

FINDING PURPOSE AFTER STRUGGLE: A LINEMAN'S JOURNEY BEYOND THE GAME

Trevor Ruhland (ND '19), a reserve offensive tackle for Fighting Irish Football during his freshman through junior years, moved into the starting lineup at right guard for the last six games of his final season. By that point, the list of injuries to Trevor's 6'4", 294-pound frame was long — from torn pectorals and labrum to a broken ankle and nose to a knee eventually requiring three surgeries — yet the team didn't surrender more than one sack in any of those games. He helped the offensive line finish the season at 11th nationally in sacks and 13th in scoring offense. Trevor entered the workforce after graduating with a degree in management consulting, and today is an account executive for VelocityEHS. He and his wife Nina, an accountant, live in Chicago. Trevor's published chronicle of his swift transformation from a person of almost 300 pounds to one weighing just 150, due to an eating disorder, is one of trial and triumph. He writes that his experience is like that of countless other former athletes battling personal struggles, and as he describes his eating disorder, as well as his thoughts about finding balance and fulfillment in life after sports, Trevor says he hopes his story will help others feel less lost or alone and more resilient, adaptable, and honest with themselves. LAND sat down with Trevor to learn more about his early life, his transition from Notre Dame, why he decided to write his testimonial, and the reaction to it so far. Here's what he told us:



I was born and raised in the Chicago suburbs, in a small town called Cary, about an hour northwest of the city. It's also the hometown of both my parents. While I played baseball, basketball, and track growing up, football was my destiny. My father, Matt, was a two-time All-Big Ten defensive tackle at the University of Iowa, where he met my mom, Lori.

I wore Iowa jerseys as a kid, ran around the house pretending to be in the games, and watched old Hawkeye DVDs and recordings of my dad's highlights, which later served as hype videos during my Junior Trojans program. Dad was my role model, my coach, my greatest influence.

As I grew bigger, I was determined to play lineman for Iowa. But when I visited the school, the coaches told me I wasn't big enough. My parents still hold a little grudge about that. I moved on, though; I still wear the Iowa hats, but Notre Dame is number 1, even if it wasn't always that way. If you're from Chicago, you're either a fan or you despise them. That was me.

Other recruiters were Minnesota and Northern Illinois, some Big 10 schools. But then Notre Dame Coach Harry Hiestand invited me to camp and once I saw the campus, I grew excited about an almost perfect package: Two hours' drive from home, world-class education, the chance to play for Hiestand and connect with the local alumni network later on.

On April 5, my brother's birthday, I got my Notre Dame offer (taking a shine off his big day). Just two days later, Hiestand wanted my decision. I sat down with my parents...and announced I was going to Minnesota, my first offer. Nope, my shocked parents said, reiterating the benefits of a Notre Dame experience.

I don't remember them needing to do a lot of convincing, and thank God, it worked out well. And when my parents found and fixed up a little house just one mile south of the stadium, with its view of the golden Dome from the end of the driveway, they bought into the whole Notre Dame experience, literally.

THE FIRE HOSE OPENS

First year at Notre Dame? Yeah, it's cliché: like drinking from a fire hose. In high school, I was the big fish. Suddenly, I was surrounded by Nick Martin, Ronnie Stanley, Quenton Nelson, Sam Mustipher, Alex Bars — guys who went on to long NFL careers. How could I compete with them? Academics fed the flood; along with business courses, I was suddenly in philosophy and theology classes, and balancing those with practice was challenging.

So I was excited to head home for the summer after spring semester of my first year. I'd see my parents, my dog, and get to hang out with my high school buddies for a few weeks before going back to camp. As I checked my phone in the driveway at home, I saw a missed call from Adam Sargent, our academic advisor.

He told me I had a 1.6 GPA and was on academic probation. If it happened again, I'd flunk out. That shocked me, and sitting on the porch, I cried. How could I let this opportunity slip through my fingers?

That was the kick in the ass I needed academically. I knew it would be a long process on the field to compete with those amazing players, but I could fully control my grades in pursuit of the degree I wanted. With tutors, advisors, and Adam Sargent's support, I graduated from Mendoza with a GPA over 3.0.

EARNING MY SHOT



It was a long journey to see the field. I was always the sixth man, and I knew I wasn't going to be the biggest, fastest, or strongest guy, especially with my many injuries. So I had to be smart and versatile, learning all the positions, knowing the film, and being ready to plug in wherever needed. And during my last two years, I started in 16 games, making it all worth it.

One of my favorite experiences came in my fifth year during a game against Virginia Tech at home. I was physically spent at that point: my knee was done, I had a pulled hamstring, ankle problems, shoulder issues. My body was dying, and my coaches were basically trying to get me to game day each week.

Late in the game, we put together a 16-minute drive, with Ian Book scoring on a scramble to our right side and tying the game. The crowd went nuts and the whole team ran to Ian. Everyone but me, that is. After my block to aid Ian into the end zone, I stood there, just 10 yards away from the celebration. I didn't have the energy to move.

We got the extra point, but my tank was on zero. After the game, I mustered a laugh with the media who knew all about my physical state. I'd done what I could and played to my strengths. I couldn't move a 320-pound nose tackle 10 yards off the ball, but I could see the safeties creeping down for a blitz and communicate that to the rest of the offensive line, for the win.

UPSIDE TO THE PANDEMIC

As graduation approached, I knew I wasn't going to play professionally. I couldn't pass a physical and I also didn't think I was good enough. So I transitioned into the work world, with dad once more my role model. After football, he had built a career in sales, working from home, and as a kid I had listened to him make cold calls. Sales intrigued me, and as dad always said, that's where the money is.

