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Family & Football

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Family & Football

Author Bio

Danny is a junior Psychology major at Gettysburg College. He plays defensive tackle for the football team, he is a brother of Sigma Alpha Epsilon, and a member of Gettysburg's All Male Acappella group Drop the Octave

Family and Football

Daniel Speca

I bent over the rusted, chalk-covered barbell and gripped it tightly with my calloused hands. The powdered chalk and dust particles floated about the musty garage, illuminated by brave beams of light venturing through the cracks in the seasoned door. The morning was quiet until my speakers switched on and the work of an artistic genius broke the silence. *Since birth I've been cursed with this curse to just curse and just blurt this berserk and bizarre shit that works.* The brilliance was motivational. I stared without blinking at the four, forty-five pound plates stacked on the left side of the bar, and suddenly he was there. He lay unmoving, faced pressed into the corner of the slippery porcelain as water continuously showered his body. His limbs splayed out like a discarded rag doll, a small trail of blood running from his forehead. My heart kicked into overdrive. My grip tightened as I contracted my quads, glutes and traps and ripped the barbell up to my waist, legs now straightened. I lifted just as I had that March afternoon three years before. This time the burden was much lighter.

The iron weights crashed into the concrete floor once I released my grip. I turned away and gasped for air, though I wasn't out of breath. The episodes were getting worse. I pulled open the refrigerator door, searching for a Gatorade. Heart still racing, thoughts of seeking help flooded my mind. A glance over at the kitchen counter where my daily pill regimen fit for a ninety-year-old cancer patient dismissed the notion. The last thing I needed was another pill. I was a pharmaceutical company's wet dream, with a pill for what seemed like every hour of every day. A pill for this and a pill for that, I took pills to cure the side effects of other pills, and pills to make sure I wouldn't become addicted to those pills. I threw up some yellow Gatorade in my mouth.

I could see my breath on the walk to the athletic center. I cherished the silence of Pennsylvania mornings. At this hour all I could hear were my footsteps. I dug around in the potted plant where Coach had left the key to the side door. Only two people who cared like we did would break the rules so blatantly. My butt met the plastic desk in the film room with a thud, and I yawned as I fired up the projector. When thoughts of my warm, blissful bed crept into my mind, I forced them away with memories of my father arriving home long after his family had turned out the lights. I thought of

him rising long before the sun and making lunches, cranking the heat inside frozen cars, putting the coffee on, and taking on the herculean feat of forcing me out of bed. Watching closely, I learned to work like an army ant and love like a labrador.

With a rediscovered zeal, I watched my opponent for the upcoming weekend. I studied their formations and tendencies, watched for any cues or tells, examined which moves saw success against them in weeks prior, and mentally prepared for a war. I didn't look up as the custodial staff arrived for the morning, but I could feel their puzzled looks landing within my peripherals. They wondered why anyone would care about a game so much. I couldn't believe that they didn't.

The day went by in a haze. I smiled and nodded as my professors droned on about research methods and chlorofluorocarbons and shit that happened 300 years ago. I killed the corner of a Poland Springs bottle in order to swallow a pill that would help me write a paper that was due in two hours. "The History of Overpopulation", it was entitled. I began to type, *People really like having sex with eacho-* I deleted it with a smirk. After attaching the document to an email and sending it to my professor with a whopping 14 minutes to spare, my stomach growled. The short walk to the dining hall left a bead of sweat running down my temple and a few blotches on my shirt. *Whatever*, I thought without a shred of anxiety, thanks to Wellbutrin. I slid into a booth across from my roommate. He was a skinny, half-Italian Bostonian whose neck I imagined wringing at least forty times freshman year. Two and a half years later, he was my best friend and my lifeline who knew me better than my own mother.

"Dude," he said in a firm, pointed tone.

"What?"

He widened his eyes as he glanced to his right. I casually looked over and immediately understood. He was always quick to alert me if a particularly handsome young lady was on the premises.

"That's why I keep you around," I chuckled, really only half-joking. At the same time, he would transfer to Franklin & Marshall before disrespecting a woman. We sat and chewed bland chicken breasts smothered in barbecue sauce, and washed them down with mixed flavors of PowerAde. I experimented with grape-cherry and, of course, swallowed three pills before I was finished.

"Want some fake happiness?" I asked while offering him the orange bottle. He caught my joke in stride, though not even a hint of sarcasm accompanied my words.

"Nah man, already nice and happy," he winked and lifted an imaginary joint to his lips. Boy, did he love that green stuff.

