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NO EXCUSES

A MEMOIR

DERRICK COLEMAN JR.

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For all who need to overcome adversity

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FIELD DREAMS

FULLERTON, CALIFORNIA

LATE SATURDAY AFTERNOON, APRIL 28, 2012

One game.

That's all I ever dreamed of playing.

One game in the NFL—and it couldn't be a preseason game—it had to be one regular season NFL game. For years, my sole focus was making that dream a reality.

I'd be satisfied after only playing one game, too. If they cut me after that, I'd still have peace of mind that I played in the NFL. If all went well and I stayed on the team, then great, I'd set new goals after that. But all I wanted to do was show people I belonged up there—at the highest level. I knew I needed to do everything I could to make that dream come true.

Hey—I didn't even know what I'd *even* do once I got to that game. You might think I had it all figured out—how I'd pictured

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myself suiting up and running out of the tunnel into a stadium full of screaming fans. How I'd sprint down the field after the kickoff and charge straight for the guy who'd caught the ball and tackle him hard. How I'd play my heart out and be a beast and at least once during that one game get my hands on the football and help my team win.

But I didn't have my dream all figured out. I just wanted to get there and see it unfold. My dream of playing in one NFL game was sort of like a guy driving his dream car—if only for a moment. Maybe it's a Dodge Viper. You don't know exactly what you're going to do with that Viper. But if someone hands you the keys, you'll turn the ignition and screech out of the parking lot with the pedal to the floor.

I was so close to my dream. So close. But one thing stood in my way. This was the third and final day of the NFL Draft. The clock was ticking against me. You can go to the draft in person if you want. It's held at Radio City Music Hall in New York City every year. But most players don't go unless they're a contender for top pick.

I grabbed four bottles of icy-cold Gatorade out of the kitchen refrigerator at my dad's house in Fullerton, just another middle-class suburb of Los Angeles, and went outside to the driveway, where I was shooting hoops with my friends from high school days. We were just fooling around playing two-on-two and H-O-R-S-E, and I tossed a bottle each to my friends. We're all fierce competitors and were all drenched in sweat, but I think out of kindness they were letting me win this late in the afternoon. They knew my heart was pounding in my chest and it had been since the draft

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had started two days earlier. They knew I was just waiting for that one big phone call today—either from my agent or from a team—saying, You're it, man. We want you for our team. Welcome aboard. You're in the NFL.

But so far, no phone call.

And time was running out.

My buddies and I all drank our Gatorade and played another quick burst of two-on-two on the driveway, but my mind wasn't in it. Mostly just then, my mind was focused on making a run to the bathroom. That Gatorade had really flown through my system, and my back teeth were floating. All the adrenaline I was feeling at waiting for a phone call wasn't helping any, either.

I went inside the house but the nearest bathroom was occupied, so I passed through the kitchen and the living room to get to the other bathroom. By going through the living room, that meant I needed to look at the TV.

I absolutely did not want to look at the TV.

I was trying so hard to avoid it. The draft is all about anticipation—and I hate anticipation. I can't even watch a television series when it's shown on regular TV if it's one of those shows that have a cliffhanger and are continued every week. I need to know what's happening right now, so I'd far rather download a whole TV series off iTunes and watch it all at once. Too much anticipation, and it feels like my heart's going to explode. That's how I'd feel on game day, too, right before a big game. Anticipation.

Sure enough, I couldn't help but glance at the TV. I couldn't believe we were already at the sixth round. I'd hoped to be picked in the fourth or fifth. Maybe even as high as the third. I figured

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I wouldn't go in the first or second, but I'd made the mistake of mentioning my doubts two days earlier to my mama, who's always full of faith. She slapped me upside the head with a serious grin and said, "You never know, Derrick. You might go in the first or second. God is amazing."

And I said, "Yes, he is, but I'm being realistic, too."

