



# ALL DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS

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## Mirage

I was sprawled out on what appeared to be an operating table in an eerie dark and cold room. Nobody was in the room, but I could see silhouettes just outside the door. I heard voices feverishly muttering medical terms, but I couldn't exactly make out what they were saying. All of a sudden I was no longer in my body. I had an aerial view hovering over what seemed to be a lifeless vessel. I saw my body lying on the table, but I was overwhelmed by a drastic sense of polarity as my *Essence* was slowly floating away. As I ascended, the subtle glow emanating from my skin began to fade.

It was like a scene from a Hollywood movie and I was all too familiar with how it was progressing. Without the presence of an actual voice I shouted out, "I'm not done yet! I'm only 24 and it can't end like this. I haven't accomplished what I'm here to do. Put me back in my body! PUT ME BACK IN MY BODY!!!"

Suddenly, I was back in my body staring up at an *Abundant Being of Light* suspended just above me. At first I was frantically repulsed at the potential of my life coming to an end. Then a soothing warmth radiated through me which created an instant calming affect. Unsure of what was happening I cried out, "Am I going to be able to return to my life?"

The response I received echoed deep within my *Soul*. A body without form answered me in words beyond space and time. "If you return to your *Life*, it will be *Different* than anything you have ever known."

I replied automatically, without processing the information I just received. I answered clinging to the only reality that made sense to me, "That's fine, please just let me go back to my life."

The *Voice* then said, "You can return to your *Life* if you agree to three things. First, and most important, you must work to find *Oneness* within *Yourself*. Second, you have to *Live* the example of what it means to *BE*, in an effort to positively influence your *Friends* and *Family*. Finally, get to work on accomplishing your *Purpose*. If you agree to these three things, you may return to your *Life*."

It didn't matter if the *Voice* told me I needed to backflip through six hula hoops with my hair on fire, I wasn't ready to let go of my physical existence. When I agreed, there was a blinding flash and the luminous presence above me filled the room. The warmth I felt is simply indescribable. Rays of light, like the kind one sees when the sun pokes through the clouds after a rain storm, plunged into my motionless vessel. Once the ethereal glow filled my body a wave of serenity pulsed inside me and I opened my eyes.

The American Dream is filled with opportunities that are often difficult to understand. At a young age the happiness equation is presented in a manner that represents equality, hard work and freedom to pursue dreams. If you fill in the blanks correctly then the sky is supposedly the limit. *Illusion* and reality are often times cloaked in an ideology that seems fair and just. The impulse to pursue what makes one comfortable is fueled by high rise cities and corporate propaganda. Hollywood renditions of real life are often disguised as untapped potential just beyond people's fingertips. The tendency to get ahead often derails the *Soul's* path in a way that makes material gain look like the forefront of all good adventures. This is a story about how *Life* works itself out even when the road map goes up in flames. Every moment offers a chance to experience the *Divine*, while free will guides each individual towards self-expression. With every end comes a new beginning and each *Life* has a unique responsibility to make sense of its happenings. Since I learned these lessons after years of hapless meandering, I'll back up a bit in an effort to paint a clearer picture.

I poured my heart and soul into a high school football career that ended with the first championship in private Catholic school's history. I was decorated with many honors including having my jersey number '2' retired. My grades weren't the best, but I was one of the best linebackers in the state. I thought this would be enough, but the universe has a funny way of working things out.

As it turns out I wasn't big enough, strong enough, or fast enough in the eyes of major college recruiters and I definitely had a "unique" way of getting things done. My game was incomplete and I needed to polish it if I was going to find success. Highly discouraged I turned to a mentor to comb through my options. Time was running out when it came to getting a football scholarship and I had a bum shoulder that required a fairly serious surgery.

