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Did you ever seriously try to picture your future adult life when you were a kid? When kids do this, they typically think (well, at least I did) of their adult selves as essentially bigger versions of their current selves. We never think about all of the possible life-changing factors that potentially change your life forever. I'm sure you have had a moment in your life that you can't imagine what your life right now would be like were it not for the decision that you made right then and there. I have had that moment. Sure, there are probably a dozen or so in the average person's life, but this one was so monumentally changing to me that I have no idea where I would be. That was the day I joined the greatest high school football team in the history of Illinois: The Maine South Hawks.

It's the first round of the 2010 IHSA playoffs. The venue: Wilson Field. Maine South Hawks versus the Notre Dame Dons; their eternal rivals. Essentially, if Park Ridge up and had a Civil War, this is what it would be. The cross-town rivalry, despite the fact they had only met on the gridiron 2 times prior to that day, and each time the Dons had been shut down. Now it was my turn. I would play in the playoffs! I march out on the field. I feel thousands of eyes on me. I know what I must do; drilled into my head for three years. We got in our positions. Whistle. Ball is snapped. Hit. Rip move. Duck under. A shout from the sideline, "PASS!" Quarterback in my sights. Tackle. Kill.Kill.BAM! Whistle. This was 3 seconds of play. It is near-impossible to put all the feelings I felt during those 3 seconds on paper, but even as we went back to the huddle, I still thought of how I had gotten into this, and how no one I knew four or five years ago would

ever believe where I am today.

Going back to memories of Middle School in my mind is a bit of an awkward experience for me. Don't get me wrong; Middle School was a fairly nice time for me, then a 5ft 6in, 282lb cheerful sack of cheer and fat. I had few friends, fewer enemies, and an absolute hatred of anything to do with manual labor or exercise. I feared the dreaded Centennial Park Mile Run like you would fear a vicious cougar. Heavy Lifting? Hell no. I was weakened by my years of sitting on my ass in my basement playing nothing but Halo 3 and Fable II. At least I had a nice gym teacher. Mr. Barker was a dream come true for me. He often just let us play around instead of sticking to the lesson plan, and this is why I loved him. But I could tell he expected better from a lot of his students, particularly me. One day, near the end of 8th grade, we were throwing shot-put in the "Spring Sports" unit in gym. I decide to try and throw it pretty hard. I was surprised at my distance: I had beaten the entire class! I tried to be modest about it and say that is was just luck. I really did not like attention back then. As I was leaving class later, Mr. Barker asked if he could talk to me for a bit. He said, "Kyle, I gotta say, you're a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for!" I was incredibly shocked. No one had ever complimented me at something athletic before then. I mumbled my thanks and started off again, but he continued, "I know you haven't really been thinking about High School yet, but Maine South has some really great sports teams. Maybe you could play football there!"

Of course, I had no intention of ever even considering the possibility of playing football. That sport was more foreign to me then the lost language of the Zulu or something. I didn't know a halfback from a left guard, and I did not really care. "Oh, but you like video games Kyle!

Didn't you ever play Madden?" No, I used to hate the EA Sports franchise too. Don't get me started on that. Anyways, when I got home that day, my dad was sitting on the couch, watching a football game, effectively barring me from watching any of my after-school cartoons. I just sat there for a bit. Then he asked, "How was your day, Kyle?" I said, "Pretty good. Mr. Barker thinks I should play football." I froze. That was the exact opposite of what I wanted to do. I wanted to act like that conversation never happened. My dad is a massive football fan. He used to play linebacker for his high school and was always pushing for me to do something active. From Little League soccer to baseball, he had tried and failed to raise an interest in sports to me. He had tried everything, except of course, football. I am pretty sure he did not do this when I was younger because I am pretty sure my mom would not approve whatsoever. Anyways, my dad instantly perked up. "Oh, I had actually been looking at Maine South's football. Summer Camp starts June 15th. Want to do it?" I didn't know what to say. No, screw that. I knew exactly what to say. I would say no. Plain and simple. But...I couldn't say it. Something in his face. It was...hope? Joy? Both?! Regretting it the minute it escaped my lips, "Sure thing dad! I would love to give it a shot!" Mom was not particularly happy, but she grudgingly accepted my transition.

Fast-Foreword a few weeks later: I was just pulling up to the still ominous Maine South campus, feeling fearful for my life. Mom wished me luck, handed me my water bottle, and drove off. Walking into the then-foreign Fieldhouse, I wondered if I was in over my head. I had heard terrible rumors about the football team. I was told that many dropped dead from exhaustion. In the fieldhouse, I noticed very few people I knew. Maybe only 3. I knew this would be rough. I also noticed that everyone that was there had done the famous Park Ridge Falcons football

program in Middle School. I was the lone wolf. Well, wolf is an overstatement. I was simply one thing: Fresh Meat. A man came over with an air of power and superiority, yet also with a bit of cheerfulness. It was Head Coach David Inserra. Though I didn't know it then, I was in the presence of one of the most powerful men in Park Ridge. "Gentlemen," he barked, "Today you start on a great journey that will likely last you your entire four years here at Maine South. Some of you will not make it. Some of you will succeed. Others may quit. Which one will you be?" No response. "OK then, 25 push-ups! Down!" Oh dear God, what had I gotten myself into?

