

WHERE TO

A resource dedicated to student-athletes
and their Life after Notre Dame.



LAND

FALL 2024

A NOTE FROM DR. TOM CARTER III



Here we are again at one of the most inspiring times of the year for Notre Dame alumni returning to South Bend. The fall reinvigorates our deep love of sports and offers opportunities to revisit the special memories we made playing together.

We are incredibly excited to announce that LAND has been named the Official Service Provider for Notre Dame former student-athletes, managers, and trainers. This partnership with the University's Athletic Department, as part of their new 4 For Forever Program, allows us to extend the Fighting Irish spirit beyond graduation. We're honored to play a crucial role in supporting our alumni as they transition to life after Notre Dame, helping them to continue living like champions in their careers, families, and communities. [Read more in our article.](#)

The LAND team is also excited to engage with even more alumni by increasing our presence on campus during Legacy Weekends throughout the year. In addition, we are planning to host another on-campus event in the winter along with our staple Spring Event. Please be on the lookout for details on both coming your way.

Speaking of the LAND team, we're delighted to welcome Abdelrahman "Haridi" Elaraby as our new Marketing & Administrative Coordinator. Haridi brings an exceptional blend of athletic prowess and academic excellence to our organization. He is a decorated swimmer who has represented Egypt internationally and embodies the spirit of dedication and achievement that defines Notre Dame athletes. With a master's degree in Non-Profit Administration from Notre Dame, Haridi's experience in mental health advocacy and inspiring young athletes aligns perfectly with our mission.

Haridi's journey from international athlete to his role at LAND exemplifies this issue's theme: "redefining ourselves." This process of transformation and growth is something many of us experience as we strive to achieve new goals in life and work. In this spirit, our [Partnership Place](#) section highlights our new collaboration with tru®, an innovative career discovery and development platform that complements LAND's career services. We extend our gratitude to Vince Phelan, ND '88, for introducing us to tru® as Chief Marketing and Strategy Officer for BreakThrough Performance Systems and designing a special tru® subscription program for LAND to offer to former athletes.

As they transition into the professional world, former athletes must redefine their status for the job search. For many, this search represents the first time they will be the ones chasing an opportunity, rather than being sought after. Our [Career Connections](#) article offers a playbook for persistence in the job search game, with a plan of action for winning in a whole new arena.

Both Olympic champion [Amanda Polk Sobolewski](#), ND '08, and Pro Football player [Braxton Cave](#), ND '12, experienced setbacks in their athletic endeavors. But when they redefined their approach to attaining their goals, they found success and satisfaction. Read their stories in our Spotlight section.

Lastly, If you haven't already, we strongly encourage you to join our LANDing Pad app, now officially live and available on both the App Store and Google Play. This platform is designed to connect and support our Notre Dame alumni community like never before. For those who've already joined, we now ask for your help in spreading the word to your former Fighting Irish teammates and encourage them to download the app. Together, we can build a stronger, more connected Notre Dame network that continues to support and inspire one another long after our days on campus.

Thanks to you, our Class Reps and service partners, for helping LAND achieve so much in a short time. Together, we continue to define a pathway to help our fellow Fighting Irish redefine their futures. Hope you enjoy this issue of "Where To LAND" and I look forward to seeing many of you at some upcoming Legacy Weekend events!

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STUDENT-ATHLETE SERVICES LAUNCHES 4 FOR FOREVER PROGRAM



SOUTH BEND, IN – The University of Notre Dame Athletic Department’s Office of Student-Athlete Services (formerly referred to as the GLD Center), whose mission is to holistically support the student-athlete experience by providing unique opportunities to help them grow personally, lead effectively, and prepare for life after graduation, has announced the 4 For Forever Program.

ATHLETICS

4 For Forever will focus on four pillars: Career and Connection, Community and Belonging, Life Skills, and Life After Notre Dame.