I love my mama with all my heart. My dad, too. I'm blessed to have a big network of supporters, family, and friends, but I've gotta say that my mama, May Hamlin, and my dad, Derrick Coleman, Sr., are my two biggest supporters. They've worked with me for so many years to get me to the level I'm at. They're my biggest fans, and they've always been pushing me forward, encouraging me, helping me in any way possible. I could never repay them, and I never want to let them down. Particularly not with the draft.

For this third and final day of the draft, I'd wanted to keep the party small at the house. My parents invited my aunts and uncles, my grandparents, and some friends over to the house—that was it. They were all watching the TV except my grandma, who was in the kitchen frying some chicken for supper. Everyone's mouth was watering at the smell of that fried chicken. The counters were piled high with potato salad and Doritos and chips and baked beans and fresh coleslaw. Plenty of warm apple pie was waiting for dessert. My grandma is the best cook ever. She cooks on point. But there I was, glancing at the TV while on my way to the bathroom, and my heart sank in my chest. The draft was too far along. The clock was ticking too quickly. I should have been picked by now. Something was wrong. Definitely wrong.

We'd all known I stood a high chance of getting drafted.

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I wasn't a Heisman winner or anything, and I knew I wouldn't be a first-round pick, but I knew I stacked up well against other college running backs and I was confident that I'd proved myself both on and off the field.

I was a senior at the University of California, Los Angeles, a standout player on my team. My stats as a running back were really strong. My game film had been sent everywhere. My senior year alone I led the team with eleven touchdowns. I was ranked second on my team with a career-best 765 yards rushing. I'd won the Tommy Prothro Award for Outstanding Special Teams Player, and the Paul I. Wellman Memorial Award for All-Around Excellence. My coaches and agents and friends and family all agreed that I had a strong shot at making the NFL, a really strong shot. But if I wasn't picked by now . . . well . . . this thought rushed at me as terrifyingly as a veteran linebacker, huge, agile, and fast—maybe I wasn't going to get my one game after all. Maybe I was going to let down my friends and family. Maybe my dream was never going to come true. I quickly walked on past the TV, went and did my thing, then washed up and headed back outside.

Mama was sitting in the garage with her phone in her hands. The garage door was up, and she was watching us play basketball, but not really. She was praying, waiting, wanting with all her might for that phone to ring, just like we all were. I looked her way and she smiled at me, but her smile was tense. No call had come. Who were we kidding?

I was never going to play in the NFL.

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You gotta realize the odds against me making it this far even—I mean, as far as I'd gotten that Saturday in April—playing basketball on my driveway, waiting for the phone to ring, hoping and praying like mad that I was going to get drafted into the NFL.

The process of making it to the NFL starts back in high school. Actually, it starts even before that, in a sense, but high school is where the road to the NFL becomes more serious. Think about how many high school football players there are at any given time in the United States. We all love football in America. It's played on every high school field and playground patch of grass from coast to coast and back again, New York to Los Angeles, Miami to Seattle.

If you're playing at a high school level, then football is competitive, but there's still fun and games involved, too. It's a bit more relaxed. A lot of the guys have played in middle school and for Pop Warner leagues, so they know what's going on. But a lot of guys are still learning the fundamentals of the game, even by the time they reach high school. A couple of players on each high school team will be really good. One might be a standout player. Most of the other guys will soon learn to hold their own. But at that level a few players on your team will be average. A few players might even suck. So, let's do a little math. There are about 37,000 high schools in America. Most high schools are going to have football programs. Each high school team has about 50 players. That's about 1.8 million high school players total. That's where the pool of potential NFL players begins—a pool as big as the ocean is wide.

The years pass, and you need to narrow that pool to a river. Plenty of high school seniors want to play football at a college level, which you have to do to make it into the NFL. With other pro-

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fessional sports, like basketball, for instance, a guy can sometimes jump straight from high school to the big leagues. But not football. In football, you either have to play for three years in college first to be eligible—or you have to be out of high school for three years. They want you older, bigger, tougher, wiser. That's how it works. So, you take those 1.8 million high school players, and maybe a quarter of them will be high school seniors. That means some 460,000 high school seniors are trying to make the jump and play at a collegiate level. Colleges want the best players they can get, and here's where the first real sharp ax falls.

