



WINNING THE COLLEGE GAME

**A STUDENT ATHLETE'S GUIDE TO SUCCESS ON THE
FIELD, IN THE CLASSROOM AND AROUND CAMPUS**

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Chapter 1

It's Your Dream

What is now proved was once only imagined.
– William Blake

Dream lofty dreams, and as you dream, so shall you become. Your vision is the promise of what you shall one day be; your ideal is the prophecy of what you shall at last unveil.
– James Allen

The crowd erupted into a roar as I rumbled shoulder to shoulder with my teammates onto the perfectly sheared evergreen playing field at Stanford stadium. We quickly filed into rows for our pre-game warmup routine. Clearing the sweat from my stinging eyes, I focused for a moment on the south end zone, where I once sat to watch games as a wide-eyed 6-year-old with chocolate malt ice cream dripping between my fingers. Inhaling slowly, I allowed the moment to sink in, and whispered to myself, “So this is what it feels like to fulfill a childhood dream.”

Reaching that moment was the culmination of an epic and exhausting journey. Sometimes I wonder how I survived it. Big dreams have a

way of making us prove ourselves worthy of reaching them, and you, my young friend, will be tested as you strive to achieve yours.

You might be a high school all-American or just all-conference; recruited by colleges or relatively unknown. It doesn't matter. My experience has taught me that high school accolades do not promise any kind of success at the next level of competition. Every athlete's dreams are put to the test, regardless of the number of awards won or the amount of recognition received.

It's not my intention to give you a grizzled veteran's account of how I managed to take the hill, bloodied and exhausted, remaining the only man standing as the smoke cleared. We're having a conversation about how to take on this rather intense challenge, successfully manage it, and get past the normal setbacks that student athletes deal with. I definitely want to inspire you, but at the same time, I have to be honest with you about what I saw and went through to help you be adequately prepared.

In college, I played with highly sought-after high school and junior college all-Americans who disappeared from the team and never graduated from college. During my freshman year in college, I watched in disbelief as highly touted players quit the team or failed out of school during the year. As the time passed, I became immune to these events and acknowledged the announcements of permanently departed teammates with a shrug and a quick roll of my eyes.

No matter what they may claim as their reason for failing, the truth is that they were tested by the incredible demands found in the collegiate environment and they didn't have the tools to persevere. Importantly, someone or some event, whether academic or athletic, changed a belief in them that ultimately led to the decision to end their college careers.

Remember this: student athletes who fail make the choice to do so. Their failure is determined once they agree with the negative input being spoken to them, either by other people or by their own inner voice.

The power of suggestion is just that—a very real power. This is why placebos, or fake drugs, work to heal medical conditions. A person can be given a sugar pill and told that it is pain medication. Often, as many as one-third of the patients receiving the sugar pill will experience relief from their symptoms. The pill is meaningless; it is the power of suggestion that actually creates the effect on the body. Negative suggestions and criticism spoken to you can have the same powerful effect in a destructive way, if you do not guard against them.

Some of you may have not yet experienced “dream thieves”—everybody believes in you and all the colleges want you at this point. Others of you may share my experience, which is a path to collegiate athletics full of naysayers and a feeling of anonymity. To be sure, every athlete will face down this opposing force at some point. Keep in mind that dream thieves come in all guises, including people we love. My dream since I was six years old had always been to play Division I college football. Until I actually made it onto the playing field in college, no one believed it was possible or realistic for me.

It really didn't help that I attended a small college prep school in New Hampshire with a total student body of 275. As of 2013, their football field still does not have a scoreboard or bleachers. On game day, there is no band and no cheerleaders. The football program and school league I played in was and remains about as small-time as high school level football gets.

So, despite my athletic prowess throughout my high school years, others tried to discourage me and some even counseled me not to follow my dream. During my junior year in high school, I spoke to the head football coach about helping me get recruited. He had a very serious look on his face when I discussed this with him, as if he were trying but couldn't muster the courage to say something he knew would hurt my feelings. Days later, he caught up with me to revisit our talk. He explained, “Marshall, you know, I always wanted to be in the Russian Ballet.” I immediately chuckled, looking at this 6'-4” 280-pound man. However, he wasn't trying to be funny. He contin-

ued, “Some dreams just aren’t realistic. Those big college football programs chew kids up; it’s not for you.”

My college guidance counselor punctuated this message by telling me with a severe tone, “Those guys, Division I football players, are some tough hombres. You are too nice of a kid to survive in one of those programs.” He concluded the conversation in more certain terms, stating, “You are not cut out to play big-time college ball.” My coach and guidance counselor wanted me to attend a small college where I could enjoy a gentle environment and a football program that was a step up, but not a leap of faith. That was their vision for me and I just didn’t see it their way.