- **CAREER AND CONNECTION:** Showcases the power of the Notre Dame network through mentorship programs, legacy weekends, and résumé/job search workshops.
- **COMMUNITY AND BELONGING:** Actively builds a safe and inclusive environment through community service opportunities, the Student-Athlete Advisory Council (SAAC), and connection through various other affinity groups at the University and throughout the local community.
- **LIFE SKILLS:** Empowers and prepares student-athletes to thrive during their time at Notre Dame and beyond graduation by focusing on financial literacy and well-being development, participation in the Rosenthal Leadership Academy, and NIL education.
- **LIFE AFTER NOTRE DAME (LAND):** A continuation of services for student-athletes to fulfill the 4 for Forever promise. LAND provides career transition coaching, innovation/entrepreneurship training, mental wellness and safety net navigation, physical health care and rehabilitation services, and emergency assistance. These services are also available for all former student-managers and student-trainers.

“The change to our name will allow us to better define what our office is here for – providing services to student-athletes,” said Senior Associate Athletics Director Jen Vining-Smith. “In the ever-changing landscape of college athletics, it was important for us to narrow our scope and focus on four main pillars that will help bring to life the 4 for Forever promise. The 4 for Forever program will provide each student-athlete a minimum of baseline skills in each area of focus and the opportunity to explore each area further if they are motivated to do so.”

Notre Dame Athletics is officially partnering with LAND as part of the 4 for Forever program. LAND is an organization focused on supporting former student-athletes in their lives after Notre Dame; its mission is to provide and coordinate resources and services necessary to empower former student-athletes to successfully transition to their post-athletic career. Like Notre Dame, LAND recognizes the unique challenges of post-athletic transitions and wants to help as many student-athletes as possible through this difficult change.

“Our collaboration with LAND will greatly benefit the 4 for Forever promise we make to our student-athletes at Notre Dame,” said University Vice President and James E. Rohr Director of Athletics Pete Bevacqua. “Supporting our student-athletes not just during their time on campus, but through their entire lives is fundamental to being part of the Notre Dame family.”

LAND was founded by former Notre Dame football student-athlete Jack Shields and also features former Irish football players Pat Eilers as a founding board member and Dr. Tom Carter III as CEO and President. These founders are former student-athletes themselves. They bring years of experience in healthcare and player engagement, as well as connections to vast networks of experts and services.

“Before the Irish take the field, it’s tradition to hit the ‘Play like a champion today’ sign,” Shields said. “LAND is about extending that for life – play like a champion today – and be equipped to live like a champion tomorrow. That’s because Notre Dame doesn’t just produce great athletes. It produces great leaders in companies, families, and communities.”

Information provided by [FightingIrish.com](https://fightingirish.com)

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POST-ATHLETICS CAREER TRANSITION: TRU®



Project LAND is excited to partner with the career discovery and development platform, tru®, as we expand our career transition services for former student-athletes, managers, and trainers. The tru® and LAND collaboration is thanks to one of the University of Notre Dame's own, Vince Phelan, ND '88, starting punter for the 1987 Fighting Irish Football team, First Team Academic All-American, and Monogram Club member.

Vince is Chief Marketing and Strategy Officer for BreakThrough Performance Systems (BPS), the company behind tru®. Prior to BPS, he served as a marketing leader in several industries where he coached and helped develop team members realize their full potential and career success. Vince is excited to bring the tru® approach to former athletes – a self-discovery journey that creates a pathway to greater meaning and satisfaction in work and life.

HOW DOES THE PARTNERSHIP WITH TRU® WORK?

tru® reveals what is uniquely fulfilling to each person; in other words, their truSelf. It mines a former athlete's Peak Experiences – times when they were achieving at a high level and energized and satisfied with their efforts and results. With clarity on the roles, values, needs, and skills that rise to the top, and the ideal environment in which they can thrive, participants are empowered to build a powerful My Path Forward plan that better utilizes these strengths in their daily work.

Through the partnership with tru®, LAND will cover the cost of a one-year individual subscription to the tru® platform. The subscription includes:

- Access to the Strength Realization platform
- Unlimited ability to add and analyze Peak Experiences
- Update the truSelf Portrait, where the individual's unique strengths and aspirations combine for optimal performance, energy, and satisfaction
- Maintain My Path Forward to track progress in pursuing truSelf expression and ongoing development

HOW OUR PARTNERSHIP COMPLEMENTS LAND'S CAREER SERVICES

LAND's current career services focus on the technical aspects of career transition. We provide invaluable support through résumé curation, LinkedIn profile optimization, networking strategies, and mock interviewing sessions. These services equip our former student-athletes with the practical tools needed to navigate the job market effectively.

