

**B·R**



## **DOCTOR FOOTBALL: ALL-AMERICAN, NFL, BRAIN SURGEON. NEXT STOP: WHITE HOUSE?**

He has the ultimate resume—and he's only 30. Walk along the career path of Myron Rolle, who's setting a new standard for overachievers every day.



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**D**ozens of doctors and nurses and staffers had streamed through Marjorie DeVoe's hospital room in the days following her surgery. They checked her breathing. They changed her bandages. They brought her food. And for the most part, they blended together.

One doctor, though, was different. He was always impeccably dressed, and he was in stunningly good shape. And he seemed to care about more than her recovery—he had asked about her family and where she was from. When they discovered they'd both spent time in Florida, they reminisced about the weather and Waffle House.

So as he enters her room for the last time to approve her discharge, she must know more. She asks, "What's your story?"

Myron Rolle looks up from her charts and smiles. "I've been playing football since I was 6," he says. "I went to Florida State for college. Then I went to Oxford in England for a master's degree. I was drafted by the Titans and was with them for two years, and then one year in Pittsburgh with the Steelers. Then I went back to Florida State for medical school, and now I'm here."

Here is Massachusetts General Hospital, where Rolle is a neurosurgery resident. When he was 10 years old, he decided he wanted to be an [NFL](#) player and then a doctor. Now 30, he has already achieved both goals.

"Wow," DeVoe says. "You sure have done a lot."

"Well," Rolle responds, "I know that my parents are proud of me."

Before he leaves, DeVoe shows Rolle a few photos of her newborn granddaughter. She's 69 years old, but this is her first grandchild, and Rolle *oohs* and *ahhs* enthusiastically. He tells her he'll be sad to see her leave but glad to get her back home. She promises to call him to get coffee when she's feeling better, and he agrees. Then he bends over her bed and kisses her on the cheek. He walks out of her room.

"All right," he says to himself. "What's next?"



**Five years ago**, for the first time in his adult life, Myron Rolle felt lost. On Saturday night, he had failed to record a tackle in a game for the first time in his only preseason with the Steelers. On Sunday night, slumped on his bed and watching TV in the team hotel, he'd received the dreaded invitation to report to another room—and to bring his playbook. On Monday morning, he'd gone to clear out his locker and say goodbye to coach [Mike Tomlin](#), who told him not to let anyone stop him from pursuing his NFL career.

He walked into the parking lot, tossed his shoulder pads into the back seat and pointed his black GMC Terrain east. He had only one place left to go: home.

Myron is the youngest of five brothers. His oldest brothers—Marchant, Marvis and Mordecai—were born in the Bahamas. But his mother, Beverly, wanted McKinley and Myron to be U.S. citizens. For the final four months of her last pregnancy, she parked herself with a friend in Houston and didn't leave until she gave birth to Myron on October 30, 1986. His father, Whitney, who had gone to college in Minnesota, secured a job with Citibank in 1987, and the family followed him to Galloway, New Jersey.

While their parents worked, the older brothers assumed certain child-rearing responsibilities for Myron and McKinley. Marchant and Marvis tended to the training of their minds. As Marchant was teaching the 5-year-old McKinley to read, he noticed that Myron, 3, was mouthing along with every word. He could read before he turned 4. As Myron grew, Marvis challenged him in Scrabble, while Marchant bought him books like *Gifted Hands* by the neurosurgeon (and now Secretary of Housing and Urban Development) Ben Carson.

Mordecai, meanwhile, trained their bodies. Mordecai dragged them both out to a parking lot near their house on weeknights and weekends and taught them the ins and outs of American football. By fifth grade, Myron understood the wide receiver route tree and the different regions of the brain. He knew he wanted to be an NFL player and then a neurosurgeon.

He didn't yet know what that would take. If you want to be a professional football player, there is a path for that: peewee, Pop Warner, two-a-days under the sweltering summer sun, Friday nights, Saturdays and then, if you're one of the top 224 players in your draft class or a talented free agent, Sundays. If you want to be a neurosurgeon, there's another path: science camps, conferences, long nights in the library, seven years spent pursuing two degrees and then, if you're one of the top 200 doctors in your class, seven more years of residency.