Junior College plus reconstructive shoulder surgery meant I'd have to take a year off in my home town to recover. This was an unacceptable option in my eyes, as I watched all of my friends that actually did their homework go off to major universities. The first two doctors I saw would not grant me medical clearance to play football, so I went for a third opinion. The third doctor confirmed that I needed surgery, but added that I couldn't really damage my shoulder much more. It was a clean tear but I could play through the pain if I was willing. My heart hurt much more than my shoulder, so my teenage brain saw an opportunity amongst the wreckage.

I highly valued the opinion of a mentor I became close with in high school, so I listened carefully when he offered an option I had not heard before. He told me of an athlete that had graduated a few years before me who had found himself in a similar situation. The athlete decided to go to a prep school on the East Coast and completed a post-graduate year at a Connecticut boarding school. Each boarding school was allowed three such athletes to boost the moral and talent level at each school. The process enabled the smaller boarding schools to even the playing field against some of the larger schools in the area.

The following morning I went to the library at the Junior College I was supposed to attend. My mentor gave me a stack of papers containing information about the boarding school attended by the athlete. One of the papers among the lot was a football schedule. I investigated every school on the schedule and reached out to each of the football coaches detailing my interest. By the end of the day I received three responses from coaches asking to see game film.

When I broke it to my *Family* that I wanted to move to the other side of the United States, to attend a fifth year of high school, they were shocked to say the least. Sunday dinners usually dealt with a completely different type of excitement. I was the oldest of four crazy boys, which meant I was the ringleader of all the nonsense. Moving to Connecticut meant I would be breaking up our California version, of an Italian Catholic Family. Being the first to graduate high school meant I was the pace car for all future *Brotherly* endeavors.

My *Dad* served in the Air Force Special Forces, and then became a cop, and then a lawyer. So to say he is detail-oriented is an understatement. My plan to go to prep school was like telling him I was going fly to the moon with a jet pack I made in the garage. Once I explained that the opportunity would expose me to an Ivy League education, his wheels began to turn. At the end of the day, *Dad* was my number one fan. He also saw merit in the potential of the experience itself. I needed him to buy in. Without the support of my most valuable asset, my *Family*, I couldn't confidently move forward. My *Dad* gave me much needed insight and understood that if a few critical pieces fell into place, the idea wasn't all that bad. He did mention that he thought I was crazy nonetheless. *Mom* was another story. She always got behind my crazy ideas. Since I was young, she had an unwavering *Faith* that I would *Find My Way*. But her first baby was now leaving home. This was a tough experience for her, but she trusted I had a plan and was supportive.

At home we all shared something special. Our *Family* was *Different* in that our home was our sanctuary. The entire bunch was a bit hyperactive, and *Family* events resembled a sandbox jungle gym instead of formal get together. During Sunday dinners, you were more likely to get beaned in the head with a grape than see silverware in the proper order next to the dinner plates. Fine china and roasted duck were often substituted with paper plates and a large bowl of mamma's pasta. The Peter Pan mentality was often embraced, as the Lost Boys would have nothing to do with growing old, and neither would we. Despite the insanity, *Unconditional Love* was always present in the most mysterious, elusive manner.

The following week, critical pieces started to fall in place and the great adventure began to take shape. Three of the coaches that saw film of my senior year football season were quick to offer me a fully paid opportunity to play for their team. I received their offers on Monday, spoke with all three coaches on Tuesday, and committed to one of the schools on Thursday. I was in pads practicing with the team by Sunday. I went from being depressed, confused, and not knowing what to do with my life, to being on the other side of the United States practicing with a new team in 10 days.

I wasn't a naturally gifted athlete, so football never came easy for me, but I had developed a formula to be *Great*. If I trained harder, studied longer and practiced as though I were preparing for a championship every day, game day became an opportunity to perform at the highest level. Football is a game that pushes physical limits in an extreme manner and playing through injuries was part of the gig. Having a banged-up shoulder meant I had to adjust my strategy a bit, but I accepted the challenge and found a way to get it done. I always took pride in my ability to find a way to make things happen, despite the circumstance. I didn't travel all the way across the United States to be average, and I took the commitment that I made to the coach and team very seriously. I was there to be a *Leader* and that meant giving everything I had on every single play.