The partnership with tru® brings a crucial and complementary dimension to our career services. While LAND helps with the “how” of career transition, tru® addresses the equally important “why.” Their platform delves into self-discovery, helping individuals uncover their unique strengths, motivations, and aspirations. This introspective approach ensures that our former athletes not only find a job but also discover a career path that aligns with their true potential and passions.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Whether you are just starting your career but unsure of the best direction to take, a few years into a job but unable to say “I love what I do,” or wondering if your skills and experiences could offer new, more fulfilling opportunities, email LAND Program Manager Brandyn Curry to begin the journey with tru® and a career meant for you – why settle for anything less?

THE ATHLETE’S PLAYBOOK: PERSISTENCE IN THE JOB SEARCH GAME

By Team LAND



As athletes, you’re no strangers to the grind. You’ve spent countless hours in practice, pushing yourselves to the limit, all for those moments of triumph on the field. Now, as you transition into the professional world, it’s time to apply that same tenacity to a new arena: the job search.

THE NEW PLAYING FIELD

For many of you, this will be the first time you’re not being “recruited” or “highly sought after.” You’re now the one doing the chasing, and it can feel like a whole new ballgame. But remember, just as success on the field comes through consistent effort, so does success in your career journey.

TRAINING FOR THE BIG LEAGUES

Your job search is your new training regimen. Here’s what it looks like:

- Daily Practices:** Instead of physical drills, you’re now honing your networking skills, following up with contacts, and tailoring your résumé for specific positions.
- Game Film Study:** Research companies thoroughly, just as you would study opponents’ strategies.
- Scrimmages:** Engage in mock interviews to prepare for the real thing. Practice articulating your skills and experiences effectively.
- Equipment Check:** Ensure your “gear” is top-notch – polish your résumé, craft compelling cover letters, and maintain a professional online presence.

FACING THE OPPOSITION

You may encounter challenges that feel like tough opponents, including:

- Hearing you lack work experience
- Facing rejection or radio silence after applications
- Having to consider entry-level positions that might not align with your initial expectations

Remember, these are not defeats – they’re learning opportunities. Each interaction, each application, each interview is building your professional skillset.

THE LONG SEASON

Unlike a sports season with a defined end date, the job search process doesn’t have a set timeline. It’s a marathon, not a sprint. Some of you may land a position quickly, while others might face a longer journey. This is normal and doesn’t reflect on your worth or potential.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

During your job search, as in a game, you’ll need to deploy strategies to help get you the win:

- Consistency Is Key:** Set daily or weekly goals for applications, networking reach-outs, or skill development.
- Diversify Your Plays:** Don’t rely on just one method. Combine online applications with networking, informational interviews, and industry events.
- Adapt Your Game Plan:** If one approach isn’t working, be willing to pivot. Maybe your résumé needs tweaking, or you need to expand your search parameters.
- Build Your Team:** Surround yourself with supportive mentors, peers, and career advisors. Don’t hesitate to lean on the LAND network.
- Celebrate Small Wins:** Acknowledge every step forward, whether it’s a successful networking conversation or mastering a new skill.

THE CHAMPIONSHIP MINDSET

Remember, every professional – even those at the top of their field – started somewhere. That entry-level position or internship could be your foot in the door, leading to greater opportunities down the line.

Your athletic career has equipped you with invaluable skills – discipline, teamwork, resilience, and the ability to perform under pressure. These are your secret weapons in the professional world. Employers value these traits immensely, even if they don’t immediately recognize how they translate from the field to the office.

THE FINAL WHISTLE

The job search process can be stressful and at times disheartening, but it’s also an opportunity for tremendous growth. Approach it with the same dedication and persistence that made you successful in your sport.

Every day you put in the work – every application, follow-up, interview – brings you one step closer to your goal. And just like that championship at the end of a grueling season, the right opportunity will come.

Stay in the game, keep pushing forward, and trust in the process. Your athletic journey has prepared you for this moment. Now, it’s time to win in a whole new arena. LAND is here to help you every step of the way.

