

Introduction

Growing up, I always thought that I had to find a purpose in life. I felt like God put me on earth for a specific reason, whether it was to make an impact on a community or simply make an impact on my family. This has forced me to find a passion, this passion was football and computers. This passion grew throughout the years from training hard for football and learning different types of coding languages. This mindset had guided me as a student-athlete at ODU where I balance my passion for football and my academic pursuit as a major in cyber security.

Building the Foundation

As a child, I was drawn to both football and computers, I spent countless hours training for football but also learning about everything I could about computers. I had passionate dreams about playing football at a high level however, at the same time I was captivated by technology, curious about how computers worked and how technology make our world go round. My parents were no burden to me, they supported me one hundred

percent of the time and they were encouraged to keep me focused to let me live out my dreams and make them reality.

Football taught me the important of teamwork, discipline, and resilience. Whether it was waking up everyday running over four miles to lose weight, waking up weight training where the weight of being tired is on my shoulders, or the mental pressures that came with football. I learned to stay committed to football because it had given me a sanctuary to let me be myself. Football has given me the gift to let whatever is bearing weight on my shoulders to be released by controlled chaos. Another reason why I love football is because although it is a very violent game, you must be smart; there is a quote that every football player goes by: "Football is 90% mental and 10% physical." This means that mostly football is about schemes and problem solving. Like technology, although it isn't violent it takes a lot of mental capacity to understand all the components of the hardware and software of computers. All these attributes made me like computers more than I thought I did and make me start to really take them seriously.

Behind the Firewall

After a long winter of recruiting colleges, I ultimately chose Old Dominion University to be my home. One of the 2 reasons I chose ODU was the excellence they had in their cyber security program. Despite my passion for computers, I had some doubt about pursuing a major in cyber security, mainly because of bunch of my mentors told me it was going to be hard managing that and being an athlete. However, I stuck to my passion and declared for my major in cyber security, during my first semester of college I took my first cyber security class, and I fell in love with it immediately, that is when I knew I was fully committed to my major despite my doubts. One of the most impactful moments in my academic journey is the cyber security course "Ethical Hacking and Penetration Testing" this course really solidified what I wanted to do if for some odd reason football didn't work out. I felt like with my major coming to a close I wanted to do more that could open opportunities behind my degree. With my attributes from football, I was a natural leader so I decided to declare for a minor in business management, I feel like this minor will provide me with the tools I needed to problem solve and motivate others.

Behind the Helmet

Being apart of the football team has come with so many ups and downs. The lessons that I've learned have been life changing, this football program has shaped my character in so many ways. When I first got to ODU in the summer before school, I was a timid kid who just knew about the smallest details about football, I felt like I needed to change that. I woke up everyday to get better not only at my craft but my character.

During my freshman year I came into the season that I had no expectations so I should go out there and not be afraid to make a mistake and just go full tilt. This helped me in so many ways, the coaches saw me as relentless and fearless. Although I was just a freshman, they told me it would be a great idea to redshirt me. Which means they hold me back another year so I can have an extra year of eligibility. Now I didn't like it because that meant that I couldn't play until the last 4 games of the season, but I was willing to trust the process. The first 8 games of the season were hard because I knew

that I should be out there with my teammates on the big stage. When my name was finally called, a little bit of doubt started to creep in because it was my first college game. My first college game I playing was vs. James Madison in 2022 and some people would call this my “Welcome to College” game. After this game I knew that I needed to step up to be the player that I wanted to be, so I worked tirelessly to get stronger for the next game. After that we played Appalachian State, and I had earned a starting job. This was the best football I’ve played so far and after this game I earned my trust with the coaches. The final game of the season was South Alabama, this was single handedly the best game I played in my entire life. After this season everything started to go downhill, I felt like I proved my point, and I started to get complacent.

My sophomore year was a roller coaster of emotions, during the off-season of my freshman year I had switched back to my main position with was Linebacker. I was a natural at linebacker, so I thought. After my position change, I got back to work in the summer losing close to 20 pounds to get faster for my position. However, I was not

starting I was a backup to a close friend of mine, however; I did not complain because I knew that I had a lot to learn about the game and I wanted to learn from him. During my sophomore year I played significantly more than my freshman season averaging about 120 plays. Towards the end of my sophomore year my coach proposed me with a challenge to study the play book and become a leader like he knew I was.

During my junior year I broke out, through all my adversity, position changes, and challenges I've been through I finally earned my starting spot. During my summer before the 2024 football season, this was the hardest I've ever worked in my entire life trying to earn my starting spot and it paid off. I was playing my heart out the entire season, I started in 8 games until the most important game of the season. It was the second play of the second drive, I went in for a tackle and the rest of my season changed. Laying on the ground I couldn't feel my arm, it was completely numb, panic started to set in as I knew I wasn't going to be able to finish the game out. After a very stressful x-ray I dislocated my elbow which was season ending since we only had 4 games left, there was a 5-week recovery process. However, I refused to let my

circumstances hinder my ability to play the game that I love. I had been through adversity before, so I had a mindset of that I had to play another down of football this year. I started rehab and recovered and got cleared in 2 weeks just in time for our rivalry week against JMU. I ended up being a huge star and contributor to the defense this year and I only want to keep climbing.

Behind the Scenes of a Student Athlete

It has not been without its challenges to balance the demands of being a student-athlete. There were times when I was overwhelmed by the amount of work that came with being prepared for games and prepared for exams. But those difficult moments are there a chance for growth. I have had to learn to manage my time, to prioritize tasks and to ask for help when it is needed.

However, the relationship between academic achievement and athletic participation is more complex than a simple trade-off between time and effort. While being a part of the football team has provided me with invaluable opportunities for personal growth and development, both on and off the field, it has also required

sacrifices in terms of time and energy. There have been early morning practices, long bus rides to away games, and late nights spent studying and preparing for exams. But I believe that these sacrifices have been worthwhile, as they have allowed me to achieve my academic and athletic goals while also learning valuable lessons about time management, discipline, and teamwork.

In fact, I have found that being a student-athlete has enhanced my academic experience in many ways. Being part of a team has taught me the importance of teamwork, communication, and camaraderie, all of which have been beneficial in the classroom and in my interactions with professors and peers. Additionally, the discipline and time management skills that are necessary to succeed as an athlete have also been helpful in my academic pursuits. I have been able to stay motivated and focused on my studies, and I have been able to take on leadership roles within the academic community, such as serving as a tutor or mentor to my classmates.

Moreover, I have discovered that being an athlete has many advantages that have made my learning experience better in many ways. This is because a team is a team,

and one must work together, talk together, and be friends as well as colleagues.

Moreover, the discipline and time management skills that are required to be an athlete are also very useful in the academic process. I have been able to be more productive and focused in my studies and have also been able to take on leadership positions in the academic field, for example, being a tutor or a mentor to other students.

Conclusion

Looking back, my time as a student athlete at ODU has been one of growth, discovery and achievement. Not always easy, but incredibly rewarding, balancing football and cybersecurity. The lessons I've learned on the field and in the classroom have, in fact, made me a better person and have put me in a position to be prepared for a future with many possibilities. Life is like football; it is a strategy game. Every play is important, and one must be prepared both in terms of mind and body to be successful and one needs to have determination to succeed. Going forward, I will be ready to face

the next challenges in the cybersecurity world and overcome them. This is my story,
and I am proud of the path I have chosen.