You quickly see at college how that's where the business side of the game kicks in. In college, you have to keep your scholarship, and to do that you have to play well. Most players will have mastered the fundamentals of the game by then, but not everything about the game will be mastered. Football's a game where you keep learning as long as you play it. It's sorta like golf. When you watch it on TV, it looks so easy. But then you try to play the game yourself. The slightest repositioning of your arm, your elbow, your legs, your back, can make the difference between a ball in the sand trap and a hole in one. The stakes are raised in college. Definitely raised.

About 115 colleges across America have NCAA Division 1 football programs. Each college team has about 110 players. Division 2 has about the same amount of teams. There's also Division 3 to contend with, as well as NAIA. So, you take that original ocean of high school players, and maybe you end up with 40,000 college players total, with a quarter of those positions becoming open each year to freshmen as the college seniors graduate. That's 1.8 million high school players getting sliced down to about 10,000 college

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freshmen who get to play football. Point being: It ain't easy to play football at a college level. And after that, it gets even harder.

If you want to play in the NFL, then part of the challenge means you gotta survive all four years of college. Football's brutal. I respect a man if he becomes a lawyer or an architect, a doctor or a journalist—all of those are competitive professions where you have be really good to make it. But the big difference between any of those and football is that in those professions no one's trying to physically hurt you like they do when you play the game.

They talk about the "beast" mentality being necessary to play football well. Out there on the field, you gotta be an animal. It's controlled aggression, yeah, but it's most definitely aggression. You can't hold anything back. I know of guys who'll mentally prepare themselves before a game by rehearsing in their minds the time in their lives when they've been the most angry. They get that image in their heads, and then they charge out onto the field, ready to unleash all that rage in the game. That's what's coming toward you every play. It's a street fight. A wall of angry muscle.

If, by chance, you do survive all four years and end up as a college senior and you're not limping or in a coma in a hospital, then you'll find yourself one of about 3,500 other players who potentially could play at the NFL level. Those are the guys you're competing against to make it into the draft. There are also guys from other countries who become eligible for the draft, and they're trying to get spots, too. I'd seen how Tyrone Crawford was drafted by the Cowboys. He's a Canadian. The Giants picked up Markus Kuhn, a star player from Germany. A couple of other standout Canadians were picked up, and a couple of guys from England,

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too. So the draft is really a worldwide competition, although the bulk of players get drafted from American college teams.

Here's where the numbers really shrink. That river turns into a garden hose. There are 32 NFL teams total. Each NFL team has 53 guys on the roster. That's 1,696 players total in the NFL, give or take, at any one time. Each year, about 200 of those spots open up, so just over 250 guys are ever drafted into the NFL in any given year. Even if you're drafted, that doesn't mean you've made it. The guys who are drafted need to compete with everyone else on the roster as well as the free agents and any guys from other leagues who might be trying for a slot. You could be drafted and still not ever play an official NFL game.

Those are the odds. You start with 1.8 million high school players and time goes by and you cut and cut and finally end up with 250 guys getting drafted. Or think about it this way: There's plenty of good-sized cities in America that have a population of about 68,000 people. If every single person in that city was trying to make it into the NFL, then you'd end up with one draftee out of that city. By the time anybody gets to the NFL level, every player on every team is a great athlete, the best of the best. He's the American idol of the football field. And I was confident I had what it takes to play in the NFL.

But still that phone of mine wasn't ringing.

I went back to the driveway, and my friends and I played some more basketball. We were all practicing our dunks now, all trying to look

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cool, all trash-talking each other and trying to be the man. In my mind, I thought about how there was one other obstacle I needed to overcome. The thought flashed at me suddenly, because usually I don't even think about it anymore. My friends don't, either. Maybe, I thought, just maybe, that's why my phone wasn't ringing.