STAY TRUE TO YOURSELF, NEVER GIVE UP

By Amanda Polk Sobolewski, ND '08



In the summer 2012, I didn't know how to identify myself. I had been a winning rower for almost a decade and yet here I was, on the dock as an alternate, cheering my U.S. Women's Eight teammates over the finish line at the London Olympics. I had set a goal to be in that boat, too, and I didn't meet it.

Back at home, I couldn't shake my bitterness. This Olympics was going to be the culmination of my rowing career. Now what do I do? In these instances, people say, you're not defined by your sport. And athletes – particularly University of Notre Dame athletes with high expectations and standards – respond, yeah, thanks, but it is a part of me.

My dad knew that, and as I sulked that summer, he asked me if I wanted my experience in London to be my last in rowing. I answered no, I didn't. Of course I had to get back to it. But this time, I would do things differently.

GREEN IS THE COLOR

Rowing became my passion as a sophomore at Oakland Catholic High School, after my basketball teammate, Meghan Boyle Warfuel, ND '07, sparked my interest when she received a full scholarship to row for Notre Dame.

As I delved deeper into the sport, I found myself drawn to the unique team dynamic it required. The synchronization and the collective effort reflected my team-oriented personality, as well as my upbringing in a family of five. Unlike basketball, where individual statistics – and superstars – stand out, rowing is all about the team moving as one unit, with the boat being the center of attention.

Meg's achievement planted a seed in my mind that I, too, could row at the collegiate level. And as I narrowed down my offers to two – Notre Dame and the University of Virginia – I asked God the night before committing to send me a sign: something green if I was to become a member of the Fighting Irish, or orange if UVA was my destination.

The next day in the high school cafeteria line, my best friend and I picked away at her bagged lunch as we waited. When she got to her last clover-shaped piece of broccoli, she offered it to me. Here was my sign. I became a Notre Dame rower, and – icing on the cake – a teammate once more of Meg Boyle.

TAKE THE SHOT



I came in with the freshman expectation that I would need to work my way up to the top of the roster. But I was excited to see exactly where I'd stand within a group of some 30 women vying for the team. Our first step was an hour-long test on the ergometer, or ERG, a device that simulates the motion a rower creates in a boat.

To my surprise, I finished first in the group! Instantly, the pressure was on – where do I go from here? I soon realized this was a great opportunity to play a role in elevating the program, along with the other recruited freshmen who had a similar goal in mind. We pushed ourselves and everyone around us. And in 2006 during my sophomore year, the team made our first-ever NCAA appearance, an historic achievement for Notre Dame Rowing. We continue to hold our ninth-place team ranking to this day.

That same year of the NCAA finals, I experienced my proudest moment at Notre Dame: winning the South-Central Regional Championships. Meg was in that Varsity Eight boat, too. At our first 500, our coxswain, Maria Romano McGann, ND '07, yelled that we were in seventh place (there were only six boats). Instantly, our boat felt charged. We sprinted as hard and as fast as we could, gaining on the top dogs, Ohio State and Virginia. At the end of the longest sprint I've ever done in a Women's Eight, we crossed the finish with two historic strokes. I wish there was video because I still can't believe it.

One reason I love rowing so much is that you're constantly in the action, from start to finish. There are no time-outs, no breaks. It's one shot, and you either have it or you don't. To me, showing your athleticism this way is incredibly appealing.

TESTING, TESTING



The Olympic Games weren't on my radar when I was selected for the U.S. Junior National Team after high school and made it to the 2004 World Championships in Spain. But at the starting line, when each team was called to affirm it was set – "Spain ready, Italy ready, Germany ready, United States ready" – I got goosebumps. I wanted to keep doing this, and at the national team level.

Now with my Notre Dame graduation behind me, I went for it. Each member of my Under-23 National Team boat was invited to train in Princeton, New Jersey, after we won the gold in 2008, and the 2012 Olympics in London were now firmly in my sights.