The football season was a success as the team went 7-2 and was crowned co-league champions. I was again blessed with many individual honors, but none sweeter than being part of another championship team. When the season was over I flew home to California and underwent surgery to fix my shoulder. When I returned to prep school I began the recruiting and rehab process. It was a long, painful journey getting my shoulder back into playing shape, but something happened during this time that would define my *Purpose* in a way I never could have imagined.

I received interest from Harvard, Yale and Brown and went on recruiting trips to see each school. I really buckled down in the classroom and received decent grades during my time at prep school. It was much needed scholastic discipline, and I learned that there are things in life more important than hitting people on the football field. Unfortunately, it was too little, too late. The combination of my high school GPA, my SAT scores, and my prep school scholastic efforts fell just under the bar for an Ivy League education. Amherst and Wesleyan offered me an opportunity to receive an incredible Ivy League caliber education, just on a smaller football stage. Since I had my eyes on playing in the NFL, my dreams overtook my reasoning process and I accepted a partial scholarship to a State University in California. It gave me a chance to play football on the grand stage and prove myself alongside the best football players in the nation.

One day after rehab I met an interesting character on the table next to me in the training room. He had blonde hair and blue eyes looking the part of a California surfer dude, so I struck up a conversation with him. It only took seconds to realize my first impression was way off when he responded to my greeting with a firm German accent. I stuck with my original profile and asked him if he surfed. Surprisingly he said yes. He explained that his mom lived in Germany and his dad lived in Bali, Indonesia. I was immediately drawn to his story.

I asked him, "You mean Bali, Bali?! Like, the best surfing spots in the world Bali?" He said, "Yeah, my dad owns a village there. I'm Jasper, the friendly ghost." Convinced that he misunderstood me, or maybe his English was off, I attempted to clarify again by asking, "You mean a villa, right? He owns a villa." He said, "Well, kind of. It's more like a little village. There are 5 small bungalows on the property he owns and it's at the edge of cliff that looks over the ocean." Baffled I jokingly said, "Bro, you're my new best friend. My name is Damien. When we graduate, can I please do a surf trip and stay with you?"

Little did I know this was the beginning of a relationship that would extend far beyond the confines of the training room. I experienced many significant relationships during the short time I was at prep school. There was something significant about living and learning together at such an influential time in our adolescent lives. It added a dimension of camaraderie to high school that you just don't get when you leave campus and go home to mom and dad. The prep school experience broadened my horizons and added an element of discipline to my young life that was critical for my future success. There was a component of my personality driven by EGO though, and it clouded my decision-making process. Not only did I pass on an opportunity to earn a private school education at a pristine school, I also chose to leave prep school early.

Graduating with my friends was not a priority to me as I already had a high school diploma. Against the advice of my football coach and advisors, I elected to spend 5 months in California beefing up for the upcoming season of Division 1A football. As I look back, I truly regret this decision because I didn't finish what I started. I didn't realize that there was more to the experience for people who had invested in me. I robbed them of seeing me finish and it's something I have to live with forever. No take backs. No do-overs.



The irony in it all is that I missed the fun part of my senior experience at prep school; that time when kids get to be kids, knowing that they have their whole life ahead of them. I missed the time when teachers ease up a bit and the teenage experience dares to unfold its ridiculous happenings. And I missed it all because I thought I knew what was best. I wanted to be comfortable and move forward with what I thought I knew. Oh, what I thought I knew . . .

## Dreams

When I showed up to training camp I was ready to go. My shoulder was all patched up and I was beyond excited to earn a spot on the team. Division 1A football was the real deal. Everyone on the team was athletically gifted in some way. Though our team wasn't nationally ranked at the time, we had a preseason schedule that was packed with some of the top teams in the country. This meant we had an immediate opportunity for national exposure, and no time to waste. At the conclusion of rookie camp I had proven that I deserved to be there. I was excited to see where I fell into place once the veteran players showed up for full training camp. During rookie sessions, there were plenty of chances to get reps and learn the system. When the other guys showed up, the game started moving faster and the veteran players got most of the reps with the rookies being left to catch up, or get left out.