Before I knew it, an hour had gone by and it was my favorite part of

the day. I hustled over to Musselman Stadium and entered our uncharacteristically lavish locker room. A few of my more cultured teammates were dancing around to the latest hip hop, already suited up. Knowing my limits when it came to dancing, I stuck to the lyrics and joined in singing the ever so elegant, *I LIKE ALL MY S's WIT TWO LINES THROUGH DEM SHITS!* There was no better way to prepare for two hours of potential brain damage. I looked up to see a blue and orange sign above the locker room door and immediately became stoic.

“Prepare. Compete. Execute.” I laced up my cleats and focused on its first instruction. I chewed a mouthful of wild berry Skittles and used a week-old PowerAde to swallow six pills. Two prepared me mentally and four dulled the pain of my bumps and bruises. Before taking the field, I looked fiercely at the lone picture hanging in the back of my locker. A thick, black goatee and a pair of bushy eyebrows surrounded two eyes identical to the ones that I saw when I looked in a mirror. I heard my father’s voice. *You are the closest thing to a gladiator that there is. These shoulder pads are your armor. Once you buckle that chinstrap you have no friends. The time to be friends is after the final whistle. Until then it’s time to win.* I snapped my helmet into place and entered the Coliseum.

After warm-ups, special teams practice, and a half hour of position-specific drill work, it was time for a short scrimmage. The starting offense lined up across from the rest of the defense and me for a five minute battle. Six plays into the block, I was winded. I was limping slightly from a less-than-pleasant helmet to the shin, and clutching my shoulder thanks to a re-aggravated labrum tear. But there was no time for pain as I aligned myself in preparation for the next play. Slightly late from trying to catch my breath, I crouched into my stance and dug my gloved hand into the turf. Before I knew it, the ball had been snapped, and I was out of position. I scrambled to gain control of my gap, and in doing so I overran the ball carrier. He faked a pitch, stuck a foot in the ground and scampered for seven yards before being brought down by our outside linebacker. I knew exactly what was coming.

“[Redacted Surname]!!” I turned around, ready to take my licks. The same coach who generously left me a key was about to rip into me like I was the biggest gift under the Christmas tree. “What is your fuckin’ job?!” he screamed.

“Make him give the ball,” I replied, with a thorough understanding of what I should have done during the play.

“So *do* your fuckin’ job! You’ve got ten other guys out here counting on you to do your job. Grow a set, and get it done!” he implored, loud enough for the cheerleaders — who were practicing 50 yards away — to

hear it. Anger was the vinegar, embarrassment was the baking soda, and my mouth was the clay volcano ready to lose a 4th grader the science fair. But then, just as it always seemed to, that deep, buttery voice clicked on in my head. *You cannot imagine the amount of stress you're under while your financial stability depends on a 19-year-old who is having trouble with his girlfriend to be in the exact right place at the exact right time on a football field.* I closed my eyes and unclenched my fists.

“Yes, Coach.”

I finished practice with unparalleled effort and ferocity. There was nothing I loved more than the game, and there was nothing I hated more than mediocrity. I raised my helmet into the air, surrounded by 94 others doing the same. We ended the workday with our closing ritual.

“BULLETS ON THREE! ONE, TWO, THREE!”

“BULLETS!” I bellowed, pledging my allegiance to my brothers in arms.

The majority of the team ran for the showers, ecstatic with thoughts of food and girlfriends and that sweet green relief. A few strolled towards the sideline and sat on the cool, metal bench in order to reflect on the day and shoot the breeze. I pulled my helmet back onto my head and put in my mouthpiece. As I jogged over to the blocking sled, my coach caught up with me. Was he going to apologize? Not in my wildest dreams.

“Does ‘Maryland Late’ affect you?” he asked, making sure I understood the play call he had just installed.

“Mno, isf enyfin-“ I stopped talking and spat out my mouthpiece. “No,” I repeated, “If anything, I need to rush more vertical to influence the tackle up field.”

“Good,” he said, and jogged off to go eat with the other coaches.

As much as I hated him, I loved him even more. He was the best football mind I had ever met; I could listen to him talk about the game for hours on end. He knew exactly how to get the best out of me on the field, too. I always told myself that if he got another job, I would go there with him.