I had time to figure out how to become an elite athlete and what worked for me as an individual within this rowing team. Once again, I needed to elevate my game and constantly improve. But unlike at Notre Dame, where we helped each other, at Princeton, you earned your seat by kicking someone else out of it. This proved to be a tough transition, but one that kept me pushing myself to reach my goals.

Each year leading up to London, I had to start at the bottom and work my way up to make the Women's Eight, even after our team won the 2010 and 2011 Senior World Championships. When we broke the world record in the 2012 World Cup, I was the most tested athlete in that crew.

The tests would continue. I tried for a seat with the Women's Eight and the Olympics. I didn't make it. Then another opportunity came up for a pairs spot. No go. I was at a loss for what to do. Then coach gave me another shot; because I had the second-fastest ERG on the team, he wanted to try me at sculling, something I had little experience in. What did I have to lose?

The last seat race, in fact. By .1 second. My Olympic dreams were crashing. You would think I'd be grateful when coach offered me yet another chance to join the team – as an alternate, "the strongest we've had for an Olympics." To someone with my personality, this was a backhanded slap. Ultimately, though, I said yes. As hard as it was to go to London and watch the team I had trained with for four years race without me, I knew it was important to be that next person they looked to if an original member couldn't be seated.

DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY



After my dad helped me realize I didn't want to end my rowing career with London, I approached the 2016 Rio Olympics with a new perspective and plan. I was now a veteran, focused on elevating not only myself but the team's culture. My mentality shifted from feeling victimized by setbacks to actively striving to be the best. I pushed myself further than I thought I could go and asked my teammates to do the same.

I also became a squeaky wheel of sorts. I spoke up more and asked questions about why we were doing certain workouts, as it was a huge learning curve to understand

the plan itself. I wanted the coach to know that I cared about improving, while also being an advocate for myself. Bottom line, I told myself that I was going to crush this, and it's not going to matter who's in the boat or where they're seated.

In doing so, I had a "what am I made of?" moment. Sports is character-building based on what we define as failures. I built my character because I saw 2012 as a failure. I had two options: end with that and think about what ifs, or give myself another chance, but do things differently. That's what I went for and this transformation in attitude, coupled with relentless effort, paid off. The U.S. Women's Eight continued its winning streak, and I played a crucial role in that legacy.

At the start of the gold medal race in Rio, we weren't up in the first 500 – or the 1000. Our coxswain Kaitlin Snyder Guregian turned to us and yelled, "We are the U.S. Women's Eight!" The moment she uttered those words, my next stroke was my most dynamic ever. We surged ahead, like someone pressed a turbo button, and took the lead, increasing margin until we won.

These moments are what you work for – what you live for! When we finished, I had flashbacks of my journey and the people who supported me. At the culmination of all the hard work and everything that I overcame to be in that moment, I experienced so much emotion, and I can still feel it.

TAKE GOOD CARE

My post-Olympic experience included many interviews and celebrations. When that died down, I once again asked what's next? My husband Eric and I had settled in Greenville, South Carolina, near his work as an associate professor of health sciences at Furman University. Clemson University and its rowing team were nearby, and I was missing the sport I loved. Without hesitation, I sent an email to the head coach with the subject line, "Gold Medal Olympian in Your Backyard" and the simple question, "do you have a job?" A week later, I was an assistant coach sharing my experiences and knowledge with student-athletes.



"I advise former student-athletes to be patient with themselves as they transition to life after sports. It's normal to have failures and successes.

Don't let the highs get too high; the lows too low. Try to find a balance, which is easier if you're eating well, exercising, and getting rest."

After two seasons at Clemson and the birth of our first child, Eric and I discussed our options. I knew in my heart I had to step away from coaching – you don't hear many people say they regret spending too much time with their family. Three days after leaving the job, I learned I was pregnant with our second child and had confirmation we made the right decision.

With the birth of our third child, I was ready to leverage my biochemistry degree and my interest in nutrition to pursue a career in health and wellness. Eric, a Division I football player with a PhD in exercise physiology and human movements, had deepened my understanding of nutrition and his guidance leading up to the Rio Olympics was invaluable in optimizing my training and recovery. I had also done my own research into nutrition as an elite rower and now was bearing witness, through my full-term, healthy kids, to how beneficial good food and exercise during pregnancy can be.