Is it possible to keep a foot on both paths?

The roadblocks arose quickly. Every summer, his mother would take him to the Bahamas and he would marvel at what he saw: Each person in power, from the prime minister to the grocery store owner, was black. In Galloway, he saw white women clutch their purses as he and his brothers walked by them to the arcade; he saw security guards follow his mother around stores; when a baseball glove went missing on his otherwise all-white team, coaches questioned him first.

When he was around 10, he and a boy were teasing each other on the bus ride home from school when the boy, who was white, called Myron a nigger. He'd heard the word before, but this time the full weight of it hit him like a strong right hook. When the bus stopped, Myron chased the boy home and repaid the racism with a royal beating.

He felt justified until he saw the look of disappointment on his parents' faces. "They had sacrificed so much for me," Myron says, "and I was blowing it."

They knew Myron would need more than just his God-given intellect and athleticism to last on this path. He needed to learn that there was another way to respond. During those trips to the Bahamas, they showed him how most folks in the world lived on so little, and thus he learned gratitude. They showed him how they sent money back to family and friends there who needed it, and thus he learned generosity. They assigned him book reports focusing on black male role models, like Carson and Paul Robeson and Martin Luther King Jr., and thus he saw the signposts left by other remarkable men who looked like him.

Success walked with him in lockstep. Back in New Jersey, McKinley and Mordecai got Whitney's blessing to cold-call prep high schools and eventually got Myron a scholarship to the Peddie School in Hightstown and then the prestigious Hun School in Princeton. When Myron was a sophomore, he attended a medical workshop for young medical leaders. Although *Gifted Hands* is part of the Myron Rolle mythology, it was this conference that offered him his first hands-on medical experiences. For a few days in New Orleans, he got to learn how to suture wounds and how to measure blood pressure. He came home more convinced than ever that medicine would be in his future.

On the field at the Hun School, Myron found a role as a star running back and defensive back. In the trophy cases of Princeton's Jadwin Gym, where the basketball team often played, he found a role model: Bill Bradley, the ex-Princeton hoop star, Rhodes scholar, NBA Hall of Famer and U.S. senator.

At the Hun School, Myron didn't just become a consensus 5-star football recruit; he also became a kind of chameleon. During the semester, he'd spend time with friends on their yachts and sit courtside at Knicks games. For breaks, Whitney pulled his Ford Taurus up alongside Bentleys to collect Myron and take him back to their two-bedroom house. Myron began realizing back then that he could fit in with almost any group of people. He even reconnected with the family of the boy he had beaten up in elementary school and befriended them.

For a while, it worked like that—academics and athletics in harmony. He worked hard in class, but A's still arrived relatively easily. And football offered the needed moments each day for him to clear his mind. As they watched what his success wrought, Myron and McKinley would stay up late at night and plot their futures. Because of the age gap between the oldest three brothers and Myron and McKinley, they had become uncommonly close. McKinley would take a bus to a subway to a train each Friday to make sure he never missed one of his little brother's games. And McKinley saw even then that Myron would have opportunities in his future. "Myron and I would always say: We want them to write about us when we're not here," McKinley says. "We want to leave a legacy."

But by the time Myron pulled up in his driveway, after the Steelers cut him in 2012, the trail had gone cold. The hopes and dreams he'd carried with confidence for more than a decade seemed now to be a distant memory.

His mother and father had a plate of peas and rice—his favorite Bahamian meal—ready for him. His brothers each called or dropped by to check on him. For three weeks, there was nothing he could do but wait on the whims of the 30 franchises he hadn't played for and hope that one would give him another shot. He received an offer from the CFL but rejected it outright.

He remembers the early-morning workouts, but the rest of each of those days is a daze. All his life, Myron had walked both paths with ease, but now, it seemed, one had come to a dead end. For the first time in his life, he had given his whole self to something and still hadn't succeeded.

How would he respond to failure?



**On a recent Saturday**, Myron emerges from his glass-box apartment building in downtown Boston wearing red shorts and a Seminoles hoodie. He has worked for 10 days in a row—days that begin at 4:30 a.m. at Mass General and often don't end until after 6:30 p.m. It's midafternoon, and though he technically had the day off, he still woke up at 6 a.m. to attend a neurology boot camp at nearby Tufts University. Now he ambles from his apartment to a park overlooking the Charles River. Then he slips in his earbuds, blasts some Bahamian Soca music, a type of pop, and begins to run.