See, I never really looked at this other thing as all that big a deal, but I knew other people did if they didn't know me. To me, this other thing was something that always made me stronger. Something that made me so all-fired determined to succeed at the highest level I could. Ever since I was a kid, if ever I wanted to do something, then thanks to this obstacle I'd needed to fight and scrape and claw my way forward, and go as absolutely hard as I could to achieve a goal. When I lifted weights in practice, I lifted like a man on fire. Whenever it was game day and I ran for the ball, I sprinted like a cheetah hungry for a gazelle. If someone was yelling at me, telling me that I was no good, well, I just never listened. You know what I mean?

Let me explain it another way. The day after my Pro Day (where NFL scouts came to UCLA), my agent and his girlfriend were in San Diego doing some business for another client. While there, they were hanging out in a restaurant having beers with two scouts. I won't name the scouts, and to this day, I don't know who they were. But it don't matter none.

My agent says, "What do you think of Coleman?"

And one of the scouts says, "Coleman. Wow, what an impressive Pro Day he had. He's a top physical specimen, all right, he's got the build and moves of an NFL player, but we won't touch him. Sorry to say, but it's the truth."

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"How come?" asks my agent. He's got a hunch what they're getting at, but he wants to hear them say it straight out.

"Because we can't take a chance on him, that's how come," says a scout.

The two scouts leave to go to the bathroom or something, and my agent's girlfriend says quietly, just to him, "Can they actually do that? Can they discriminate against a guy like that?" Because she knows what they're talking about.

And my agent says, "Yeah. Of course they can. This is football."

What he means is, if you're in the NFL, then your only job is to win. It doesn't matter if you're a scout, coach, general manager, or player. Your job depends on it. A line like that could bother a guy, sure. It's frustrating to put in all that work and be dismissed, particularly since I'd proved myself in other ways. But I refuse to let something like that bother me. I get what he's pointing at. If you take all the players vying to be in the NFL, and one of them has this one other thing, see, this one strike against him, even if he had nothing to do with that strike being against him in the first place, then they think, Why gamble? Football is just business. It's big business. And everyone involved needs to win.

In fact, my agent has answered that question before—and he's answered it well. Rick Neuheisel, my coach at UCLA, served as a reference point to anyone who asked. We've never tried to hide this one other thing. We shot information about me to all thirty-two NFL teams, saying Rick is able to answer any questions about me and my performance on or off the field. I've never once missed an assignment, that's what Rick told them. I'm able to play the game at the highest level—he told them that, too. Because of this one

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other thing, I'd work harder, stay out later, come in earlier, lift and push and squat and sprint and throw and catch and run with every ounce of determination I have.

Rick will tell ya.

Never once has it been an impediment to the game that I'm legally deaf.

Toward the middle of the sixth round, my phone rang.

We stopped playing basketball immediately. Mom stood up from the chair where she was sitting. I picked up my phone and motioned to everybody to be quiet.

"Hello?" I said.

My heart sank. Instantly, I knew it was nothing. It was just a guy asking me if anybody else had called. He was from a team, sure, but it didn't mean anything.

I hung up, and we went back to playing basketball.

Oh sure, I'd talked to a lot of teams earlier—Detroit, Oakland, Seattle, and more. A few had flown me out so they could meet with me. A few just talked to me on the phone. They'd said things like "You're definitely on our board. We're definitely interested in you." But I knew that could be a lot of bull, too. You just never know. I felt excited to hear those words from them, but I was trying hard not to set myself up for disappointment, too.

There in the driveway, I reflected back on how a ton of work happens before the draft, and how those three important days are

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the culmination of all that preliminary work. Just like in any other sport, all the professional football teams have scouting departments, and each year all through the year the team owners put big money into finding talent. Scouts are going out all the time, watching games, looking at film, going to training camps, reading news stories—all the time they're watching players, both on and off the field.

After the regular season, the NFL holds what's called the Scouting Combine, where they bring a bunch of college players to Indianapolis for a six-day assessment. They put the players on the field and give them all these physical and mental tests and interviews just to see how they do. And then each university holds what's called a Pro Day, which is like a combine just for that university's players, and scouts come in to see how you do. On top of that there are all these all-star games where they can look at you, too. So that's all in preparation for the draft.