Eric and I founded **Heart for Gold**, a consulting business focused on nutrition and supplementation, partnered with the world's most clinically proven wellness company, Shaklee. We help our clients, non-athletes and athletes alike, improve their health and energy levels, and the rewards of seeing them thrive are immense for me. It's also bittersweet when I imagine how much faster, higher, and stronger I might have been as a student-athlete fueled by a balanced and trusted regimen.

In my additional role as a Class Rep/Ambassador with LAND, I advise former student-athletes to be patient with themselves as they transition to life after sports. I know that takes work; we Notre Dame alumni put so much pressure on ourselves. But being patient means that, while it's normal to have failures and successes, you can't let the highs get too high, or the lows get too low. Try to find a balance, which is easier to do when you're eating well, exercising, and getting rest.

Give yourself some grace on the bad days. To do that, you must resolve that the next day is going to be better, and stick with that decision. Remember that our experiences as athletes equip us with unique strengths. Embrace the unexpected, trust in your journey, and never stop pushing for greatness, your way. Your next chapter might just be your most defining yet.

Born in Pittsburgh, **Amanda Polk Sobolewski, ND '08**, was a basketball player at Oakland Catholic High School, winning a state championship with her team. She started rowing in her sophomore year to enhance her strength, and soon discovered her passion. Amanda became the most decorated rower in Notre Dame program history. A four-time All-American, she was a member of the Varsity Eight that claimed three consecutive Big East Championship wins, the first gold at the South/Central Regional Championships, and helped Notre Dame achieve the first team bid to the NCAA Rowing Championships in 2006. Amanda became Notre Dame's first rowing alumna Olympic champion in 2016 when she and her U.S. Women's Eight team won gold in Rio. She began her membership in U.S. Rowing in 2008 and with the team claimed six of its 11 consecutive World Championship/Olympic titles. In addition to founding the lifestyle and performance wellness company **Heart for Gold** and raising five children with husband Eric, Amanda recruits high school female athletes for the U.S. Rowing Olympic Development Program and coaches them in the mental and physical aspects of elite training and high performance both on and off the water. Amanda is a member of the National Rowing Foundation Hall of Fame.

FAMILY IS MY DEFINING FORCE IN SPORTS, WORK, AND LIFE

By Braxton Cave, ND '12



I was born, raised, and still live near the University of Notre Dame. My family is based in Mishawaka, Indiana, and is led by my dad, Rick, an electrician since graduating high school, and my mom, Kim, whose Italian heritage helped seal the deal for me attending college close to home. My older sisters, Brooke and Brittney, along with our numerous cousins, toughened me up at many a family gathering attended by aunts and uncles who built lives close by.

Family remains a defining force in my personal and professional lives and the decisions that have shaped them. For me, family not only comes in the “relative” form, but also in the coaches, teachers, teammates, mentors, and colleagues who have enriched and encouraged me with their guidance and belief in my potential.

Dream Call

Notre Dame isn't just close to me in proximity, it's also in my bloodlines. My great grandfather played football before fighting in World War II; he made it through the war, but didn't get to finish his studies. My cousin, Tom Creevey, led the Irish as quarterback and defensive end under Coach Ara Parseghian.

My own recruitment started in the spring of my sophomore year, but it didn't include Notre Dame – at first. Among a number of interested teams, I received an offer from the University of Florida and Coach Urban Meyer. For a 16-year-old, it couldn't get much better than that. But when Coach Meyer called my house and my mom answered, she'd hang up at the sound of his voice. There's no way you're going that far away from home, she told me. I soon made a habit of checking the caller ID and grabbing the phone before she did.

Eventually, the call came from Notre Dame and Coach Charlie Weis, and mom was much more accepting of that one. He learned who I was from my high school senior teammate Kyle Brey as the two watched film together while Kyle prepped to play football at Buffalo. Choosing Notre Dame was a no-brainer, and I committed within a week of the offer. I was in great company; John Goodman and Mike Golic Jr. committed the same weekend to kick off the start of that year's number one recruiting class. I was able to secure number 52 in honor of the player I tried to model my game after, Jeff Faine, ND '03.