Myron received his first football scholarship offer when he was in the ninth grade. He was at a Bob Stoops football camp in Norman, Oklahoma, and caught the attention of the head coach himself. On the last night of the camp, Stoops summoned the Rolle family into his office and made a rare offer to a freshman. Before they left the state for the 22-hour drive home, they were pulled over for speeding. It turned out, though, that the officer was an Oklahoma diehard. When he heard Myron was a top recruit, and he saw Stoops' business card as evidence, he gave the family a break in exchange for a handshake with Myron and a plug for the hometown team.

They saw then how many traps and temptations lay on the path to football stardom, so they became methodical in their decision-making. Whitney or McKinley handled every recruiting call for Myron. At least two family members accompanied him on every recruiting visit. And when they did, they would gather in their hotel room at night or back around their kitchen table in Galloway when they got home and discuss a survey that they'd designed and that contained more than 70 questions, ranging from the quality of the food to the type of grass on the practice field and the access to a medical school on campus.

Even though some in the family preferred for Myron to go to Oklahoma or Florida, they all backed him when he enrolled early at FSU, intent on graduating in two-and-a-half years, getting a prestigious scholarship and playing in the NFL. Even then, critics wondered on Rivals and Scout message boards if Myron could really keep a foot on both paths. McKinley created an anonymous account on each and snapped back at any slights he saw.

On the field, Myron became a freshman All-American, then a third-team AP All-American as a junior. He famously missed the first half of a game against Maryland that season to interview for the Rhodes. He returned in time for the second half and by the end of the day had won both the game and the scholarship. His father, Whitney, called him that night when he got back to Tallahassee. It was maybe 2 a.m. by then, but Myron picked up. "You have a tough decision to make," Whitney told him.

"No," Myron responded, "I don't."

Several family members advised him to skip the Rhodes scholarship—he'd won it, and no one would ever be able to take that away—and enter the NFL draft, where he'd received a second-round grade from the NFL College Advisory Committee, which evaluates underclassmen considering declaring early. Instead, he and McKinley moved across the Atlantic. All his life, his paths toward the NFL and medicine had run parallel, and he had been able to maintain that foothold in each.

At Oxford, he woke up each morning before dawn to sweat through drills with a local rugby team or with McKinley. He didn't take advantage of the opportunities to travel like other students did, and he missed much of the second semester when he returned to participate in the Senior Bowl, his pro day and the NFL combine.



During interviews with teams, he was more often asked about medicine than football. He felt team doctors and trainers were more interested in him than the GMs and scouts. The Buccaneers even asked him if he felt like he'd abandoned his Seminoles teammates when he left a year early to go to Oxford—a question it seems unlikely they would have asked if he'd simply opted as a junior to go pro.

"I think the teams thought I'd just been eating fish and chips, listening to Sandra Day O'Connor and punting on the Thames," he says. "No one thought I'd be any good anymore."

When the Titans selected him in the sixth round, he felt more relief than joy. And when he arrived in Nashville, with McKinley faithfully at his side, he hoped he was back on the right path.

"I know what I was told, I know what I saw, and I know what I felt," Myron says. "I was told that I could play seven or eight years by multiple NFL coaches. I know what I saw, that I could compete with these guys. And I know what I felt. I came from a prep school in New Jersey, so I get that when I got to FSU, some people weren't sure about me—I didn't play in Florida or Texas or at a powerhouse high school. But when I got onto the field as a true freshman practicing with the second-team guys, I felt, OK, I can play with these guys. And then I became an All-American. And I felt the exact same way in the NFL. I thought, I can be here. I can validate what has been said about me for so long."

When he arrived back in New Jersey after a season-and-a-half in Nashville and a preseason in Pittsburgh, and without ever having appeared in an NFL game, he allowed himself three weeks of sorrow. In his lowest moments, he even regretted taking the Rhodes scholarship, but those feelings never lasted long. "It was like the Book of Lamentations in the Bible," he says. "I never got the fair chance to make an impact. A second-rounder gets nine chances to fail, but a sixth-rounder doesn't get that luxury. So I thought to myself, Why do I want to keep running this race? It's taking more energy to shake this stigma that I don't care about football than I'm actually expending on the field."