The pace was grueling. Our day started at 6:00 AM and we were on the field practicing by 7:00. We then lifted weights, watched film and had a mandatory team meal before we got about an hour to rest. Then it was back to the field for another practice, followed by another film session. After a second team meal we had a few hours of down time before another film session and one final practice, followed by our last team meal. We had to sign in and out of all our meals and some of the guys were on a strict calorie count. We usually finished our days around 8:00 PM and got up the next morning to repeat the process. This went on for a month straight with no days off. Living my *Dreams* had become a pretty regimented ordeal.

Since I didn't have a full scholarship I had a lot to prove and very little time to do it. Realistically, if I didn't do something special in camp the team was not obligated to keep me, I was subject to roster cuts each week. There was an extremely talented athlete trying to make the team that pulled his hamstring the first week during conditioning. He was black and blue from his butt to his knee, but he pushed hard to work through it. By the end of the week his locker was empty. I'd never seen anything so cut-throat. I was

simply a number and I'd either rise to the occasion, or I'd be another common student walking around campus. The intensity of football at this level left no room for bullshit. If you were late, you got punished and did extra conditioning after practice. The same applied if you forgot your playbook, got caught sleeping in film, or skipped reps in the weight room. The coaches would run your tail off until you got the hint. If you did something devastatingly stupid like fail a drug test or get caught partying during camp, they simply dismissed you from the team and dropped your scholarship. Most of the players didn't have the money to continue, so it was the end of the road for both their football career, and their college experience.

I was so stoked on being there, that I would never challenge such a great opportunity with utter foolishness. I did come up with a pretty fancy idea though. Since I was a partial scholarship freshman, I rarely saw the field, even during practice. It wasn't necessarily because I was a bad athlete; it was simply a numbers game. There were six linebackers in front of me. Most of them were upperclassmen and the freshmen were full scholarship athletes in the same position I was. This meant if there were any reps left after the starters got in, the freshman on a full ride got the call before I did. They rarely saw the field either, but their future was secure because they signed four year scholarship contracts.

Since I was getting so few reps I was afraid that I wouldn't be ready if I did get my number called. I needed to find a way to maintain a competitive edge. I decided that I could do so by staying in superior condition and that wasn't happening with my butt on the bench. After practice I decided to do extra conditioning with all the guys that got in trouble. Day after day I did this until one afternoon a coach noticed I was running with delinquents all the time. He said, "Minna, what the hell is your problem? How come you can't pull your shit together? You're in the dog pound every day! I thought you Catholic school boys were smarter than that."

I didn't say a word and I just kept running. A few days later I got called into the head coach's office for a one-on-one meeting with the head honcho. An assistant coach did some research and found out I had never been in trouble. Not once. He went to the head coach and told him what I was up to. The head coach explained that, as the seventh string linebacker, it didn't look like there was room for me on the defensive side of the ball. He asked me if I would be interested in moving to offense to play running back. He mentioned that we only had a few fullbacks and I'd have a much better opportunity to make the team this way.

I left his office glowing. I didn't care what position I played, I just wanted to make the team and help them win in any way I could. My strategy to stay in great shape showed the coaches how serious I was about being there. It caught their attention, and let them know I meant business. I learned the entire playbook in four days, just in time for our final scrimmage. When my number was called, I was ready. I squeaked by the final cuts and was officially part of the team.

I was happy about this but I had another goal in mind. 85 players made the team, but only 52 got to travel. In order to travel with the team, I needed to earn a starting spot on special teams to be added to the official roster. I had two weeks to prove myself before the actual season started.

I showed up early, stayed after practice to ask questions and continued to run with the dog pound. When it was all said and done, my *Greatness* formula paid off again. I was one of only three freshmen to make the traveling squad, and the only one that was on partial scholarship. By the time game one rolled around I had earned a spot on the kickoff and kickoff return teams.