I turned my attention to my post-practice delight: a one-man blocking sled with an iron base the color of unripe cantaloupe and a water-logged pad heavier than most people who used it. It looked older than the inside of Weidensall, probably because it was. If getting screamed at was my dinner, the sled was my dessert. I set it on the goal line and got to work. Again and again, I fired out of my stance and drove it as far as my lungs could tolerate – usually around 7 yards. By the time I had moved it to the fifty yard line, my teammates had gone inside and the sun was beginning to set. I turned it around and began the grueling trip back. As my body fatigued, my mental toughness began to give way. I wanted to stop and I

wanted it bad. I forced myself to think about the day's practice, to bring myself back to the embarrassment and the anger that all stemmed from being winded and unfocused. I heard my coach's words over and over. *Do your job. They're counting on you.*

My father lay motionless on the cold tile floor. There was no pulse and no heartbeat. I had a job to do. He took care of me, now I had to take care of him. He was counting on me. I felt his ribs crack under my desperation-fueled chest compressions. I breathed into his lungs with everything I had. The 9-1-1 operator on the other end of the phone was useless. My hysterical mother was useless. Everything was useless unless it was a heartbeat. I looked down at my best friend. My hero. With eyes slightly open and pupils rolled back, he would make a noise every so often. I hated that noise. It taunted me. *Do your job. He's counting on you.*

I dropped to my knees in front of the sled and rested my helmet-covered forehead on the turf. I gasped for breath as I watched tears and sweat roll off of my face and into the artificial grass. After several minutes I gathered myself and stood up. Sweat bubbled from the seams of my cleats with each heavy step towards the locker room. My shoulder throbbed and the piercing pain of turf toe accompanied me on my walk. I stood with my head bowed in the icy shower water until the last black bead from the turf had been rinsed from my body.

The week went by in a blur of kids in shirts covered in pink whales and tuition checks with too many zeros. It was Saturday and time for a blood bath with Susquehanna. Game day was extra beautiful because it meant a day without any pills. There was nothing to suppress my natural and rage-filled killer instinct. I didn't blink once on the walk to the field, my eyes fixated on the battleground. As if I needed it, Kanye threw wood on my fire as he drawled through my headphones. *Never gave in, never gave up, I'm the only thing I'm afraid of.* Very true.

Pregame rituals meant something different for everyone. Some sat quietly wearing headphones, undoubtedly listening to the same songs as they had for years. Others wrote initials on their wrist tape with flawless precision. Quarterbacks rubbed water on slick new game balls to enhance gripping ability. Receivers leaned in close to mirrors, making sure to paint on their eye black perfectly. Offensive linemen warmed up knee joints, praying this game wouldn't be their last. A group of specialists queued up a Brian Dawkins highlight video on the projector, letting the Hall of Fame Free Safety's bone-crunching artwork inspire them. I acted as if it were any old day of the week. I laughed with my neighbors as we quoted TV shows, and spat out rap lyrics whenever they crossed my mind. Aside from my game day gloves and cleats I might have been gearing up for another

practice. This was the calm before the storm. I saved every last bit of fire and focus for out on the field. I donned my game jersey and let the G on my chest fill my heart with pride. And finally, I stared into my father's eyes. *Find what you love, and be the best at it. Whether it's football or flooring, find it and let it kill you.* I felt a tug deep in my gut as I got ready to obey him.

"He's holding me, sir! He—he's holding my jersey! 64! Every play, sir!" I implored the referee to throw a penalty flag. "I've got places to be man, he can't hold me like that!"

The official nodded without even looking at me, only half listening as usual.

"You're getting away with murder over there, boy," I barked at their left tackle who wore number 64.

He shook his head and waved me off, fully aware of what he was doing.

"Better keep that shit up too, man. You know what'll happen if you let go!" I taunted him, knowing he couldn't block me legally.

A text message conversation with my cousin after his game the previous weekend taught me that it was easy to get in 64's head. I was coming for his heart. I lined up for the next play, adrenaline flowing through my veins. 64 waddled up to the line of scrimmage and squatted down in his stance. I studied him carefully. He had too much weight leaning backward. *It's a pass*, I thought as I elongated my stance, ready to get off the ball and into a pass rush as quickly as possible. I saw his eyes peering in towards the ball. *Dumbass doesn't know the snap count.* I had a good feeling about this play. The center fired the ball between his legs, back into the waiting hands of his quarterback. I was out of my stance with a step in the ground before 64 knew what hit him. I took three big steps up field and he kicked backwards, trying to keep up. As he punched his hands toward me, trying to get a hold of my chest, I violently chopped at them with my right arm, staying free and mobile. He opened his hips too quickly while trying to keep up and had all of his weight going backward. It was as if he had opened the gate to Heaven. In my case, Heaven was the soon to be cracked ribs of his quarterback.

