the trust that came along with that strange leather sphere far more. When you run a route you are all alone. A single being fighting against another, jockeying for every inch of green grass. Yet, when that ball comes flying towards your face your quarterback has given you his faith that you will not let the ball touch the ground, that you will complete the catch.

It still doesn't feel real that I was a college football player. I never should have been. I had no desire to do it, but instead was driven by a hatred born of a simple phrase. I remember the moment my switch flipped. The moment I stopped loving catching the ball. The words that made me something I never was were simple, "Stop talking to Loveland. Don't let him come to your parties. Don't have him over to your house. He's a traitor. He's a quitter." I was fifteen when I heard them. In my whole life up until that phrase I had never had anything like this ever said about me.

I was called a traitor by my high school football coach. He said this after I had just partially torn my meniscus playing for *his* team. His words came 6 weeks after the injury. I probably would have been able to come back, but I was scared. Scared of getting hurt. Scared of having my body broken just for one more meaningless football game. I grew up with a broken body, I didn't need it to happen again. Basketball season was on the horizon. A season that was stolen the previous year by my thumb snapping off my wrist for the very same football team.

Instead of going back to football the very moment I could physically run again I decided to attend the basketball team meeting. I still could barely move, and it felt like if anybody had so

much as looked at my knee the wrong way it may have turned directly to dust. My coach saw me at this meeting and started unleashing on me. A fifteen year old kid. He began to attack my character and told everybody who would listen to make sure that I was an outcast. As I heard those words my stomach plummeted, I wanted to scream, I wanted to run. I couldn't even play, I was just doing what anybody else would have done, and moving on.

Then I didn't do what anybody else would have done. I didn't quit football like any sane person would have. Instead I dreamed it every night. I ran, and I ran. I ran into my legs felt like they were going to rip off my hips, then I would keep running. I built my body in the gym. I ate like I had never seen food. By the next season I was twenty pounds heavier and a half second faster. I didn't fear getting hit, my body wasn't going to break anymore, I wouldn't let it. I craved the chance to absorb abuse to prove to my teammates—my best friends—I would never quit on them again.

After two high school seasons full of miracle catches and merciless hits I earned a spot at a small Division 3 school named Hamilton College located in the bustling heart of upstate New York. For the football team a fun Friday was smashing our skulls into one another then drinking until the next day's daunting light came beckoning us back out onto the field. I was a small freshman so I was relegated to the scout team. I was essentially a tackling dummy for our starting defense. I lived for the hits; I loved finding my ribs wrapped in bruises, and legs soaked in scrapes.

Those hits should have broken me. My body should have quit. Each time my soft flesh cracked from the force of a man nearly twice my size it just fueled me on the field. I would hear my coach's words, I would feel a pain worse than any hit over and over again. Suddenly my body didn't hurt so much. Suddenly I felt nothing but hatred; hatred and a desire to never quit, to never be a traitor. Every hit I would get better. The next play I would be faster so he couldn't catch me. The next play I would be quicker so he couldn't touch me. The next play I would be smarter so he wouldn't see me. I was a machine.

But I was just that, a machine. I had no emotion. I didn't care about football and I kind of hated the people around me, all I cared about was proving I could take any shot they could, and

keep going. Halfway through the year the coach asked me to switch to defense. I was asked to start giving out the hits. I wanted to say no, but I also knew I really didn't have a choice.

I couldn't do it. I just couldn't will my body through another. I could dive at the turf, swiping through legs in the process, and I could guide players out of bounds, but I could not make a perfect clean, open, tackle. I felt like my body would betray me each time. I would be in the perfect position and my legs would bounce out of the way. It takes a certain amount of bravery or recklessness to see someone twice your size charging towards you and dip your head—your most prized possession—directly into their body.

After every football practice I would swear to myself it was the last. I didn't like the sport, I wasn't playing, what was the point? The only reason I didn't quit then was because I didn't want the voice in my head to be right. I didn't want to fail.

Finally after weeks of slamming my body into the ground again and again I was beginning to feel the ache of a traitor I knew all too well. After practice I could barely take my pants off. Leaving the locker room I had to physically drag my right leg up stairs. I couldn't even get up onto my bed, but I could still run. I kept running and diving and playing even though my right leg screamed in pain with every step.

A part of me loved the pain. A part of me still longs for that pain. I felt like I was doing something productive with myself. I felt like I was really sacrificing my body for something. After the season ended and I stopped playing on it, my leg was not getting better. I could barely even walk around campus. I finally told the trainer. I thought it was just a strain, it wasn't. I tore my right quad and continued to play through it, just to ride the bench. That was the moment my switch flipped back. My body betrayed me, again. This time felt different. As I was limping back to my dorm I realized my body wasn't betraying me. I would've been fine if I had just stopped. I was hurting myself just to prove that I could. If I had stopped thinking about the words of an overgrown bully I wouldn't have to carry my leg up stairs, if I had just stopped running each of my steps wouldn't scream in agony. My stomach plummeted. As I realized I had just wasted a year down the wrong path, all off of a fiery and thoughtless breath words. I was done betraying myself, I was done with the game I hadn't loved in years.