The sense of euphoria that crept down my spine as we took the field for our first game was electric. I had done it, somehow I made it. I might have taken a dirt road instead of the highway, but I still figured out a way to get it done. When the whistle blew, my nerves calmed and it was back to playing the game I loved so dearly.

You'd think I would have been grateful for what I had in the moment, but one of the oddest occurrences rattled my bones. I looked across the field and saw one of my high school teammates playing for the other team. He was on a full scholarship and started on special teams. He also got an opportunity to play offense and defense. I don't want to take anything away from his efforts or abilities; he is a great guy and an exceptional athlete. It just got me thinking...

He was a senior when I went to prep school and his team completed an undefeated championship season. He did things the right way. He stayed out of trouble and worked harder than everyone else, on and off the field. I wasn't a bad kid in high school, I just wanted it all. I played by my own rules and the books fell pretty low on my priority list. My *Dad* warned me about this, encouraging me to take school seriously, but partying and girls were much more important. Having fun kickin' ass, was a far better time then tests or homework.

I felt like a fool. I was supposed to be living the *Dream*. Instead I couldn't stop thinking about all of the self-imposed speed bumps I kept putting in front of me. I was happy for my high school teammate, but the entire flight home I thought about where I would be if I had just done things right the first time. When I returned to school the next week, my rose-colored glasses were a different shade. I had a renewed sense of focus and though I was happy about making the team, I knew I was capable of much more. School became a priority to me as I realized that an education was the most important part of being in college. When it came to football, I approached my *Dream* of being *Great* with a sense of fury beyond any effort I had previously put forth.

As the weeks went by I continued to climb the depth chart at running back, and had earned a starting role on almost every special team. Playing in front of 50,000 plus people each week was everything I *Dreamed* it would be. I honored each moment with grace and enthusiasm. I gave everything I had, every single minute I was on the field. Once I made it to third string running back, it meant I took almost every repetition on the scout team. The first and second-string running back practiced with the starters, which meant I was next in line.

The Scout Team consisted of the best remaining athletes that were not starters. Our job was to run the opposing team's plays against our starting defense to prepare them for the upcoming game. One week during drills our senior All-American safety came off the edge on a blitz. At the last moment he slowed down to avoid a major collision. I hit him so hard, the back of his neck hit the ground before the rest of his body. The entire team erupted in laughter because one of their best players just got clowned by some punk freshman. It was as if he got caught with his pants down in the middle of the final dance at the prom. He was furious.

After practice he approached me in the locker room and asked what the hell did I think I was doing? He said, "Look super hero its practice. There's no need to go full speed. You're going to get someone hurt and then what will we do come game time?"

I looked him right in the eyes and said, "First of all I didn't come here to sit on the sideline to watch you play. If that was my intention I would just buy a ticket, it's much easier that way. And secondly, I go full speed to give you the best look possible so you're ready on game day." He followed by saying, "Ok rookie, it's on! You just put a target on your back for the rest of the season." I said, "Good, bring it."

He tapped me on the shoulder, gave me a half-cocked grin and walked away. As I sat in front of my locker part of me felt quite accomplished. The other half of me was wondering what the hell I had just done. Every day after that moment was like stepping onto a battle field. Play after play everyone on defense took pride in the opportunity to line up across from me. I got everything they had on every play.

This resulted in me losing far more battles than I won. It also meant I spent a lot of time picking myself up off the ground. My efforts did something awesome though. The other guys on the scout team started to rally around me and the team's collective effort got a little nastier. As time went on the intensity stayed the same, but some of the guys on defense started to help me up after hitting me so hard that I saw stars. I began to gain the respect of the veteran players and it was an incredible feeling. Not everyone was a fan though.