But timing helps. Back home, when I started having final interviews with companies, the pandemic hit, and those opportunities were pushed away. Honestly, this provided a breather for me after five years of living football like a full-time job.

So, my days looked like this: I would wake up, lift weights with dad in our basement gym, take the dog for a walk, play video games with my brother, a student-athlete at home during the pandemic, and then sit around eating pizza and drinking beer with the family.

BEGINNING OF THE BATTLE

And then I got antsy. Obviously, I didn't want to be 300 pounds forever. It's not healthy for your heart or your body. So I put my mind to losing weight. I started by taking it easy in the gym, but my diet changed dramatically. No more Little Caesars after training or eating five times a day like my playing days. Instead, Mom made grilled chicken and salad, and within two months, I was down 50 pounds. The fat just fell off, and my knee and shoulder felt better.

Now that I could lift weights at my own pace, I began to train for aesthetics instead of function. When I got a little vein in my bicep I thought, hey, you're starting to look better. In my mind, this was all good.

And then I hit a weight plateau. I still wanted to lose more, so dad, who's a big guy, too, suggested we both try intermittent fasting, starting with no breakfast. We lost some weight. Okay, now let's stop eating so many carbs and drink less beer. Lost some more weight. Every time I hit a plateau, I tweaked something, doing more physically while eating less.

FINDING MY LIGHT, AND THEN DARKNESS



During this time, I met my wife, Nina, a TCU graduate in accounting who happened to live one town over. What were the chances? Because of the pandemic, our first date was walking our dogs. When she later moved to Dallas for work, I joined her. And that's when things unraveled.

Without my family and friends nearby and Nina working long hours, I was lonely and sad. I felt out of control. Until I realized what I could control, and that was my weight.

Every morning, I jumped on the scale and would become disheartened at not dropping a pound overnight. Since I wasn't eating until late afternoon, I'd lose it emotionally. I became a hothead who wore two sweatshirts in hot and sticky Dallas to hide the skeleton underneath.

My family noticed something was wrong when they visited. Nina encouraged me to see a doctor, and when tests revealed liver issues, I hoped they explained my eating disorder. Obviously, it was the other way around.

The lowest point came when we traveled home for a family party, the same day lab results revealed nothing major was wrong with my liver. I was so weak that Nina, five feet tall and 120 pounds, had to carry my light backpack through the airport. It still hurts to think about it, the shame I felt. At the party, I sat in jeans and a sweatshirt while everyone else wore shorts in July. That night, I told Nina I needed help.

That experience — Nina having to carry my flimsy backpack and my miserable attitude with family and friends — was the first kick in the ass that started the process to get better.

LETTERS THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

The second kick came after a visit with my brother and his wife in Chicago. We did a bar crawl and again, I was not myself. No laughing and joking while hanging out with the rest of the crew; instead, I was angry and checked out. The next morning, my brother hugged me goodbye and dropped something in my pocket. Read this at home sometime, he said.

A few weeks later, while rummaging through the car's glove box, I found the packet of letters from my siblings, my sister-in-law, and Nina. They all wrote that they missed the real me.

That broke through. I started therapy, learned to open up and be more vulnerable, and realized it was okay to not be okay. Something had switched in my athlete's mind, one trained to be mentally tough. I realized that everybody is fighting something in their life, and if this was the battle that I had to go through, so be it.

WRITING IT OUT

As an athlete, I've learned to stay flat emotionally; never too high, never too low. But I love my wife more than anything, and while not outwardly lovey-dovey, I write little love notes in her journal. Writing is a way to express my emotions, and it's been truly therapeutic for me.

As I started to heal and get better, Nina suggested I continue to write my experiences and feelings down, just for myself. And when I eventually shared my words with her and added some additional sections on friendship, recovery, and finding purpose, I asked my family to read it, too.

I hadn't needed to worry about their reaction; they found my story amazing and when we all agreed it should be out in the world, I put it there.

The responses after my story's publication on Blue&Gold.com have been absolutely insane. People I haven't talked with since freshman year in high school ask if they can call me. The athletic director of Youngstown State requested I speak to his athletic department. Former coaches and student-athletes contacted me with thanks for sharing my experience with an eating disorder, saying they've struggled with it, too.

The point of writing all this down wasn't to publish it, but I'm very, very happy I did. Mental health is a widespread issue, but eating disorders in men isn't something you often hear about.

SOMEONE IN YOUR CORNER

Last summer, I walked a marathon. Not to burn calories or for competition, but to physically challenge myself and test my knee after replacement surgery. I woke up on a Saturday morning at 4:30 am, put on my headphones to listen to my Bible and some podcasts, talked to people on the road, and 8-1/2 hours later, crossed the finish line.

Today, I'm at a healthy weight. People tell me I look so much better, and I think so as well. I'm more present in my relationships with family and friends, and I'm grateful for them; I never would have been able to heal without their support.

If anyone reading this is going through the struggle I did, remember, it's okay to not be okay. People aren't going to look at you differently. If anything, they're going to see your strength in getting the help you need.

The greatest advice I can offer is to lean on the people who love you. Everybody has someone in their corner, even if they're not vocal about it. If you reach out and say, I need help, they'll respond because they care. And that includes LAND, which is standing by, dedicated to athletes and their mental well-being.

Finding yourself and your purpose is a challenge. When you're an athlete, you wake up every day with a focus on specific goals — the next season, a national championship, graduation. And then, you're done. It's not like you're tossed away; Notre Dame is still there for you. But you have questions: What do I do now? What are my new goals? How do I achieve them and find happiness in the world?

Write this down. You can answer those questions and find fulfillment and your purpose, with a little help from your teammates in life.