I was also fulfilling my dream of attending the home of the 4 for 40 promise which would provide me the support structure to achieve my goals when football was over. Another dream came true as well – that of my parents, fervent fans who named me after Braxton Banks when they heard his name over the PA system during a 1988 Blue & Gold game. When my namesake heard this story, he contacted me, and we became friends before his passing a few years ago.

A Second Home



Unlike what typically happens for newly recruited players and their families, the nearby Cave home became their hub when they came to South Bend. I believe this unique experience provided a family atmosphere that reinforced our group's cohesion. That was key, because our learning curve of Coach Weis's sophisticated New England-based playbook was steep (for me at least!)

We studied and practiced hard, spending every waking hour together. When we needed a break from the mental and physical repetition of learning the game plan and our academic subjects, we headed to Mishawaka and mom's home cooking.

These visits not only filled our stomachs, they also helped to soothe our souls. In a town like South Bend, it's all eyes on you as you try to live up to the golden standard. Escaping with teammates to my family home – a safe place to relax and reset – was crucial in getting us through the ups and downs of our seasons.

Stronger Together

Expectations were high for our class of recruits, but things started low. We underperformed during the first two years and by the end of four, we saw a head coaching change and three offensive line coaches come and go.

But then the 2012 season arrived and I was part of a handful of fifth-year seniors who returned to Notre Dame and made it to the national championship after going 12 and 0 in the regular season. It was a wild, incredible season, with close calls that we pulled out, including beating Oklahoma in Norman and USC in the Coliseum.

Though we didn't finish the job and lost the championship game, battling through the trials and tribulations that came before felt like a great accomplishment. Not unlike what sometimes happens within families, our challenges only made us stronger, and with the seniors under us and a coaching staff that played to our strengths, we developed a mindset that made things happen.

Decision Time



After the championship game and finishing the year as an All-American, I had high hopes of being a high draft pick. But a shoulder injury at the Senior Bowl forced me to pass on some of the workouts at the NFL combine; a subsequent MRI spotted my injury, and I watched my draft stock plummet. I was disheartened by the draft's outcome, but still determined to seize the NFL opportunity, with three years of film and an offensive line role that might encourage a team to take a chance on me and my recovery.

But getting drafted was not to be. Later at home, teams were calling to get me at a discounted price. I saw Cleveland as the best opportunity, had a good training camp, but as many who have been in my position also experienced, the numbers just didn't work out and I was released during the final cuts.

I then signed with the Patriots active roster and on day one, Tom Brady introduced himself (not necessary) and welcomed me to the squad with open arms. This meant an incredible amount to me. The veterans in New England taught me how to prepare, how to be a pro, and what the game was all about in that transformational year.

Next was Washington, back to Cleveland, and finally Detroit. After two years there, my contract was up, a new one wasn't guaranteed, and my wife Natalie and I were expecting our first child. I had been living out of a suitcase, but I didn't want my family to grow up that way. At that point, I made the incredibly difficult decision that football was over and it was time to put my degree into action.

All About People

My degree is in psychology, and I was the rare football player in class. How I chose it springs from family. It was Easter of my freshman year, and a bunch of relatives were at the house. My uncle, a successful businessman in Chicago, asked me if I had settled on a course of study. I responded business, an obvious choice.

He said, listen, you can be the smartest businessman in the world, but if you don't understand people, it won't matter. This was a light bulb moment for me. I took a few business classes to gain a foundation, but through my psychology studies and the mentorship of Professor Anre Venter, who played an integral role in my development, I learned what makes people tick and motivates them to give their best.

I deploy this knowledge today in my role as Senior Vice President of Operations at Lippert, the youngest in the company's history – which I don't take lightly. The majority of my work involves coaching, leading, and encouraging our people, from the moment they join us, through the development of their personal and professional goals, to the resolution of any issues that may keep them from performing to the best of their abilities.

This fills my cup – the opportunity to impact people's lives and how they go home to their families. I believe one of the reasons why CEO Jason Lippert hired me was my belief that there's so much more to life than “punching a time clock” at a job.