I hadn't been invited to Combine, which devastated me because I knew how big that was—a high percentage of the guys who go to Combine get drafted. But it isn't unusual for a player not to go to, either. It just made me work harder. I'd done well at UCLA's Pro Day, and I'd played in one of the all-star games and done well there. At my Pro Day, Sherman Smith, the running back coach for the Seattle Seahawks, was there, and he said, "Hey, when you're done, meet me in the auditorium for an interview." So we had a good talk there, about how it's just as important who you are off the field as it is who you are on the field. I don't think we even talked much about football. He asked me all about my family. He wanted to

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know what kind of person I was. He asked me about my faith. It felt like a good interview all around. After Pro Day I got some more calls from teams.

But a good Pro Day doesn't guarantee you a spot in the draft—that's for sure. What made matters difficult for me was that when I played in the all-star game, they asked me to play fullback to see how that would go for me. I'd always played a different position—running back, more specifically tailback—so there I was in the week before the game, watching all these YouTube videos about how to play fullback.

See, the term *running back* is a broad one. It actually encompasses more than one position. There's the tailback, guys like Marshawn Lynch of the Seahawks and Jamaal Charles of the Chiefs. Those are the big names, the guys who line up seven yards deep and get the handoff. A tailback gets the ball more often. He runs more. He gains yards and even scores more.

Then there's the fullback, which is also a running back position, but it takes different technique, different moves. With a fullback, basically you line up in front of the tailback and block for him. Your job is to create a path for the guy behind you, the guy with the ball. A fullback must be big, strong, and tough. Think of a fullback as a battering ram. It's not a position that a lot of teams even have anymore, since a lot of teams have transitioned to more of a passing game now. Playing fullback is sometimes thought of as a dying art. But a number of teams still value the position, too. See, whenever a team passes the ball, you're taking a lot of chances with that ball flying through the air—interceptions, fumbles, you name it. But when you run the ball, you keep the ball close to

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the ground, and the play stays more controlled. That's the benefit that a good fullback can bring to a team—he opens the door and strengthens the running game. He helps guarantee yardage. That's why they wanted me to try playing it.

When I was told to play fullback, I didn't like that personally—hey, I'd played running back for eight years already—but I kept my mouth shut. My dad always told me that nobody likes a whiner. There wasn't anything I could do about it, either. What am I going to say to them? No—not interested? Of course I was interested, and I tried to keep my big goal in mind. I just wanted to play football, and I would do whatever it took to play. I knew that in the position of fullback, I wouldn't get to see the ball as much as possible, but I was up for anything. You tell me to play fullback, and I'll play fullback.

So we went through a week of practice to get ready for the all-star game, and I think I did okay in practice. I was always good at special teams in college, so I was doing punt formations and showing other guys what to do, and the coaches and scouts saw that. One or two of them indicated that I'd absolutely make the NFL for my skills in special teams, which, if you're unfamiliar with that term, means the guys who go onto the field for plays involving a kick of the football. So I felt good about that. I was even elected captain for the all-star game, and the game itself went well. I played well.

After the all-star game, I just went home, kept training, and waited for the draft.

Roughly a month before the draft, team officials meet in secret closed-door meetings. Each team's got what they call the "war

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room," and that's where the scouts come in and make a case for who they like and why.

Maybe you saw that movie *Moneyball*, a few years back, about the Oakland Athletics baseball team, and how their general manager, Billy Beane, and the assistant GM, Peter Brand, a numbers wiz, totally turned tables on the scouting and selection process and looked at statistics only. That approach certainly worked that year for the A's, but that was baseball. In football the process is still more subjective. A lot of it hinges on how they feel in their gut.

