

# This Rhodes Scholar made the NFL. He's about to achieve his other dream: neurosurgeon.

By **Rick Maese** March 21



Myron Rolle opens his "Match Day" letter that shows where he will continue his medical education and residency. (Toni L. Sandys/The Washington Post)

TALLAHASSEE — Myron Rolle, dressed in a light blue plaid jacket and dark slacks, was ready for his close-up. Within the hour, his life would change. For the time being, though, he waited in line with his fellow medical students for class photos. “It’s just like a football picture,” he said. “I’m not going to smile. I’m going to give a mean look.”

Rolle’s mother, Beverly, kept wiping sweat from his head, but she could do nothing to calm his nerves. This was what medical students call Match Day, the much-anticipated unveiling of where the nation’s next class of doctors would spend their residencies. Rolle likened it to the NFL draft: He had no idea who might choose him to join their team.

Rolle, 30, was the only prospective neurosurgeon in Florida State’s graduating class — and also the only former NFL player and the only Rhodes Scholar.

“I was less stressed honestly with the draft,” said Rolle, who spent parts of three seasons in the NFL before enrolling in medical school. “Back then I thought, as long as I go somewhere — just one of the 32 teams, anywhere. Here, it’s binding. You’re looking at seven years in one place. The training is different, the opportunities are different.”

Rolle and his family found their seats in the auditorium. He was given a sealed envelope, the contents of which would reveal his fate. Every student is matched with one hospital, but nationwide, no one knows his or her destination until Match Day. Rolle interviewed at 14 hospitals. He ranked his favorites: Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston was No. 1, followed by respected neurosurgery programs in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Nashville and so on.

The envelope had his photo and name printed on the outside. He held it up to the light and squinted his eyes. “I don’t know what this is,” he said and later passed it to his mother.

Rolle had been interested in the brain since he was a child. So when his football career was finished, he knew the branch of medicine on which he wanted to focus. As the football world asks more and more questions about what the sport does to the brain, Rolle is intent on finding the answers.

He looked at his watch.

“You’re anxious,” his brother McKinley said.

Fifteen minutes still remained.

“I am, bro. I am.”

### **‘Daddy, you watch me do it’**

It started with a fifth-grade class project focused on the anatomy of the brain. Rolle’s older brother Marchant then gave him a book called “Gifted Hands” by Ben Carson, the groundbreaking neurosurgeon from Johns Hopkins Hospital. The young boy was hooked. Soon his bedroom wall featured photos of two men: Deion Sanders (“my football guy”) and Carson (“my academics guy”).

“My parents wanted me to have these kind of black role models that looked like me, were men doing positive things,” he explained, “not necessarily just rapping or playing sports.”

Rolle distinguished himself on the football field and in the classroom. He never saw any reason to choose between the two.

“We encouraged all our children,” says his father, Whitney, “but I knew there’s a point in time when you have to make a decision about which path you want. Frankly, I told him, ‘Myron, you can’t play football and be a doctor.’ The timing, I didn’t think was possible. Myron told me, ‘Daddy, you watch me do it.’”

A defensive back, Rolle was named the nation’s top high school prospect by ESPN and had more than 80 scholarship offers. When he made official college visits, he asked to tour the medical schools, and he tried to be up front with his intentions. Before agreeing to attend Florida State, he told then-coach Bobby Bowden how his college career would unfold: He’d turn pro after three years; he’d become a Rhodes Scholar; and he’d attend medical school. No one doubted him.

“Listen, I can tell you this now,” says Mickey Andrews, the retired coach who was Florida State’s longtime defensive coordinator, “if he stays in the field of medicine, and he wants to spend his life as a neurosurgeon, he’ll be one of the best ever. That’s just the kind of person he is.”

Sure enough, Rolle wrapped up his bachelor’s degree in 2½ years. He was a three-year starter for the Seminoles. And rather than return for a senior season, he was selected for the Rhodes and studied at Oxford, delaying his entry into the NFL by a full year. Juggling football and his studies wasn’t an issue at Florida State, so Rolle was taken aback when he started to realize how

his academic interests hindered his stock leading into the 2010 NFL draft. He recalled interviewing with teams that asked whether he felt like he abandoned his college teammates by leaving a year early for Oxford.

Asked recently whether his academic pursuits hurt his football career, Rolle said, “Absolutely. Unequivocally.”

Once projected as a possible second-round pick, Rolle heard 206 names called before the Titans took him in the sixth round. He spent a year on Tennessee’s practice squad before he was released before the 2011 season. The Pittsburgh Steelers signed him but then cut him before the start of the 2012 season.

“Their sentiment was, ‘You play very well, but there’s other guys who will run through a wall for this, they need this,’” Rolle recalled. “‘We’re not worried about you — you could go be President of the United States. But they need this.’ I was like, how could you take this from me? They tell you all your life: be a student-athlete, focus on your grades. So I do that, and because it gets attention, it becomes an issue?”

Rolle had never appeared in a regular season game. He says both the Baltimore Ravens and Houston Texans expressed interest in bringing him in, but he was coming to terms with the inevitable. He knew he would attend medical school, just perhaps not this early.

“I was concerned about my future,” he said. “I thought to myself, ‘I can still play, go to the Ravens, continue to try to bust this stereotype. I could physically continue busting my head. I could keep going and potentially hurt my hands.’ I kept thinking, ‘Man, I’m going to need all this, though.’”

