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Taliaferro beats the odds

Doctors gave the ex-football star a 3 percent chance of walking again. But he thought differently.



By Joe Logan
Inquirer Golf Columnist

For thousands of sports fans, the most enduring and horrifying image they have of Adam Taliaferro is of the then-18-year-old Penn State cornerback lying motionless on a football field, his neck broken, paralyzed in an instant, his prospects for recovery abysmal.

"I could only blink," Taliaferro recalled. "The doctors gave me only a 3 percent chance of ever walking again."

Yesterday, at the graduation for the 2008 class of the Rutgers School of Law-Camden, Taliaferro didn't so much walk again as glide across the stage at the Susquehanna Bank Center to pick up his diploma. True, there was a hint of a limp, but it was not nearly as pronounced as the smile on his face.

"It has been a long journey, and we are just happy," Taliaferro's father, Andre, said as he beamed from the audience. With him, as they have been every bit of the way, were his wife and Adam Taliaferro's mother, Addie, as well as Adam Taliaferro's longtime girlfriend, Erin Mulshenock, a former swimmer at Penn State, and her parents.

From Penn State, news of Taliaferro's graduation prompted a statement from his former coach, Joe Paterno: "Adam has been an inspiration to everyone at our university and many others. He is courageous, dedicated and an example of being able to overcome extreme adversity. He's a hero."

Once Taliaferro, 26, takes a little time off to visit Disney World and prepare for the bar exam, he has a job awaiting him at the Center City office of Montgomery, McCracken, Walker & Rhoades, where he'll join the labor and employment department.

"They offered me a job, and I quickly accepted it," said Taliaferro, who spent two summers as an associate at the firm.

Taliaferro's old civil procedure professor, John S. Beckerman, had no doubt that the same grit and determination that got Taliaferro this far would also make him a fine lawyer.

"A lot of folks focus on what Adam has had to overcome to recover from his injury and to get through law school," Beckerman said. "But what you need to know is that this is not anyone who ever asks for any accommodations. He is a person of fortitude and perseverance that is amazing, and he is smart as a whip."

As many sports fans may vividly recall, on Sept. 23, 2000, in the fourth quarter of a road game against Ohio State that Penn State lost, 45-6, Taliaferro was injured while making a tackle.

A standout at Eastern High School in Voorhees and The Inquirer's South Jersey player of the year in 1999, Taliaferro had his pick of schools. Moreover, he was a strong prospect to eventually play in the NFL.

But, without warning or reason, he was suddenly down and out that afternoon, sprawled on the field with a fractured fifth cervical vertebra near the base of his neck.

To this day, that initial helpless moment remains the worst of it for Taliaferro.

"Just lying there on the field, the uncertainty, not knowing what was wrong," Taliaferro said yesterday. "I remember trying to get up and roll over, and it felt like my whole body was asleep - numb. I had no idea what was going on."

Even after surgery, the doctors told Taliaferro nothing about his condition. They told his parents the prognosis was not good.

Fortunately for Taliaferro, his parents didn't pass on the grim news. Back home in Philadelphia, at McGee Rehabilitation Hospital, they told him only that he could - he would - eventually walk again.

Looking back, did Taliaferro realize he could muster the resolve to essentially pull off a miracle?

"Not at all," he said, thinking back to those months. "First of all, my parents were there every second of every day. I had people all around me encouraging me. With them, I was able to accomplish things I never thought I could."

To the amazement of family, friends, doctors and sports fans, 11 months after the injury, on Sept. 1, 2001, as the Nittany Lions were about to take on Miami, Taliaferro skipped and jogged into Beaver Stadium at Penn State before 109,000 cheering fans. He also went back to school, finishing his degree at Penn State.

Life now is all gravy. He takes nothing for granted.

"Just getting up out of bed every morning, walking, brushing my teeth - just being able to get up and do everyday life functions - is special to me," he said. "I no longer look to the future. I appreciate the moment. I appreciate the now."

He holds no grudge against football. "People ask me if I would let my kids play football," he said, nodding as if to say, "yes."

"I tell them it was a freak accident," he said. "I can't blame anybody. It just happened."

On a scale of 1 to 10, Taliaferro put his recovery at about 7 1/2, which is about where he expects to remain even with daily workouts on the elliptical trainer to maintain his progress. He has no complaints.

"Every injury is different, but from what I hear, you sort of plateau after about five years," Taliaferro said. "It has been eight years for me, so I think I've got everything I am going to get back. You're not going to see me running anywhere any time soon."

With that, Taliaferro grinned and walked - quite happily, thank you - off to live the rest of his life.

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