Suggestions such as those are dangerous. In an instant, words like that can steal your belief in yourself, and that is when your dream begins to evaporate. Those suggestions made me more angry than anything, which turned out to be a positive reaction. The anger turned into greater inspiration to pursue my goal.

But let me tell you a little secret here: it’s not enough to get angry and then feel more determined inside your head. Get out and do the work—study the game, understand and improve on your weaknesses, push yourself to find your physical limits, then train harder, and push yourself past them.

Importantly, I didn’t allow the words of my coach and guidance counselor to permanently deflate me because I understood that *opinions are not fact*. These “all-knowing” adults didn’t know me as well as I knew myself at that age. The same holds true for you. They weren’t there when I ran hill sprints until I threw up during my summer training; they didn’t know I disciplined myself to work out twice a day, six days a week during the summer while living at home alone. What I’m saying is this: no one but me knew the kind of fire I had in my belly to compete. I moved forward without their support, which was not easy, but certainly doable.

I took the matter of getting recruited into my own hands, attending major college football camps in the summer and sending letters to universities with game films throughout my junior year. There

was barely any interest. I imagine a lot of recruiting coordinators dismissed my game films once they saw no bleachers, no scoreboard, no band, and no cheerleaders. The fans, all fifty of them, could be seen standing on the grass around the field as if they were watching two golfers face off on the 9th hole. This had to be fairly humorous for the big-time college recruiters to observe as they reviewed my game films. Admittedly, there was no way to gauge the competition I faced in a league as small as mine.

My junior year came and went without a single college expressing interest. After my senior football season, however, I received a very unexpected phone call from Kent Baer, the linebacker coach and defensive coordinator at UC Berkeley. He said the more he watched my game films, the more he liked me. I was invited to fly out for my only official NCAA recruiting trip.

I was hosted during my visit to UC Berkeley by Mike Pawlawski, the living embodiment of swagger who became the starting quarterback during my first season. With his white blond flat top spiked up high and that million-dollar smile of his, he looked like one of the Navy fighter pilots straight out of the movie, *Top Gun*. The two of us toured—or should I say raced—around town on his motorcycle, cutting through traffic and driving illegally inside campus grounds to check things out. I have to say, it was entirely awesome and I was sold on Berkeley by the end of the weekend.

At the close of my visit, Bruce Snyder, the head coach at that time, told me he would give me a call in a couple of days to let me know what they decided—a scholarship offer or not.

Ultimately, Coach Snyder, along with the rest of the Division I college coaches, didn't disagree with the naysayers in my life. I received zero scholarship offers. Was it over at that point? Not even close. The UC Berkeley coaching staff, not totally convinced I was Division I caliber, invited me to join the team as a walk-on, which I accepted. I had deeply desired a scholarship, but did not hesitate to walk through the door that opened the Division I dream to me.

Early in the fall of my senior year, some months prior to my recruiting trip to UC Berkeley, I had applied to the university via their regular application process. Ironically, when I returned from my recruiting trip, I received a rejection letter from the admissions office. Fairly concerned about what this meant for me, I contacted the recruiting coordinator and explained what I received. After enjoying a little laugh, he said that he would FedEx me an application designated for student athletes.

When I received the new application, it was stamped MIA (Men's Intercollegiate Athletics) on each page—I figured this had to be a good thing. I filled out the forms again and mailed them in without any essays. I received my letter of acceptance weeks later; kind of funny and pretty cool, right? Not entirely; it dawned on me that neither body of the university really believed in me, but simply agreed to give me a chance. It didn't help my confidence, but I got over it quickly. The opportunity was really all that mattered, not the way it came into my life.

Going Back to Cali

After several years of shoveling snow, wearing a coat and tie six days a week (this was mandatory dress code for me in prep school), and sitting through required Sunday night dinners with faculty, I said my goodbyes and boarded the plane in Boston for San Francisco. I had a motorcycle waiting for me when I landed, and the epic journey began.

Within the coming chapters, I'll get into some good detail of what happened in the early days of my transition, but I want to let you know right now that it took me two years of smashmouth practices and countless hours of strength training to become competitive in practice. That's right: not two years until I was given playing time, but two years until I was on par with my teammates in practice. I'm getting clear with you on this right now because we're talking about making dreams happen in this chapter and for a long while I had no

idea if I was really going to make it happen at this level of play. This is the work that I put into it—a huge grind with very little promise of success. This is often what it takes.

During these first two years, coaches, players, and trainers wavered between encouraging and discouraging me. I imagine they must have wondered several times if I would quit. Honestly, some would have been happy to see me leave. After two years, I was just taking up space and not contributing in any measurable way. A great deal of self-discipline (the same that had me running hill sprints until I puked, as discussed earlier) and a certain stubbornness kept me in the picture.