He signed up for the MCAT and applied to Florida State medical school that summer. His family members noticed a shift. For a few weeks, Myron had been lost in the wilderness, directionless. But then he picked up the trail again and started setting goals and knocking them out in quick succession. He enrolled at FSU's medical school in fall 2013.

Now, as he runs along the river, two separate groups of people see his Seminoles gear and taunt him with "Go Gators!" chants. Today's run is a relatively low-key workout. On days when he lifts, he performs the explosive movements he learned at FSU and in the NFL, borrowing routines from friends still playing professionally. On days when he sprints, he straps on his cleats and heads to a small patch of grass near the hospital and works his way through the route tree, imagining he's back in Pittsburgh or Nashville or Tallahassee.

Now as he approaches his finish line for the day, near the Museum of Science, he cries out: "Rolle with the interception. He's at the 20...the 10...the 5...touchdown!"



**On Sunday mornings** when he isn't working, Myron still wakes up at 6 a.m. He takes a train to a bus to make Morning Star Baptist Church's first service at 8. On this Sunday morning, he wears a dark suit with pronounced pinstripes and a pocket square, but no tie. Aside from the teenage boy sandwiched between his parents one row in front of him, Myron is the youngest person in the congregation by at least a decade. He likes that. He's always felt he has an old soul.

He also likes the sense of home this service offers him. All around him are older black women who remind him of his mother. When he was overwhelmed with expectations at the NFL draft, he asked her to pray for him. When he was cut by the Steelers, he drove back to be under her roof. Even now, at 30, he still calls her Mummy—and still calls her almost every day. "That's the way our whole family is," McKinley says. "You would think none of my brothers have jobs with how much time they spend on the phone with our mom."

She taught them that church wasn't just about sermons on Sundays but about bending your life toward service. When he was in high school, Myron, mimicking Marchant, learned the saxophone. On weekends, he volunteered to play at Absecon Manor, a nursing home. In 2009, he established the Myron L. Rolle Foundation to support children and families in need. The foundation has helped to fund health clinics in Africa, to raise awareness for the health plights of Native Americans and to encourage Bahamian boys and girls to seek higher education. In 2011, he accompanied former U.S. President Bill Clinton to the Congo as part of the Clinton Global Initiative's missions of serving displaced refugees.

Between his first and second years at medical school, he went to shadow one of his mentors, Phillip "Jay" Storm, the chief of neurosurgery at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Storm was removing a tumor from a young boy, and Myron was assisting. After Storm navigated what surgeons call the precious real estate, he handed the operation over to Myron, who began cutting away the boy's tumor.

"I walked right out of the [operating room], cleaned up, caught a train to New Jersey, walked into the front door of my house and told my parents, 'This is it,'" he says. "It was better than getting a clean hit on a receiver in front of 85,000 people at Doak Campbell Stadium."

Every once in a while, he realizes the wide impact he has already, and he is humbled. In 2013, the Bahamas put him on a commemorative stamp along with the country's three other Rhodes scholars. After his graduation from Florida State's medical school—after having spent four years there not only as an ambassador for the school but also as a closer in coach Jimbo Fisher's recruiting efforts for academically oriented enrollees—more than 75 people, most of them Bahamians, accepted an invitation to celebrate him at the Hotel Duval in downtown Tallahassee. Among the well-wishers were each of Myron's brothers, a number of his professors, a few professional athletes and coaches and the CEO of Waffle House.

Several of the more famous guests offered words of encouragement to Myron, but no moment meant more than when his family attempted to toast him. Each of his brothers is highly successful—Marchant was a financial adviser before becoming a stay-at-home dad, Marvis is a lawyer for the State Department, Mordecai is a nurse in Georgia, and McKinley is a high school football coach and teacher in Florida. But among them, only Marvis could speak without crying. They all believed Myron was the best of them, and it has never inspired jealousy, just pride.

