

CHAPTER 1

A BEAST ON THE FIELD AND IN THE CLASSROOM

Like most American boys football was always a fascinating sport to me. As a kid I spent countless hours in front of the television set rooting for my favorite team, or playing sandlot football with my neighborhood friends. In some ways football was in my blood. My father, Carl Collins, briefly played professional football, but he never pushed me to play. In fact, my father waited until I chose to play for my middle school team before he even mentioned the sport to me. At age thirteen I decided to step away from the television set and onto the football field and play as part of an organized team. I was an eighth grader at Hawthorne Middle School when I tried out for the junior varsity team, easily making the squad as a linebacker. Even then, I was an imposing person – five feet ten inches tall and 220 pounds. I was a big kid, and a determined one. Before stepping onto the practice field I had already told myself that I would be the best at what I did, regardless of the sport I participated in.

My first year playing for Hawthorne I was named MVP of the team. I actually had the chance to play on the varsity team which had the more experienced players, but I chose to remain on the junior varsity team because I wanted to learn the game. It was important to me to be fundamentally sound, not just talented.

From Hawthorne it was on to West Charlotte High School where I continued to excel at football. In fact, midway through my junior year the coaches asked me to play both offense and defense and I agreed. I was a full-time two way starter, dominant on both sides of the ball. But I wasn't just dominant on the field, but also in my academics. I excelled in the classroom, earning recognition as student-athlete of the week because of strong grades and strong play on the field. I was a very self-motivated kid. No one had to push me to do my best in class or on the field. During my four years at West Charlotte I would receive football accolades such as all conference, all-state, and all-American, one of the highest honors in football. I also played in the Shrine Bowl, an annual high school all-star game featuring the best senior players from North Carolina and South Carolina.

Our West Charlotte team was also very successful. We were ranked among the best in the country and played in two state championship games, although we never won the title.

Football recruiters and scouts began noticing me early in my high school career. Questionnaires and letters from major colleges started arriving in the mail during my sophomore year. But it wasn't until my junior year that scouts really took notice of me, in most cases indirectly. Most times the scouts came to see a particular teammate of mine, a kid who was the nation's #1 ranked wide receiver coming out of high school in 1994. He was a phenomenal talent. This guy put fear in the hearts of opposing players and he made the scouts drool. Practically every major college football program in the country wanted to sign him. Some players on our team might have envied the attention he attracted but I didn't. I saw it as

opportunity. Whenever scouts came to see him practice or play I would also put on a show for them. Although I was always a hard worker, I stepped it up a notch when I knew scouts were on the sidelines watching our star player. Since I played offensive tackle, I figured they'd have to notice me if I totally dominated my opponent. It was my job to make sure the quarterback had time to throw the ball down the field. My thinking was that without me doing my job, the quarterback couldn't do his, and most certainly our Parade All-American wide receiver wouldn't be able to shine.

One other thing I did to stand out was to run sprints with the linebackers and tight ends. They tend to be faster runners than my fellow linemen, but when I ran with them I still managed to finish at the top of the group. That impressed the scouts and got me noticed. It showed that I was willing to put forth the extra effort to be the best. Soon, most of them wanted to know who the big kid was who was wearing jersey number 79.

Along with my smart and intense work ethic, my willingness to be a leader also helped set me apart from my teammates. I encouraged them when they were down, got in their face and challenged them to play better if they slacked off, and patted them on the back when they did well. They looked up to me and fed off my intensity and energy. But I wasn't just a verbal leader. I backed up everything I said with excellent play on the field. That, more than anything, earned me the respect of my teammates and coaches.

But none of this would have mattered had I not had the grades to go to the next level. That helped me stand out from my peers and opponents, particularly in the eyes of college coaches and scouts. I was goal-oriented, even at an early age. My goal was to play football in the Southeastern Conference, better known as the SEC. It's considered by some to be the toughest conference in the country. The University of Florida, the University of Alabama, Louisiana State University, Auburn University, and the University of Tennessee are among the schools that play in the SEC, and they all have won at least one national championship in either football or basketball – or both – and produced countless top notch players who've gone on to play professional sports. It's where I wanted to play, but I knew I couldn't just be a great athlete and expect to fulfill my dream. I also needed to be strong academically.

And I was. I maintained a B average throughout high school and scored in the 900s on the SAT, both of which earned me the attention of a scout from the University of Florida. The school offered me a full athletic scholarship, recruiting me to play defensive tackle. Although I played both offensive tackle and defensive tackle in high school I knew I couldn't do the same on the college level. My father advised me to play offensive lineman in college because it was a thinking man's position. He thought I had the best chance of reaching the next level from that position. Of course that decision was at odds with the University of Florida scout who'd recruited me to play defense. When I told him I wanted to play offensive tackle, he placed a call to then-Florida coach Steve Spurrier who within fifteen minutes agreed to offer me a full-ride to play on offense line.

I did it. I had made it to the big league, or so I thought. Being a member of the Florida Gators football team put me in elite company. But my joy quickly turned to sorrow during week three of my freshman year after the coaches decided to red-shirt me. Being red-shirted meant I could practice with the team all week but wasn't allowed to play on game day. I could still retain my freshman year of eligibility. Being red-shirted was a crushing blow. My pride was wounded and ego severely bruised. From the first time I stepped onto a football field in the eighth grade I was always an integral part of the team and routinely one of the best players on the field. Now, I wasn't even allowed on the field. My spirit sank. Although the coaches never came out and said it, I felt they red-shirted me because they thought I wasn't good enough to play.