One day our 6'7", 300 pound defensive end took a cheap shot at me after the whistle blew. Once I was on the ground he put his knee in my stomach and used my face as support to help himself up. Nobody saw, but it pissed me off so much that I got up and fired the ball at the back of his head as he was walking back to the huddle. He turned around with a look of fiery vengeance in his eyes and took pursuit at my life like a run away freight train. One second before a devastating head on collision I thought to myself, "That was a horrendous decision and now I'm going to die." Right before he removed my head from my body, all five of the Scout Team linemen came to my rescue. A full scale brawl broke out between the offense and defense. Some might view this as savage debauchery, but this is not unusual, it's just football. The feud was broken up and practice went on like nothing happened. If you think about it, we are a bunch of grown men in the best shape of our lives, with plastic strapped to our bodies running into each other at full speed. A little scrap is bound to happen every once in a while.

After practice the Sasquatch that tried to behead me passed by while I was taking off my cleats. With an ear to ear grin he chuckled and said, "You one crazy white boy rookie. You're alright with me."

Despite all the awards, trophies and accolades I'd received in my football career, what always meant most to me was the respect of my teammates, *Family* and *Friends*. It was a big deal in my eyes and it's something I will forever hold close to my heart. It turns out that not only did the team respect my efforts, but the coaches also saw something special about my character.

The following week we had a home game and the town was painted red as our arch rivals flew in for battle. We kept the ball on the ground in an attempt to control the game clock. It was a tight one and both the first and second-string running backs were rotated in and out. Late in the fourth quarter the ball was pitched to our second-string back as he dashed towards our sideline attempting to turn the corner. As he planted his upfield leg he took a nasty hit right around the waistline. His cleats stayed firmly stuck in the ground and his body buckled over itself. I'd never heard a grown man scream like that.

The stadium was so silent you could hear a pin drop. When the ambulance carted him off the field it was like our entire team had been punched in the stomach. What we had just witnessed was every football player's worst nightmare. Each time we stepped onto the field and strapped on our helmets, we knew the risk we were taking. When we saw one of our own go down, the terrifying possibility became a gruesome reality. We lost that game and I have no recollection of what the score was. I just remember the sound of him screaming in agony.

On Monday the bad news got worse. He sustained a dislocated hip ending his season and career. It was extremely polarizing for me because I had just lost a teammate and friend, but this meant there was now an opening at the running back position. Though I was next on the depth chart I was informed an open competition would be held for the second-string running back duties. I found this to be a bit odd because I was supposed to be next in line for a shot to show my stuff. Nonetheless, I saw the challenge as an opportunity to clear all doubt in everyone's mind that it was my spot.



I put forth a solid week of practice and out-performed all other backs during an inter-squad scrimmage held only days before our Saturday game. The night of the scrimmage, the team was informed that our starting running back had a death in the family and he would most likely miss the next two games. It seemed as though a black cloud was hovering over our season at the worst possible time.

For all intents and purposes, I thought I would be a shoe-in starter for the week's upcoming road game. The evening before we boarded the plane I was called into the coaching office to meet with my position coach. I was asked to close the door behind me and to have a seat at his desk. He said, "There's no easy way to tell you this, but we are going to start the guy below you on the depth chart. He's a junior with game experience and has been on full scholarship for three years now. The university has invested in him and his number has been called this week to start at running back. You will travel as the second string guy so be ready for when your number is called. I know this might seem unfair, but that's football for ya."

It was around 30 degrees come game time, but it seemed much colder to me. I felt robbed of something I worked hard to earn and it hurt. I resumed my role on special teams but never saw the field on offense. We lost the game and the starting running back had 18 carries for 33 yards, missed multiple blocks and also dropped a couple of passes. I was speechless. I just didn't understand how politics could stand in the way of hard work. It was an extremely tough pill to swallow because I cared so deeply. But like the coach said, that's just football. It was what it was.

The next week when practice resumed my name was at the top of the depth chart. I was told that I would work with the starting offense all week and that I was the number one guy going into Saturday's game. After practice I raced home to call my *Family* to share the news. My *Dad* was elated. Though the game was an away game, it was just up the freeway from where I grew up. Pops called up the box office and bought a ridiculous amount of tickets. I think he was more excited than I was. Everyone we knew was invited to come watch my first game as a starting running back for a Division 1A football program. Dreams were finally becoming reality.