Victory: a matter of staying power.

– Elbert Hubbard

Staying power, better known as persistence, was a cornerstone of my successful journey. If you just stick to it year after year, improving and competing, it is amazing what can happen for you. You will get your chance. In my case, many guys fell to the wayside with injuries, academic trouble, and even legal problems. While they fell apart, I was busy getting bigger, faster, and better at the game. At the same time, I took care of my academics and enjoyed several semesters on the honor roll. I was able to persevere through the hard times. Opportunities came—small at first, but I took advantage of them. I was given a scholarship after my sophomore year and became a starting player in my senior year.

The dreams you conceive belong to no one else. They are not created or approved by a committee. This means you will often be the only one who understands the *why* and the *desire* behind them. Hang on to your aspirations and fiercely chase them down. No one can ever measure another's heart, that fire inside you. It's that intangible part of your being that is able to manifest your dreams. The door that is opened for you may or may not be what you envisioned, but what if it leads you in the direction of your ambitions?

Aside from football, I aspired to be an architect after graduation. I actually chose architecture as my major prior to my freshman year. This choice was met with forecasts of academic and athletic doom. After my first week of college, I had mandatory meetings with both the head coach and my academic advisor from the architecture program, neither of whom shared my unique student athlete vision, as it turned out.

When I entered the coach's office, it looked similar to an office for the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. The space felt like big business. The coach and I chatted briefly about my experience at preseason camp and expectations going into my freshman year. He then leaned forward and said, "I see you've majored in architecture." I couldn't hide my proud smile, but then he bluntly stated, "If you plan to be a contributor on this football team, you'll drop that major." I didn't know how to respond and just sat stiff in my chair looking back at him. I eventually nodded slightly and he nodded his head back, concluding with, "You have a lot of work ahead of you and this redshirt year will be very helpful for your development."

Two days later, sitting across from my academic advisor, I shared my status as a student athlete with him and he responded, "If you hope to graduate with a degree in architecture, then you'll drop football and focus on this major." I not only received my degree in architecture, but as I mentioned before, I spent several semesters on the honor roll. I accomplished this while doing everything necessary to succeed on the football field. I'm not trying to say I'm "all that" and a side of curly fries. I put a blue-collar work ethic into this experience and some really sound strategy to find my results. I was never a great football player or student in college, but I managed to reach some great results in the end.

Naysayers, Critics, and Haters

Watch out for your peers: they can be very "crabby" about your efforts to succeed. Let me explain. A very curious thing happens

when you begin to slowly boil a pot of crabs. One industrious crab will determine that things are not looking good in the pot, and figure out a way to push the lid aside in order to escape. The other crabs in the pot will grab this particularly motivated crab and pull it back with the rest to die. Human nature is like this; people don't want to get left behind. It's common for peers to want to pull you back into the pot of mediocrity, or whatever pot they're in. I lived through this experience from the time I was a boy all the way through college—regularly ridiculed, betrayed, and marginalized by peers both on the team and in school. A great freedom in life is releasing yourself from caring about what other people think. It's absolutely necessary for anyone who aspires to greatness.

*If you think you can do a thing,
or think you can't do a thing,
you're right.*

– Henry Ford

Does it really matter what other people believe is realistic for you? No, it absolutely does not. Does it matter what you think? Honestly, that's all that matters. Others' opinions of your objectives and goals are based on a totally incomplete view of you—no matter how well these people may know you. It only matters what you think and what you believe. These random opinions are based on the opinion provider's life experiences and what he or she considers realistic. My college coach and college academic advisor had the opinion that participation in both a major college sport and a demanding curriculum could not be performed in unison with success. I can understand that. Over the past 25 years, I'm the only football player to have received a degree in architecture from UC Berkeley. I made a plan and simply put one foot in front of the other each day in college in order to succeed in both areas. Again, opinions are not facts. Your thoughts become facts.

Similarly, my high school coach and guidance counselor did not have the opinion that a nice kid from a small prep school could

make it in big-time college football. They were fearful on my behalf, which I appreciate. However, that was their fear and not mine. I'm not saying that I didn't have fear going into my college experience, because I had plenty of it. I was just able to feel the fear and dive in anyway. If you feel fear when pursuing your dream, I think you're in the right place. You're daring to do something exceptional and that's a great thing in life, but it comes with some anxiety from the unknown and the fear of failure.

You don't need evidence it can be done in order to do it. If you're looking for that and don't receive it, don't worry, because you don't need it. Belief, courage, persistence, and faith will lead you to a successful college career. Though several people tried, no one was able to get me to quit before I started. Don't let anyone do that to you either. Follow your vision and step over the naysayers as you walk onto the field, the court, the track, or dive into the pool with your awesome Speedo.

Do or do not... there is no try.

– Yoda

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