## **‘I know better now’**

Four years of medical school is just the first step. A doctor’s residency provides a foundation but also opens up research opportunities. This is what Rolle feels really separates some of the nation’s top neurosurgery programs.

At a place such as Johns Hopkins, he would have dedicated time for research, to unlock some of the brain’s mysteries. He earned his master’s in medical anthropology and was interested in providing services to underserved communities abroad. And he hopes to become a respected voice on concussions. At Massachusetts General, he would work under the Harvard University umbrella, which has funding and resources and is involved in wide-reaching research on football players and health.

“They’re one of the leaders in concussion research,” Rolle said. “I think it’d be a good fit. I think I’d flow right in, adding some credibility having played football a long time and now being able to help understand it on the medical side.”

During his playing days, Rolle suffered two concussions, one in high school and the other in college. Both occurred during practices and both times he stayed on the field.

“I wish I didn’t,” he said. “I know better now.”

While he understood the brain more than his teammates, nothing scared him away from the sport. He competed with extra padding in his helmet and tried to focus on tackling fundamentals as much as possible, but he said he couldn't afford to play with any fear.

"I don't think I fully had a grasp of the potential dangers of concussions and traumatic brain injuries until toward the end of my career," he said. "That's when I believe I had a heightened sense of awareness. It eats at me now and I'm always thinking, how can I influence other players to have that light turn on sooner? Think about it: I had an interest in neurosurgery and still didn't make it a priority. Can you imagine someone with no interest in the brain? What's their level of concern?"

Rolle said there are some similarities between his two pursuits. Before a surgery, for example, he'll pray, listen to music, visualize what's about to happen.

"Just like when I played and I would go through: What if it's third and long and they come out with four wides — what's my angle," he said. "I see it all in my head and try to play it out. What do I do when we lift off the scalp? What do I do when we remove the bone? What do I do when we try to move around this certain artery?"

He has assisted on more than 200 surgeries thus far. He will never forget the first. After his first year of medical school, he spent the summer visiting the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia each day. Rolle wasn't getting school credit or paid. He was just observing and asking questions.

"A lot of times it's like neurosurgical camp," said Phillip Storm, head of the hospital's neurosurgery division. "They'll come to the OR and hang out. But Myron just really made it his own, stayed late — 'Hey, do you mind, I feel like I'm not tying sutures well enough. Can we stick around and work on that?' This guy wants to be the best at everything."

His curiosity and eagerness were rewarded when Storm invited Rolle to take a pair of forceps and for the first time assist with a chordoma resection in an adolescent patient. Less than two years removed from an NFL career, Rolle kept his hands steady as he helped remove the tumor bit by bit from the child's brain.

"I obviously felt adrenaline rushes playing football, and I felt big when I made a big play and the crowd is going wild. But there was never anything like that," he said, "where the feeling just completely took over my whole body. It was like, *this* is it. This is the calling.

"Maybe football happened because I'm big, fast, tall, whatever. Maybe God put that in me because these are my physical attributes, and I had a mind for the game. But I don't know if everyone finds that thing where just their whole body becomes so charged up."

## **The next chapter**

On the third Friday in March, Rolle was seated with his parents, one of his brothers and his best friend inside the Ruby Diamond Concert Hall. Thousands of medical students across the country were similarly situated, awaiting the results of the

National Resident Matching Program.

Rolle enjoyed the interview process. Many of the programs were eager to chat about football. His application included a letter of reference from Carson, perhaps the biggest name in the field, the neurosurgeon who had inspired Rolle in grade school and befriended him years later. Rolle reached out to Carson during a trip to the Washington area shortly before reporting to Oxford, and in the years that followed the two have shared meals, attended church, played billiards. Rolle sought his advice every step of the way.

In Tallahassee, John Fogarty, the dean of the Florida State University College of Medicine, took the stage shortly before noon. “We are now at that part of the program that you and your families have been waiting for,” he said, laying out two options: students could open their envelopes at their seats or wait until they’re called to the stage.

“Class of ’17, stand up, show me your envelopes,” he said. “Those of you that desire, open your envelopes.”

Rolle ripped his open and unfolded the letter inside. He smiled and looked at his parents, who moved to the United States from the Bahamas 27 years ago so their five boys could dream about things such as this. Rolle turned the letter to show them: Massachusetts General.

He kissed his mom and shared hugs and handshakes with everyone around him, before finally sitting back down and letting out a deep breath. “Whew,” he said. “Now we know.”

He was quiet for a moment, staring blankly ahead as the news settled in. He finally smiled and clapped his hands together. “Oh man!” he said.

The news marked the culmination of an arduous, sleepless, challenging chapter, but for Rolle, it was really the start of something else.

After the ceremony, the medical students and their families funneled outside into the bright Florida sun. They snapped photos and congratulated one another. For Rolle, the next stop would be a late lunch with his family and then a women’s basketball game. The next day he had a speaking engagement for the NFL Players Association. In May he will graduate and formally become Dr. Rolle. And in July he’ll report to Boston for his residency.

His football career didn’t last nearly as long as he had hoped, but his biggest impact on the game might still lie ahead.

“With neurosurgery, every day feels like a football game,” he said. “Every day I’m learning something new. Every brain is different, and there’s so much about the brain that we don’t know. . . . Every day, it just feels like the lights are on, and you have to perform. And I like performing.”

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