Thursday night during our last practice before my first starting game, we were running a full contact drill against the Scout Team. The quarterback called a run play to the left side and I was to get the ball. The ball was snapped and I got the handoff going full speed to the left when I saw the linebacker fill the spot I was supposed to run to. A huge hole opened on the right and I saw nothing but open field on the backside of the play, so I planted my left leg to cut back. I was going so fast that my knee couldn't support my weight and I heard a loud pop when I went to change directions. I fell to the ground and three guys jumped on top of me. From the bottom of the pile I heard a scream that sounded similar to the one on the game field a few weeks before. When everyone got off the pile I realized the scream that I heard was my own. The trainers were called onto the field and the drill was moved up ten yards and practice continued.

The lead trainer gave me a series of tests, but after one such movement he looked into my eyes and I could see his heart drop. My heart immediately followed. I asked if it was bad and he mentioned there was no way of knowing until we had an MRI to confirm the damage. A few of the assistant trainers helped me onto a golf cart and they took me to the training room. They gave me a brace and said there's a chance that it was just a bad sprain. They told me not to worry too much and that I might be back in a few weeks. I knew by the look in the lead trainer's eyes that he had treated an injury of this magnitude before. I tried to remain positive, but I knew. I went home on crutches and the first thing I did was pick up the phone to call my *Dad*. We cried together like orphans in the rain.

The next week the MRI confirmed my worst fear. I had torn my anterior cruciate ligament and it would require full blown reconstructive surgery. The team doctor cut right to the chase. He said, "I can fix your knee but if it was an A+ before, you can only expect an A- from here on out. Your knee will never be the same."

I was devastated. Instead of taking a plane to a crowded football stadium full of fans, I drove home with my *Mom* and *Dad* to have my second reconstructive surgery in two years. When I returned to the team in spring, I was unable to practice as I had months of recovery ahead of me. I was shuffled to the side with a group of guys that were also recovering from injuries. All the hard work I had put forth meant nothing now as I was a total question mark for the future. During my season review meeting with the head coach, he told me the team had planned on offering me a full scholarship but now the risk was too great.

I went home over the summer to continue rehab and passed on voluntary team workouts. This just dug an even deeper hole for my planned ascension back to the top. At the end of summer when I returned to camp, the team had recruited a handful of new running backs. In all honesty, the doctor's diagnosis was pretty spot on. My knee was never the same. I didn't have the speed or size of the new guys and my knee wasn't even fully recovered. The coaches realized this and asked me to take a year off to rehabilitate my knee. This meant a year on the practice squad with no scholarship and an uphill climb after that.

This forced me to face a few harsh realities. Football at this level was a brutal, cut-throat, violent game. I was undersized and I just had my second reconstructive surgery in two years. What if I got hurt again? The odds were not in my favor and I needed my body to last the rest of my life. These guys were so big and so fast, it was hard to fathom that I passed on a private school education to expose myself to such torture. I did some *Soul* searching and made a very difficult decision. I called my *Dad* and told him I was done.

He said, "Damien, are you sure?"

I said, "Yeah *Dad*, it's over."

## Hustlin'

I was lying in bed when the rumble of the U-Haul came to a screeching halt outside my window. Shortly thereafter, I heard a knock at the door. I knew it was my *Dad*, but I let my roommate answer the door. A large part of me didn't want to let go of what I put so much force into creating. Despite the disappointment, I never doubted my decision. I knew in my heart I was making the right choice for my future. Together my *Dad* and I loading up everything I had, and began the long journey home.

It was a 5-hour car ride but we didn't talk too much. There were no perfect words; I had to completely start over. My *Dad* was a master at tiptoeing around life's peak experiences. He was just the right amount of sunshine in the middle of a downpour. I was so bummed that my reality was I had to go home to Junior College; the same Junior College that I had avoided like the plague. Pops encouraged me to look at this next opportunity as a stepping stone in the great adventure of life. He said, "In life everybody gets knocked down. A man shows his true character by the way he chooses to get back up. So get up, dust yourself off, and get back to work."