After getting over the pain of not playing, I quickly realized that at any time the game of football could be taken from me. As a result of this revelation I became intensely focused on two things: The classroom and conditioning. I immersed myself in my studies and became a beast in the weight room. I vowed to become the smartest, strongest, and toughest guy on the football team that next season.

The following season I was considered a sophomore in the classroom, but was still labeled a freshman on the field because I had been red-shirted. I came out so prepared and worked so hard that I was named starting left tackle after taking the position of the guy who started at the spot the previous two seasons. He was one of the best offensive linemen in the SEC but I still unseated him. My play on the field was so impressive that I made the SEC all-freshman team that season. In 1995, we lost the national championship game to the Nebraska Cornhuskers. The following season we returned back to the big game and won the title by beating the Florida State Seminoles, 52-20.

My classroom achievement matched my on-field success. I maintained a B average throughout my entire college career, made the Dean's List, and eventually earned my Bachelor's of Science degree in sports administration during my fourth year in college. Although I had earned my degree I still had one year of football eligibility remaining. I could have played one more season with the Gators, but I opted to go pro. Every Monday was pro day at the University of Florida, a day in which pro scouts showed up to survey the team's talent. The same strategy I'd use to get notice in high school I also used in college, but I added something else to it. Of course I worked hard on the field, but I also used the media to gain more attention from the scouts.

On one occasion I made some controversial remarks about Tennessee quarterback Peyton Manning – the golden boy of the college football world at the time. I said he was overrated because he had never won a game in the Swamp against the Gators. The Swamp was the nickname fans called the stadium where our football team played its home games. I also made controversial remarks about Tennessee defensive tackle Leonard Little who was considered one of the best in the country at his position. I told reporters to “tell the little one I'll be looking for him.” Such comments became so-called bulletin board material, comments that supposedly angered the opposing team and motivated them to want to win even more. My coach, Steve

Spurrier, warned us not to make those kinds of controversial remarks because it sparked media frenzy and hyped the game even more.

But I didn't care. I knew that by calling out one of the best defensive ends in the country it would get media attention. People would be wondering who the trash-talking fat kid from Florida was. I put pressure on myself to shine and I did. I made controversial remarks but I backed them up when it came time to play.

After earning my degree I still had one year of football eligibility remaining, which meant I could have played one more year at Florida. But I was ready to move on. Coach Spurrier didn't want me to leave Florida. But I felt as if I was ready for the challenges of the NFL. In fact, I told an NFL coach, Bill Callahan, that I was bored with college ball. He said such cockiness was the main reason he drafted me in the first round of the 1998 NFL draft to play for the Oakland Raiders. The team signed me to a six year, multi-million dollar contract. It didn't take long for me to make an impact. Five games into my pro career I became the starting left tackle.

Making the leap from college to pro required more adjusting than I anticipated, but I was grateful to have reached my goal of playing professional football. The only real awe factor came when I lined up against players that I watched on television or read about, players such as Bruce Smith, Derek Thomas, Reggie White, and John Randall. But I held my own against them and eventually mastered the mental aspect of the game instead of just relying on my physical talent.

Unfortunately, knee injuries cut my career short. I had five knee surgeries during my seven year career and the wear and tear had taken its toll on me physically. I could have extended my career had I submitted to more surgeries, but I refused. I always believed that a successful NFL career was 10 years, but my pride wouldn't let me continue to play if I wasn't at 100%. For the second time in my career the game that I loved was taken away from me, but this time I knew that I would never have the opportunity to play football again.

Following my retirement from football I returned to my hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina but I wasn't sure what was next. I'd dabbled in real estate and for a while and really enjoyed it. But soon my interest waned. A good friend of mine, a former 12-year NFL veteran got me interested in coaching high school football. He and I worked hard together molding young athletes, trying to help them get to the next level. We called several of our college football sources with the hopes of getting athletic scholarships for our players, but we hit a lot of road blocks and initially didn't have much success.

That's when I began studying the intricacies of the college recruiting process. Although I experienced it first-hand as a player I really didn't know the ins-and-outs of the system. And so I delved into learning about it. I studied the NCAA's guidelines and academic requirements for potential student-athletes – everything from the NCAA clearinghouse registration process to the number of official visits an athlete can take, to the importance of core courses. Soon, I became passionate about helping high school athletes maneuver through the college recruiting system. I held seminars in which I talked with high school athletes, parents, and coaches about how to become a legitimate college prospect. What I discovered during this time was there was a void, a major disconnect between high school athletes and colleges coaches. Students really didn't know

what their options were when it came to getting into college, nor did they know the recruiting process. Most thought all they needed to do was simply be a great athlete and their dream of playing for an elite college would be realized. A lot of student-athletes weren't taking their academics very seriously, nor did they realize the potential benefits of going to a smaller college. For many of them, the emphasis was on just being an athlete instead of a *student-athlete*.

That's why I decided to write this book; to offer insight into how to get an athletic scholarship to play college ball whether you play baseball, volleyball, lacrosse, basketball, football, or any one of the other 23 NCAA sponsored varsity sports. The student-athlete's first priority in college is to earn a degree. They must understand that it's not all about trying to play professional sports. After all, very few make it to the pro level. Practically everyone knows a high school athlete who was great at their sport who never made it to college because they didn't take their academics seriously enough. Whenever I hold seminars or talk one-on-one with a high school athlete and their parents, I try to get across to them their priorities should be academics first, then athletics. I currently work as a Regional Scouting Director for Collegiate Sports of America. One thing I tell parents and coaches is that I would rather take a good athlete who has great grades over a great athlete with poor grades, because the athlete with good grade give has more options of getting into college. It's important for kids to not allow sports to use them; instead, they should use sports to get what they need – and that's a *free* education via an athletic scholarship.