Character Rewards

My experience as a Lippert team member began with a phone call in a Costco parking lot. I was 26 and in my transition from the NFL. I sometimes struggled with the thought that maybe I could have given football one more shot. But asking “what if” can eat you up inside, and I found peace knowing that I made the right decision for my family. Now, with Natalie sitting next to me in the car, I was arranging a meeting with Jason Lippert thanks to a connection made by a friend who first mentioned the company to me two years before at a Coach Weis charity golf event in Miami.

Jason took a kid from the sports world who didn't know a darn thing about manufacturing, RVs, boats, or cars (outside of driving one) and surrounded me with great mentors, including himself. As I began my journey in the trainee program, Jason advised me that if I put my head down, learned the business, and built relationships, the rest would take care of itself.

As I moved through leadership roles, from general manager to vice president to my current position, I gained the autonomy to build my teams. When I hire, I look for two characteristics: joyful people who lift others up, and self-motivators – individuals I may need to pull back the reins on rather than push along. One of my favorite quotes is, “If you're not careful, your talent will take you places your character can't keep you.”

Athletes are self-motivators. They are disciplined, accustomed to a schedule, and show up, every day, to WIN.

Power of the Network

My wife and children are my personal motivation and my WHY. I want to be an example to them of where choosing the hard right over the easy wrong can take you. Whether it's health and fitness, career, or even daily chores around the house, I hope to set a standard for how we approach life! It helps to peek at my final termination letter from the NFL as a motivation boost from time to time.

The strength of the Notre Dame network is unmatched. Tap into your natural motivation by calling upon this vast and mighty network for career guidance, story swapping, whatever you need. My family of 10 former players from my class talks or texts every day in a group chat, one we started during senior week of graduation. The cohesion that grew in my mom's kitchen has continued through our graduation, playing professionally, joining the business world, marrying, and having kids. We continue to show up for each other.

That's the power of relationships and of our network. It's global, with opportunities for high-level connections in every area as long as you're willing to ask and don't let your ego or a go-it-alone attitude get in the way. Start now.

During my first years at Notre Dame, I didn't take advantage of potential career connections that presented themselves in unexpected ways, like when the son of Google's CFO struck up a conversation with me in class that ended there. I started to embrace the network during my last two years at Notre Dame. It was helpful that a couple of my roommates were very good at connecting with a broad spectrum of people. Sean Rogers from the lacrosse team and Mike Golic Jr., who can talk and connect with anyone (and why he's now on TV communicating to millions), opened my eyes to the network that consists of more than just my brothers on the football team.

The Art of Living



As you enter your new life after sports, try to make it a balanced one. I'm attempting that now in this stage of my family life and career. I'm not talking about work-life balance; I don't believe in that. I mean balance that comes from finding joy in everything I do. My great grand and Purdue grad Michael Terlep created a life mission statement that he hopes his family will read when he passes. Part of it says, “I want my kids to wonder, ‘how did dad do it? He travelled for business, attended all our games, took mom on dates – he did it all.’”

This and the following quote from philosopher L.P. Jacks have put many things in perspective for me and provided a challenge for how to approach life going forward:

“A master in the art of living draws no sharp distinction between his work and his play; his labor and his leisure; his mind and his body; his education and his recreation. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence through whatever he is doing, and leaves others to determine whether he is working or playing. To himself, he always appears to be doing both.”

Braxton Cave, ND '12, was born in Mishawaka, Indiana, and lives in nearby Granger with wife Natalie and their children, Avianna, Copeland, and Asa. At Penn High School, he was a finalist for Indiana's “Mr. Football” award, while also participating in baseball, wrestling, and track. The 6'3", 304 lb. center entered Notre Dame after receiving some 40 offers; over time, the All-American was a candidate for the Lombardi Award, Outland Trophy, and Rimington Trophy. Braxton and his teammates battled in the national championship against Alabama in 2012, after outstanding regular season offensive line performances, including the second-most team rushing yards in school history; all told, the team helped the Irish average over 200 yards per game in both rushing and receiving that year. Braxton's NFL career spanned Cleveland, Washington, New England, and Detroit. Today he is Senior Vice President of Operations for the global manufacturer and supplier Lippert. Braxton has served as a member of the Notre Dame Board of Directors and is active in his community and causes.