The advice needed to be put in motion rather quickly. I had to make a decision on what to do with my football career. Part of me wasn't even sure I wanted to play anymore. The silly game had brought me as much turmoil as it had glory. I definitely did not want to sit out an entire season. I was sure I would lose my focus and passion to play. So I took a few days to think things over and then met with the coaching staff at the Junior College. They were happy to have me and I was in pads practicing the following week.

It was so different from what I grown accustomed to. The effort, the pace, the intensity, all of it seemed to lack a sense of urgency. The entire team felt like they had their own agenda, even the coaching staff. The school had just brought in a new head coach and his staff mixed in with a few older coaches that had been there for years. There was no status quo or tradition. The entire program was in the process of rebuilding, everything needed to be started from scratch. It almost seemed fitting that I landed there because everyone had something to prove.

The veteran coaches remembered me from high school and they had interest in me playing linebacker. The new head coach was an offensive guy who needed help at running back. Since I played both ways in high school, I thought I'd give it a shot. I had no idea how much of a physical demand I was putting on my body. Both positions were high impact roles and the collisions of the college game were much more severe then the high school level. There was also more actual football to be played at the college level than in high school games. College quarters are 15 minutes long, while high school quarters are only 12 minutes. Coming off a serious knee injury, I had bitten off more than I could chew. I was a step slower and I wasn't in the same shape as when I showed up to camp the year before. I spent far more time doing rehab and not enough time on the field doing football-related activities.

The coaches had a two-year plan to get me back to the Division 1A level, but I had other ideas. I was still interested in playing football, but I was more concerned with getting into a quality school close to home. I only wanted to spend one year playing Junior College ball and was looking to take my show on the road as soon as possible. The coaches and I never saw eye to eye with this strategy, which created a service mentality to my efforts. Since it turned out we were both using each other, it solidified our separate agendas. Wins were tough to come by, and with only about 100 people in the stands each week, game day had a much different face. My effort, on the other hand, did not. I gave everything I had, each and every time I stepped onto the field.

Even though Junior College football was different in many ways, there were special moments during the season that restored my faith in the game. With very little at stake on the final scores and overall record, the players and coaches continued to show up. Week after week, everyone gave their best effort because they loved being there. Sure a few players would move on to bigger programs to continue their careers, but it was the love of the game that brought us all together.

When you're a kid in front of the television and you see the guys playing ball on Sundays, the seed of mysticism becomes planted in your *Soul*. You see gladiators battling it out on the gridiron and young minds become entrenched in possibility. The first time you strap pads to your little body the fantasy of reenacting your Sunday hero's movements begin. "I wanna be just like them when I grow up."

Somewhere during the heavy conditioning, broken bones and three a day workouts the fun gets lost. Games are meant to be fun, but the nature of football pushes extremes in a way that emphasizes exploitation. Every time the game levels up, for example from high school to college, there is more at stake. The added pressure stimulates the competitive aspects of the game but also adds the cut-throat nature of Wall Street. It's kill or be killed; no prisoners; no survivors. Junior College football was different. It's Rome that caters to PETA. The carnage was still there, but it was more like backyard ball with a bunch of buddies. The intensity resided and fun was reintroduced to the game.

With less focus on football it left time for me to put more emphasis on my studies. I had a top rated private school in mind and if I was serious about attending, I really needed to pull it together in the classroom. It was no longer about just passing. I needed exceptional marks to show this school that I was worthy of their top notch education.

When I visited my college counselor I was given an articulation agreement that the Junior College had with all the private schools. It was simple math. If I passed X amount of classes I would be an eligible candidate to apply for all of the private schools in the nation. It was no horsing around though. Nobody was going to hold my hand and if I really wanted it I needed to prove it.