

Four short football stories

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As a sophomore in high school I watched my close friend, Bob Warren, break his neck playing football. He was quadriplegic, although he could move his arms. My parents, that is, my mom (my dad seemed ambivalent) made me quit playing football that year. I spent a good part of my time during my high school years as a semi-live-in nurse for Bob. I gained a clear sense of the unforgivingness of some life events. Bob and I subsequently had many adventures together.

When I played high school football in the early 70s, concussions were not part of the conversation. Although not formally diagnosed, I am sure I suffered my share of them. The most severe, as I recall, occurred when I got knocked cold from a helmet-to-helmet hit (fair play at that time) during a kickoff. I came to after only a few seconds and proceeded to play my position as quarterback — in a fog — from instinct (it seemed) rather than purpose. I mildly fret about the possibility of lasting damage from my concussions.

I was a reasonably good athlete in high school. Playing sports was fun, exhilarating, but I was not coached well in high school. I walked on to both the football and basketball teams at the University of North Carolina. I made both teams. But I had retained the idea that playing sports was for fun. Not so (for me) at the college level. I was not prepared. And I certainly

was not physically talented enough, nor committed enough to make up for my lack of talent, to compete well at the college level. (Nonetheless, one of the coolest moments of my life was when I made the freshman basketball team in a matter involving five seconds — out of sheer physical effort and commitment.) One of the best things that happened to me was being seriously injured as a sophomore during football practice. I walked away from it all.

During my second semester as a freshman (while I was still playing football), I wrote an essay for my English class concerning the detrimental aspects of allowing kids to play football as youngsters. This topic was my choice. It was our second class assignment. I didn't know that my teacher had just worked though this issue regarding her son, in the end allowing him to play pee-wee football. She gave me a 'C' on my essay. I received a grade of no higher than a 'C' on all of my assigned writings in the course. I had previously decided to become an English major after a wonderful experience in my English class my first semester. I didn't major in English. During my senior year I was sitting on a rock wall on the main quad of the campus in the lovely spring sunshine. My second-semester English teacher approached, sat down, and started a conversation. She offered her sincere apology for how she had treated me in her course. Out of the blue. She revealed that my essay had weighed heavily on her.