In the war room there are the local area scouts, the cross-check scouts, the college directors, and the general manager, and they might have all gone out and looked at a player and analyzed the stats, or they might have called in a player and had him do a private workout. All the time, they're asking themselves if a guy can do the job. They want height, weight, speed. Those are the three big categories that every player's got to have—and I knew I had those three for sure. I'm six feet tall, 233 pounds, and I can run a forty-meter sprint in 4.52, which is an impressive number for somebody as big as me. But after that—that's where the art of the draft comes to the table.

They might look at who a guy is off the field. Has he had any arrests? Does he have an alcohol problem or an addiction to gambling? Is he going to make trouble for a team if he's signed?

They'll definitely be looking at the pool of reflective players with an eye to who they need right now, and even who they'll need next season. Maybe they want to bring a player in as a backup, because they know one of their starters is injury prone. You just never know.

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My off-field life was in order.
All the rest of that subjectivity I couldn't control.
I just needed to wait for a phone call.

Oh sure, there were some other options. If I didn't get drafted, then my agent would help me figure that out. I might go play in Europe for a season. I might play in the CFL. I might need to go stock shelves for $5.50 an hour like Kurt Warner did when he wasn't drafted in 1994.

But being drafted is definitely everyone's first choice. If you get drafted, then it means that a team wants you. They target you for a reason. You fill a need they have and you're less likely to be cut. If you get drafted you also get a signing bonus. In the first couple of rounds, it can be big, millions. Anywhere past third round, and that bonus is still maybe $30,000 to $70,000—which to me was big money coming straight out of college. I most definitely wanted to get drafted. And the money wasn't the biggest reason, either. Plain and simple, it was my dream—that's what I wanted to achieve.

I could smell Grandma's cooking wafting from the kitchen to outside, but my stomach was all tied up in knots. Too much time had passed. I set the ball down and looked at my friends. I checked my phone again just to see if I'd missed something. I looked at Mama. She shook her head.

Grandma follows that timeless saying "Don't count your chickens before they're hatched." I thought about a twist to that. You

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know what I'd say to any college player who ever assumes he's a shoe-in for the draft?

I'd say, "Don't buy that BMW."

That was going to become my advice from here on out. It means there are some really talented players out there who don't make the draft. There ain't no guarantee, even if you have good stats, strong game film, and Coach Rick backing you up.

One time I was sitting in this little hole-in-the-wall restaurant near the gym where I work out, and this guy who works for a BMW dealership walks in. We've talked before, and he sits down and tells me about this other football player, a pretty good friend of mine who I played against a couple times in college, and how he tried to buy a car from their dealership,

This other guy is a real beast and his stats are great, and he was absolutely certain he was going to be drafted within the first three rounds. Everyone was telling him this, and he's reading about it in the blogs and stuff, and the news has gone to his head. So he walks into a BMW dealership before the draft, picks out a brand-new Series 7 BMW, and says to the salesman, "I'll take it." The sticker price on the window is $141,000 plus tax. He's that confident. I mean, the guy doesn't even dress up to go to the dealership. He's just wearing old sweats and a T-shirt. I don't know about you, but if ever I go buy a BMW, I'll be certain to dress the part. That's how the world works.

Well, they just laughed at him. Turned him down cold. The guy gets mad and says to the salesman, "I'm about to go first round draft. I'll show you." He whips out his cell phone and calls his agent. Seems he's got some money stashed in an account some-

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where, so he leaves the dealership, goes to the bank and takes out all his money in cash, comes back to the dealership, and says, "That's my car. Gimme the keys." He ain't worried, because he's so sure. He buys the car. But guess what—

He didn't get drafted.

Later, he signed as a free agent, so it worked out for him in the end. But it took a while, and he took the long road to get there. That's why I'd say, "Don't buy the BMW." Don't ever do anything until after your name is called. And—look at the odds—your name probably isn't going to get called.

Mine wasn't getting called.

The sun over Los Angeles was starting to head for the horizon, and my phone was dead in my hands, as dead as my dream. When it came to the 2012 NFL Draft, I was most certainly not going to be picked. My dream was over.

I knew it now beyond the shadow of a doubt.

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