

Sidelined: Life after football

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In April the NFL will bless about 250 draftees with a professional contract; the rest will be cleaning out their identities along with their lockers as they make a sharp turn out of football into new lives.

Realistically or not, most of the elite football players who appear on the playing fields of Division I programs harbor hopes of a professional career. Yet in April, the vast majority of seniors will put those hopes to sleep in a transition that is no tailgate picnic.

While some will be able to shake off the abrupt ending and bask in memories of their athletic accomplishments, others will slip into depression and substance abuse. And no wonder: they have worked most of their lives at this pigskin art. Players sacrifice much more than their knee joints on the gridiron. As James Schulman and William Bowen make clear in their sympathetic but alarming study of college sports, *The Game of Life*, very few football players run down the tunnel and out onto the field without checking all other interests at the door. Like singing a concert recital or acting in a theater production, playing football in front of 50-100,000 people every week requires enormous focus and preparation. While some athletes manage to maintain respectable grades, most are, and must be, so devoted to their craft that it is difficult, even in the off season, to become passionately engaged in the life of the mind.

As a young man, I enjoyed playing football as much as a Labrador retriever relishes chasing a Frisbee. It seemed to me that it was the only time when I was purely in the present. After all, you are not mulling over the past or fretting about the future when you are trying to snag a pass. I dreamed of draft day, of making it to the Elysian Fields of the NFL where my work would be my play. I was fortunate enough to see limited action at the Division I level, but then the end came as suddenly as the wind slamming the door shut and I was for a long time unhinged.

A close friend and high school teammate much more talented than I suffered more. As one of the fleetest football players in the country, he snagged two touchdown

passes in the Sugar Bowl, was passed over in the draft, then was signed as a free agent by the Oakland Raiders. They flew him and 30 other flankers to California but then, judging him to be too small, let him go after one day of practice. He felt as though the kite string of his life had been cut. Like many of his teammates, he never graduated. Instead, he was swallowed up in a suicidal depression which he tried to assuage with drugs and alcohol.

He was not the only one. Out of the 40 or so players in my class at Bowling Green State University, only one ended up making a career of professional football. And though we did not talk about it much, many of us had all our ego eggs in the NFL basket.

I know that it is hard to shed tears for marquee athletes these days, but for everyone who makes it to the symbolic heaven of the “Big Circus,” there are hoards of others who are left outside the tent. These young men end up feeling like outsiders to themselves—in part because they have been separated from what may have been the most powerful source of their positive identity, and in part because they have lost access to a central mode of self-expression. They are, as it were, separated from their music. It does not take much imagination to grasp the pain that a pianist must feel if he seriously injures his hand. The same kind of pang awaits many athletes at the dusk of their playing days. Big Ten player Elwood Reid, who had a disastrous experience of the game, recalls:

After college I headed for Alaska to get away from football. I became a frame carpenter and spent my days pounding nails and lifting 20-foot sections of wall until my back and neck shivered with pain and my arms went numb. Every time I went home sore, bruised and full of splinters, it felt good—punishment for failing at football . . .

America sends mixed messages to its athletes. On the one hand, we ease them through college registration and protect them from challenges that “mere mortals” have to negotiate; on the other, we send them back out into the world emotionally limping and unprepared for the rest of life. Those of us in higher education owe those students the benefit of some counseling before they go over the Niagara Falls of this transition.

Athletes get a lot of practice at silencing their feelings and fears so that their minds are quiet enough to compete. Many who fall into serious postcareer funks don’t

know why they are hurting so badly, or why they are having difficulty abandoning an ability that they've been cultivating since childhood.

It's now, in the final quarter of their college years, that they need someone outside the coaching staff who will help them to "take soundings"—to find out where they are in their sport and talking with them about the grief they may experience when they can no longer compete. As it is, most of the college bowl players who leap across our television screens will leave college feeling as though no one said goodbye, much less offered to help them cope with life after the final whistle.

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