

Chapter 1

The Man Behind the Boat

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2

Row the Boat

The Hard Way

Growing up as a runt on the block always seemed like an uphill challenge. Little did I know that the “underdog” way of life was paving the way for what I would need to succeed in a career that humbles and challenges the proudest and strongest of men. The chip on my shoulder started when I was young and eventually turned into a crack. I didn’t feel I had to prove to anyone else that I could achieve my own dreams; rather, it was more that I had to prove to myself that I was everything I said I wanted to be.

I have always been referred to as the “King of the Toos.” *Too* small, *too* short, *too* slow, *too* young, *too* inexperienced, and on and on—any kind of “too” you can think of, I’ve probably heard it. This kind of label makes people do two different things: run and forget, or play and prove. I chose to play and prove. My dad, Phil, always knew I was going to be an underdog with an undersized frame who would have to prove my worth on the sports field. My dad is 5-foot-5 and was a boxer in his youth. Whenever I would come home from shooting hoops or throwing the baseball or any other athletic endeavor, he would ask, “Are you done?” When I told him yes, he would reply, “Well, that’s fine, but don’t forget, there is always someone out there taking one more rep than you just did.” Early on he was instilling in me that my path would *not* be easy and I would have to work to achieve success. He knew I had very big dreams, and he prepared my mind to think, focus, and respond the right way.

How did he do this? Well, when I was growing up you didn’t have to show your birth certificate, fingerprints, and

bloodwork just to prove your age. (I'm joking, but you get the idea.) If there was an 8-year-old baseball team, everyone just assumed all members of the team were 8. They took your word for it. My dad made sure that I was always "playing up," so when I was 8, I played on the 10-year-old team. When I was 10, I played on the 11- or 12-year-old team. I learned at an early age that there would always be people out there with an easier path than me. I saw how they were more skilled, more physically mature, bigger, stronger, and faster. However, the skill they possessed was only part of the equation. Being younger and a late bloomer, I was going to have to find other ways to succeed and win. I started to value the "talent" of a person at an early age more than just the "skill."

Knowing that I wasn't the most skilled on the field and being smaller, shorter, and slower than most of the other kids on my team and in the league, I recognized that talent was much more than physical ability and stature. I discovered that *talent* (the how, heart, spirit, creativity, unconquerable will, effort, soul, passion, ability to be a great teammate, and refuse-to-lose mentality) were a big part of success and who I was, and I could use *my* talent to my advantage. I had to play smarter, work harder, and find ways to do it better for longer. My game had to be different. I didn't have a choice if I wanted to succeed. People often say that talent is something you are born with and skill is something you develop. However, I believe "skill" is what you were born with based on genes from your parents and "talent" is the unmeasurable force that allows your skill to develop into something really special based on all the experiences in your life.

Not only did my dad teach that the talent of a person mattered the most, but he also made me see that I could connect my teammates and friends and other boys who lived on my block. Even though I was the youngest on the block, I wasn't afraid to talk to anyone. I was very confident and kind as a young person and saw the good in everyone. I was always taught that there is so much more good in a person than there is bad, so find the good, bring it out, give others the benefit of the doubt. Judge those on how they treat you and stand up for others who don't stand up for themselves.

But the road to prove myself was longer than most because I was the youngest and got picked on more than the other kids. For instance, one afternoon after walking up the hill from trading baseball cards with the kids on the block, some of the older kids tore up my cards and sent me home with my tail between my legs for not trading my best cards with them. I arrived home sad, mad, and frustrated. My dad took one look at me and said, "You have two options—sit here and cry, or go make it work." Simple yet powerful. It was my job to find a way to make the situation work after being embarrassed and humiliated by the kids on the block. "Find a way" was the lesson: even on the days when you don't feel like it, go make it work with the other kids on the block who just humiliated you in front of the others. Sit here and cry or go find a way to make it work for you.

One Christmas I received a pair of boxing gloves and we used them to box each other in the street. The older kids would assign who was going to fight, and then each fighter got one glove since mine were the only pair. Even though I was the youngest, everyone loved to watch me

fight because I wouldn't quit. The older kids would give me the left-handed glove, knowing I'm right-handed, and give the right-handed glove to the older kid I had to box. Then the older kids would come to *my* corner to help me in between rounds and cheer me on. I used to think they just loved seeing me get the crap kicked out of me, but as I matured, I understood what they liked most was that I never quit. Did I get the crap kicked out of me? Yes, most of the time, but I never stopped fighting and that's what they loved to see. This would help me develop leather skin. I called it developing leather skin for all the tough situations in my life ahead that I would have to face later on.

Kaneland High School in Illinois is where I truly started to find my passions on the field and courts. I ended up being a three-time, three sport All-State athlete in football, basketball, and track. I averaged 24.8 points per game in basketball (most of my points came off of hustle on the defensive side of the court). On the track I ran the 300 intermediate hurdles and the 400 (two gut races that were close to each other in the meets) along with triple jump, long jump, 4x1, 4x4, and high hurdles. In football I was a wide receiver on a back-to-back 14–0 Illinois State Championship team and set numerous state and school records in receiving. However, at the end of my high school career I was 5-foot-9 and 150 pounds soaking wet, and ran a 4.8 40. So, as you can imagine the scholarships were not flying in. Then came a summer football camp at Northern Illinois University. This would be the first event that would make my football career what it is today.