I planted my foot in the ground and spun inside of 64, creating a dream-like path to the waiting passer. "Oh SHIT," 64 yelled, anticipating the coming events. I tore towards the quarterback like a dog after a cocky backyard rabbit, salivating as each step brought me closer to my prize. He didn't see me while looking for an open receiver, but at the last second turned his head my way. It was too late. I launched myself into him. The crown of my helmet connected with his facemask and my right shoulder with his chest. The sound of pads crunching together gave me chills. His

sharp exhale of agony as his head and body were forced into the turf was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard. I popped right up and threw my arms up toward our sideline, causing my teammates to roar with approval and create some precious momentum. I looked back at my prey, still motionless on the ground. *Won't be the last time, either.*

My teammates and I sprinted excitedly towards the locker room after laying a 21 point beating on the Crusaders. We jumped around, banged our helmets against the walls, and soaked in that sweet, sweet feeling. Our stern, reserved head coach forced his way to the middle of the pack and began to jump up and down, and the celebration roared on. After we calmed down, he congratulated us on a job well done and urged us to go celebrate with our families. I showered and changed back into my street clothes. The adrenaline had not yet worn off, so I could hardly feel the plethora of new injuries I'd acquired. After shaking hands with each coach and sharing a victory smile, it was time to celebrate.

I started the long, slow walk towards the crowded pavilion, alone, eyes fixed on my sneakers. I closed them for a moment, and immediately smelled worn, black leather and faint cigar smoke. The heated seats warmed my butt as I chewed the last bite of a Yodel and giggled. My dad took a sip of his Diet Pepsi with a twinkle in his eye, and a smile slowly crept up his face.

"Mrs. Potter again!" I implored, wanting to hear my favorite song. He peeked at me through the corner of his eye, sporting a sly grin.

"Annnndd...change!" he said, looking at the stereo, both hands loosely resting on the steering wheel.

Just then our favorite song from the Counting Crows' greatest hits album began to trickle out of the speakers. I hugged myself in a fit of laughter, as my dad had somehow changed the song without touching anything. (Of course, he was just using the buttons on the steering wheel, but it was still awesome.)

"You were AWESOME out there, man! How 'bout some of those blocks, huh?!"

I beamed from ear to ear, only ever wanting to impress my dad.

"You were LEAN. You were MEAN. You were a blocking MACHINE," he said, curling his arms down, flexing his biceps.

I copied his movements, my eight-year-old physique not quite matching what, at the time, looked like a Superman cartoon. We sang along with the Crows, twanging and drawling out our favorite lyrics. When the song ended he reached over with one of his massive, olive-colored, hair-covered hands and rubbed my head.

"I'm so proud of you, buddy."

I arrived at the pavilion for the post-game tailgate and took in the scene around me. My teammates were dispersed throughout the festivities, surrounded by family. I focused in on a few of them and my heart sank. I watched as they hugged their fathers tightly. Each time it was the kind of hug that lingers on for a few seconds longer than usual. I could see the pride in their eyes. They discussed intricacies of certain plays and basked in the love of the game. They each wore the same smile. It was the smile that so clearly illustrated the unspoken bond between father, son and football. I was tired of being strong, as tears flooded my eyes. I felt a stinging in my nose and my lips began to quiver. Clenching my jaw, I turned and walked home.

By the time I made it home, I had fought off the tears. Crying was for wusses. Jaw still clenched, I trudged up the steps to my room. Before I could reach for the knob, the door burst open.

“LET’S GOOOOO DUDE YOU FUCKED THAT KID UP! NICE FUCKIN’ WIN! 4-0 BABY!” My roommate wore a grin from ear to ear. He looked me in the eye and immediately understood. We shook hands and he pulled me in tight. As I threw my arms around him, the flood gates opened. Tears rolled down my cheeks as his shoulder muffled my reluctant sobs. We stood there in the hallway for a minute; he held on until he felt me let go. Still wearing a smile, he said, “Shotgun o’clock, yo!” and ran into the room to grab two beers. The last thing I wanted to do was talk, and of course he knew it. We jabbed holes in the aluminum and poured the cheap liquid down our throats. Taking seats on the couch, we sat in silence as he flipped on ESPN. I turned and glanced over at him. I felt lucky. A smile started to work its way across my face. A real smile, that wasn’t induced by drugs or pills or a TV show. I was with my family now, too.

“Proud of you,” he said, without looking at me.