Four years before, Myron was shedding tears on a long and lonely drive home. His life had narrowed and become consumed just by football. "The path had always been clear," he says. "The doors had always been open. Those two or three years were different ... Not finding a spot in football, it was like watching someone I love walk out on me. I had done nothing wrong. I'd nurtured the relationship so much—I'd cared for it, loved it, taken it out to eat. There was no good reason, but we were getting divorced anyway."

Now, surrounded by family, friends, mentors and teachers, he knew exactly where he was going next. His world had constricted while he'd played pro football, but now opportunities were blossoming all around him. For the next seven years, he'd study neurosurgery, then in an eighth he'd specialize in pediatrics. Always accustomed to looking ahead, he took a moment that day to gaze back at the trail he'd left in his wake.

"When it comes to my individual achievements, my family taught me and I remind myself to point a spotlight in the direction of 'the least of these,'" Myron says. "I try to use my platform for advocacy. I hope to be a signpost for someone else who can go further. A lot of people will come and follow this path farther than I could have ever dreamed."

Back at church in Boston, as the pastor reaches his crescendo, members of the congregation have risen to their feet and are cheering. The pastor prays aloud, "Let us be different. Let us make a difference in our community." Myron, back straight and head bowed, nods emphatically and offers a quiet "Amen."



**Even when he arrives** before first light, Myron Rolle gets energy from the way Massachusetts General Hospital is alive. Ambulances are rushing in and cars are rolling cautiously out. Monitors are chirping assurances, and they are sounding alarms. Some people are recovering; others are clinging to life. For years, Rolle wanted control in his life. Now doctors and patients and pagers dictate each of his days.

There is no comparing any suffering to that of a parent losing a child, but Rolle believes that his failure in the NFL gave him a new level of compassion. He knows what it is like to do everything right, to give your mind and your body to something fully, and for circumstances beyond your control to take it away anyway. He knows that life sometimes can be chaotic and cruel. He also knows that every weakness is strength in waiting.

"How you move forward from a setback is critical," Rolle says. "I look back at that moment now as a vivid moment in my life. It helped to forge me. It was tough, but I know now what failing is. I know now more about sorrow. When I think about that hurt, I have a new resolve for making sure nothing like that happens again."

He still misses football, mostly for the chance to clear his mind every day. He believes the game gave him crucial skills he couldn't have acquired elsewhere. Although he advocates for advancements in player safety, he desperately hopes the game doesn't disappear.

"Unequivocally, football has prepared me for medicine in a way nothing else could have," Rolle says. "It was the best thing I did in my entire life. It's those football memories that help me reconnect with myself. I use my football skills in the operating room. The important things are the same: communication, preparation, the team element.

"I want football to stay. I need football to stay. I have a platform now, and I'm going to continue to push for the game I love."

For now, his day-to-day work is more than enough. One of his favorite operations is for patients with cerebral palsy who suffer from spastic movements. He slices through the skin in the back and into the spine and grasps a bundle of nerves right out of the patient's back. With the help of other physicians, he identifies the nerves that are causing the pain and suffering and slowly burns them away. If everything goes well, the patient can go from barely moving with crutches to walking comfortably—and sometimes even running—in a matter of months.

But many members of his family have bigger goals in mind for him. "He's a 5-star prospect for political office," McKinley says.

Rolle isn't sure if that's the path for him. For such a public person, Rolle is really an introvert. He hasn't lived with a roommate in years. He likes to go to the movies alone. He likes to eat alone. But he believes he received his skills to share them, and so each morning when he walks through the hospital doors, he gives himself away. For years he tried to forge his own path; now he follows the one he believes was set out before him.

As much as he loves his work, he does savor those rare moments when a hush falls over his wing of the hospital. When time allows, he hands his pager to a nurse practitioner and changes from his suit into scrubs. He works his way through the labyrinth of the hospital, past the patients inching along in wheelchairs, past the stressed family members searching for creature comforts in the cafeteria, past the doctors and nurses sprinting to the latest emergency. He pushes open the door to the stairwell and begins running up the 22 floors. When he summits, he drops to his back and does seven rotations of abs exercises, rises again and races back down the stairs.

At the bottom, he allows himself a moment to catch his breath. Then he turns and faces the stairs again.

He knows he must keep climbing.

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