Northern Illinois University was located 20 miles west of Sugar Grove, where I basically grew up. I went to the

summer camp before my senior year in high school. I didn't have the typical size, speed, and frame to pass the eye test for a division one scholarship. So I had to go to a summer camp to get looks from college coaches. It was one of those intense camps where you practiced and played hard for four days, three practices a day, in helmets and shoulder pads, on the old AstroTurf. I knew the only way I was going to be noticed and respected was if everyone could see my heart and consistency of effort, and truly trust that I was the real deal. I left that camp with turf burns all over my body. I dove for every ball, caught every ball thrown to me, and left no doubt in the coach's mind that I could play at the D1 level despite my size! It paid off. During the last week of official visits at NIU I was offered the last available full-ride scholarship that year by Head Coach Joe Novak to play football and get my elementary education degree. All the coaches who worked for him at the time told him I was too small, too slow, and there was no way I was good enough. He told them all this was "his" last scholarship and he was taking me no matter what. This one decision by my former head coach, taking a chance on me, would change my life's path forever.

During my time at NIU I saw us go from a team that had gone 3–30 over a 3-year span before our class would enroll to a 10–2 season my senior year, beating Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Maryland at home, and Iowa State at home, all in the same year. The turnaround at NIU was complete and we laid the foundation for the future success of the program. I finished my career by setting numerous school records as an All-MAC wide receiver, an academic All-American, and

earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education. My individual and our team accomplishments weren't easy. We had a saying back then that still resonates with the NIU program today: "The hard way!" Our path was hard, but I've learned the hard way is usually the right way.

Make the Most of Your Opportunities

Not many people thought I would ever play in the NFL. Why should they? I didn't have the prototypical size or speed of an NFL wide receiver. However, in 2004 I was picked up as an undrafted free agent with the San Francisco 49ers. We had 14 WRs on the depth chart the day I arrived at mini-camp. Teams usually keep five or six receivers on their team. Based on the receivers already on the team and the new draft picks, about eight people were competing for one spot on the active roster and one practice squad spot. The first mini-camp was a three-day camp. I understand now, since coaching in the NFL, that the very first mini-camp says a lot about how the coaches feel about you and how many reps you may get. As an undrafted rookie I didn't receive any significant reps all weekend at that first mini-camp.

During our last day, I wondered if my chance would ever come or if I would be cut before getting to show them what I was made of. Fast-forward to the end of the last day. Coach Dennis Erickson gathered the team at the end of practice and told us we were going to have a conditioning test. My ears perked up like a dog does when you ask them if they want to go outside and play. This was my chance, no matter what Coach Erickson made us do, I *had* to find a way not only to

do well, but to win the contest. This was the only way I was going to get noticed by the staff, players, and management. It was the *only* way I would be able to see another day in a 49ers uniform. It was the only way at this point I could show them my talent and heart! This was it.

When Coach told us we were going to do the beep test (The Pacer), I thought to myself, “I have actually done this test before.” It consists of a series of beeps that steadily get faster as the test goes on. A beep starts you and a beep ends you. You must beat the beep to advance on to the next round. I still remember to this day the sound of the beep, the focus I had to beat the beep, and who was running with me. Jeff Garcia, the former San Francisco quarterback, had set a franchise record in this test with somewhere around 140 beeps. I didn’t know that going into the test; all I knew was that if I wanted to see tomorrow and not get cut, I was going to have to win the whole thing.

As the race went on it came down to two people: Brandon Doman, the rookie QB from BYU, and me. We were stride for stride through 70/80/90/100 beeps. The team had surrounded us both, as if they were watching an impromptu race on the school playground. At 110/120, still neck-and-neck, wobbling just to stand up. Then 130/135. On rep 140 we both crossed the finish line and collapsed. It was over. We *both* won and finished at the exact same time and same place.

Immediately we were celebrated by teammates and coaches. Everyone knew Brandon, but through the course of the race I made them know me. In that 20-minute race, my heart, passion, and character were on full display, witnessed by anyone who was watching. I gave them all a reason to not cut me just yet! Before we left the field, Coach Erickson said,

“Brandon, you and number 10, that freaking warrior, break it down.” So we did, together! I’m not sure everyone knew my name at this point, but at least number 10 had made it to tomorrow. Going from getting cut to lasting two and a half years in the league started by just gutting through a playground race that changed the course of my future forever. We never know when that unexpected challenge might be what sets our future course.



Hard Work, Opportunity, and Fate

In 2004 I made the practice squad and played against New England in the last game of the year, for my first true Sunday NFL game! Dream complete! The next week Dennis Erickson was fired and was replaced by Mike Nolan, a man who

would shape my coaching and playing career forever. I wear a tie on the sideline for two men who made me who I am as a coach: Mike Nolan and Jim Tressel. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be a coach today.

