

WHERE TO

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

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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 Anne 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 friend 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.