After our so-called "warm-up" (painful) we went into our undersized weight cage to lift. Our coaches assumed that since I was lineman sized I could lift lineman sized weight. They were completely wrong. I could hardly lift more than the smallest kid on the team. I struggled to lift up the barbell completely, all the while watching everyone bench then-insurmountable amounts of weight. It was incredibly embarrassing. After that debacle, we were told to go out to the field. As we were walking, I was thinking, "Cool. Maybe we are going out on the football field to play a game or something." I could not have been more wrong. We were told that we must run 4 laps of the outdoor track in 4 minutes, and if someone did not make it, we would have to run it again. Needless to say, I failed to make the time. At least I was not alone. My fellow linemen had not made the time either. "Again!" 5 minutes later, we were gasping for breath. Someone puked. "Ah, shit dude" "Nasty, just nasty man" This was not going well. "Again!" Oh Jesus.

Mom came to pick me up around 6 o'clock. She looked horrified at the sight of me, stumbling over to the car, dragging my duffel bag. I opened the door, slumped down on the floor.

The A/C was on. It was probably the greatest feeling I had ever felt. “I brought you a cherry Slurpee Kyle,” she said, “I figured you would be tired. Then she drove off. My mom is possibly the sole reason I ever made it through the torture that was freshman football camp. Without her, I would have just stayed in bed and likely refused to go to practice. My dad played a part in that too, but it was a more supportive role than my mom’s. It was more of a...enthusiastic role. He drove me to work my hardest and always try, even if I was not going to play in the games, just make a name for myself. Freshman year rolled on, and as the season neared its end, I began to notice that I was already changing. I had dropped close to 30 pounds, had cut my massive hair down to a buzz, and was finally able to see my feet without sucking in my gut. Life was getting better. Oh, and then there was the football season, of course. The Hawks took their first State Championship since 2000, in an undefeated season with the legendary running back Matt Perez and quarterback Charlie Goro. On the freshman “B” team, we went undefeated also, but since we were freshmen, it obviously was not a big deal to anyone but our parents. But we didn’t care. I may not have started at my position, (Offensive Guard) but I played at least one quarter in every game. I was happy with my contributions, and I looked forward to being on next year’s team. Maybe I could start! Or play center! Time would indeed tell...

Once again moving forward in time: It is June 15th again. 2009. Time for a new season. We had heard rumors from the juniors and seniors that sophomore summer camp (otherwise known as “Camp Tumilty” for the sophomore head coach) was possibly the most painful, gruesome experience you could have in the Maine South Football program. For once, my fears were wrong. It seemed that while we were running more, hitting more, and lifting more, the difficulty had not increased. I thought that the upperclassmen had lied, but then I realized what it

was: I was just more fit. I could handle it now more than I could freshman year. “This could be a great year!” I exclaimed, “Who knows, I might start!” Unfortunately, fate had other things in mind for me. After I had finally played center in a game against Maine West and managed to screw up enough to make a mockery of myself, I decided the next day in practice to make a switch to the other side of the ball. Defense: The art of killing the other team’s quarterback. I told Coach Stock, our line coach, and he said I could give it a shot if I wanted. The very first practice run of a play, I shot out, only to feel a blinding pain in my hand. I dropped to the ground. My left ring finger was nothing but a bloody stump.

Hours later in the hospital, they told me they had managed to fix my finger. “If it were any worse, you would not HAVE a finger. You should feel lucky.” I certainly did not feel lucky I knew that this was a season-ending injury. I knew I was done. But not forever, of course. That year, the Hawks once again pulled off a State Championship, the second year in a row! As I headed off to my first Varsity practice now as a junior, I wondered if we could do it again. I wondered about the possibility of a so-called “Three-peat”.

As we went on into the 2010 season, I quickly realized that I had a better chance of actually playing in a game by going on the defensive side of the ball. Specifically, nose guard. I never would have ever played in a Varsity game were it not for the efforts of the scout team defense coach, Coach Manning. Manning was my wrestling coach freshman year, and he certainly enjoyed showing me off to his eternal rival, Coach Bliss. Every time I made a tackle or sack, Manning would shout out and everyone would cheer. I would end up playing in many of the season games and as we went on to the playoffs, the Notre Dame game. In the end, the 2010

Hawks had done it again, winning their third straight State Championship title. Not only did this team change High School Sports History, it had changed me. I am, at writing, currently 271lbs, 5ft 11, and am one of the top lifters on the team. I will be starting nose guard going into the 2011-2012 season. Without this program, I never, ever would have found my potential to be a part of this amazing program. Thank you Maine South. Thank you for changing me for the better. Thank you Mom & Dad, for helping me through the tough times. Thank you for everyone who supported me through every minute of this wonderful experience. Thank you.