In 2005, I made it all the way up to the number 3 WR on the depth chart. I was the starting slot WR, but in the pre-season against Oakland I blew out my shoulder covering a kickoff. I was put on injured reserve that next week and my season was over. Mike Nolan called me up to his office and gave me the option of going home to get my surgery and rehab (which most players do when their season is over) or staying and helping coach our young WRs. Jerry Sullivan was our WR coach at the time, and he allowed me to work with the young players before our morning meetings. I was going to help the same guys that I would be competing against next year for playing time. But I wanted to help the team, and the team came first. So each day I met with the rookies in the morning to help them install our offense for the week and after practice I would work with them on the field. Coach Nolan's office overlooked the practice facility, so he saw me work daily with the young players.

The next summer in the off-season leading up to training camp, I blew out my hamstring. Again, another setback put me two weeks behind everyone and would make me miss time in training camp as well. Coach Nolan called me into his office one morning and gave me the news no player wants to receive. It was an unusual setting because his wife was in his office as well. I thought to myself, "He's going to cut me with

his wife listening? What a jerk!” Kathy was giddy too, like she was excited I was getting cut. Salt in the wound. Yes, he did cut me. That was the point of me going up there. However, what came next truly shocked me. After he cut me, in the next sentence he offered me a coaching job on his staff. That’s why Kathy was smiling. She knew I was going to be offered a job.

“What kind of job?” I asked.

Coach Nolan replied, “I don’t know yet. I don’t have a job open but I’m going to invent one for you because I think you should get into coaching.”

I was taken aback. I was devastated that I had just gotten cut, but then I was immediately offered a job. Talk about experiencing a wide range of emotions in one moment. An NFL head coach had been watching me coach the young players, and he believed I could be an asset to his organization! As with most things in my life, I could only get somewhere I dreamed of if someone gave me a shot and believed in me enough to get there. Mike Nolan did. I was honored. As it turned out, though, I didn’t take the job, because another life-altering call was one day away.

After a lot of prayer and signs of faith, I came to the conclusion that my football playing career was over. An NFL head coach thought enough of me to ask me to start my coaching career. I always wanted to teach. This would be the best of both worlds, teaching and coaching football! After some long thought and not passing a physical with the Chicago Bears, I decided I was going to take Coach Nolan up on his offer.

Just as I was about to call him, my phone rang with a call from Columbus, Ohio. I picked it up to find Jim Tressel on the line. I had never met him, but Jim asked if I was interested in becoming the offensive and special teams' graduate assistant (GA) at Ohio State! I thought to myself, "I've never met him, I never applied, I'm about to take the job in SF, how in the world does he know me and why does he want me?" It turned out that Mike Sabock, who coached me at NIU, was a fraternity brother of Jim's and knew I wanted to coach, let Jim know I got cut in training camp and was now moving into coaching, and that if any jobs opened up, I'd be perfect.

As fate would have it, Coach Tres actually had a spot open because the offensive GA who was supposed to have the job couldn't get into grad school at the last minute, so they were scrambling to find someone to take the job late in the process. And that's how I got my coaching start—fate and people believing in me and giving me an opportunity to prove myself.

I told Coach Nolan I was taking the OSU job and explained that I needed a clean cut from the NFL at the time because if I coached the same guys whom I thought I was better than, it would be hard for me to move on from playing to start my new career. He understood and to this day is one of my biggest mentors in my career and in my life. As I said, I wear a tie on the sideline for the two men who wore ties when they were head coaches so people know it's because of them that I am coaching on that sideline. I honor them every game and

will always do so. I wouldn't be where I am without Jim Tressel and Mike Nolan. My gratitude runs deep, and I will always represent those men in the best way I can.

I was a coach and I now had the opportunity to pass on what I learned from the coaches who invested in me. My coaches were and still are the greatest influences in my life. From my time at Kaneland High School under Hall of Fame Coach Joe Thorgesen, where I learned that a group of individuals is not a team, but if those individuals can bond together around common goals, drown out the outside critics, and truly put aside personal success for the team, they can accomplish far more than a simple group of individuals. From Coach Erickson I learned to believe in someone's talent, not just their skill. Skill can only take us so far; the ultimate competitor is someone whose talent matches their skill. Coach Nolan taught me about class and is still the classiest man I have ever met. Everything he does, he does the right way and with class, even the hard conversations and the hard days.

Coach Tressel taught me to care for *everyone* inside the organization. Everyone's job matters and if you care more about them as people rather than as players or employees, you'll get their best. Coach T always taught me that we don't have jobs without players, so everything inside your program should be about them. Each day find creative ways to make the student athletes better students, players, fathers, husbands, and men. Coach Novak at NIU taught me to take a chance on someone whom others might be overlooking. Everyone needs a shot, a break, and someone else to believe in them to get them going as he did for me. Coach Greg Schiano

at Rutgers taught me how to demand the most out of myself and be the most detailed and incredibly organized coach I could be. He also taught me always to coach your coaches to become better men and teachers. Finally, I have learned from every assistant coach with whom I worked with. A good coach learns not only from the other coaches around them, but from their players too. Learning and growth are keys to success.

