

# Q&A: Rhodes Scholar and former NFL player Myron Rolle

**Matt Delaney | contributing writer | Posted: Monday, October 20, 2014 9:15 am**

A top football recruit coming out of high school, Myron Rolle had the chance to go places where many athletes only dream of. But for Rolle, athletics weren't the only dream. Rolle did play football at Florida State University and spent almost two and a half years in the NFL with the Tennessee Titans and Pittsburgh Steelers.

But Rolle is also a Rhodes Scholar who studied medical anthropology at Oxford for a year prior to entering the NFL draft. He is an aspiring neurosurgeon who sees more worth in himself as advocate for public health than he does as a professional athlete. Now, a year removed from his football career, Rolle has set out on a mission to spread the word of his unique journey to the young minds of the nation and serve as a tale of inspiration. In Harrisonburg to speak at Wilson Hall Sunday night, Rolle took some time to speak with The Breeze.

## What was it like playing football in college and in the NFL?

Well, football had been a part of my life for a very long time. My four older brothers played it and they taught me the game and fundamentals and some of the very basic techniques that you need to be successful. Then I learned that I had a lot of talent at an early age so I kept playing, I had success, and when I got to college at Florida State University it was playing the same game, but on a much bigger stage. Huge magnitude — 85,000 fans at Dole-Campbell stadium. You're playing against some of the best players in the game .... if you make a mistake it's amplified because it's on national TV, it's exposed on ESPN over and over again. There's just a lot more pressure that went into playing at a major Division I college program like that. I enjoyed the challenge, it made me prepare better, it made me focus more, certainly made me a better athlete and a better man. And then getting into the NFL was a dream, I wanted to play in the NFL since I was very young. Everyone always dreams of making a big interception or a big play in



## Myron Rolle

Then a safety at Florida State, Myron Rolle celebrates a win in the 2008 Champs Sports Bowl. Rolle stopped at JMU Sunday to talk about his experiences as both a football player and a Rhodes Scholar.

the Super Bowl and returning it for a touchdown. So that was certainly my dream as well, and getting drafted to the Tennessee Titans was a huge honor because I had taken a year off to go to Oxford for the Rhodes Scholarship. Then, having a chance to play with some of the best players on Sundays with some awesome fan-support was just truly special.

### **When did you realize that you didn't want to play football anymore?**

So I realized that football was becoming less a part of my story going forward during my NFL years, my second year in Tennessee, and then when I played in Pittsburgh for a bit, as mentioned in the SBNation story *The Rejection of Myron Rolle*, there was a lot of attention paid to my off-the-field prowess. How I can think, who I know, where I traveled to, what are my future ambitions, what are my thoughts on particular current issues that are going on that would not relate to playing Cover 2 or man-to-man scheme [but instead] more related to world politics, world economics, the affordable health care act, and things of that nature. When I saw that, I realized that it was very hard for me to shake the label of being a cerebral football player, a Rhodes scholar who also played football, that gave me the idea that I needed to start moving into the next phase of my life, closing this chapter, opening a new chapter, going into medicine and healing and treating people for the rest of my life.

### **Do you think football limited your academic ability when you were younger?**

No, I think it aided it actually, because what I did in football every day, whether in practice or in games — preparation, discipline, teamwork, communication, overcoming adversity, strategizing, mental toughness, all these different things that I practiced daily to be an outstanding athlete, I was able to translate those skills into my life as a student and it made me a better academic. So I think football helped buttress [academics] and I certainly appreciated being a student athlete from an early age.

### **What role does football have in your life today?**

Football still helps me comfort myself in pressure situations very well. When you're a medical student, and when you go on to be a future physician, and especially in an operating room because I want to do surgery, you're in a very tense, high-pressured atmosphere and intense scheme where you have to overcome adversity. So if there happens to become a bleed in some sort of very important artery, or a very important structure, you have to be able to still think and react in that situation, and remain calm and make rational decisions to help save that person's life. Now, football wasn't life or death, but if it were a fourth down or it's the end of the game and a very tight situation and the team that we're playing is rolling, it's very intense. I have to be able to calm myself down, get my reads down, make sure I understand the signals and make the right play. I was able to do that as a football player, and now, as a medical student, and future physician I want to do the same thing. Football also plays an important role in my life because every time FSU has a big-time recruit come into town they want me to come and speak to them about academics and my life as a student. I still get involved in

recruiting, I still get involved with FSU, I still love the sport, I still miss it every fall. When the spring and summer's come along I don't miss it as much, but it's been a part of my life for so long it's hard to get it all out in one or two years.

**Given your academic aspirations, was it hard to relate to or make friends with other players in college or NFL?**

Playing football with guys who, perhaps, didn't have the same academic or intellectual ambitions or interests as I had was different, but it was not difficult. The guys respected and honored my drive and passion towards accruing intellectual capital. They appreciated the fact I was a student-athlete, they appreciated the fact that I had won the Rhodes Scholarship, [and] they looked at me as somebody who was representing their brand, football players in general, on a higher-level. A lot of them would come up to me to say how proud they were of [my accomplishments]. As soon as I got drafted, guys in the Tennessee Titans locker room would come up to me and say they were proud of me. They saw my story, they were cheering for me when I entered the game at the University of Maryland late and I won the Rhodes Scholarship, they were happy for me. And these were guys who I knew in my mind that they had never heard about me or even knew what a Rhodes Scholarship even was, but they were following my story and were very excited for my journey. Having the intellectual background and being a Rhodes scholar did not impede or harm any of the relationships I was able to build with teammates

**But it wasn't necessarily easy on you though — it was mentioned in the SBNation article that a lot of people took you as soft, a book-worm or nerdy-type because of your intellect.**

Well when I first got to college, certainly. I was from a different state [New Jersey], I talked a bit differently, I went to a boarding school, a smaller boarding school. We didn't play some of the better competition in New Jersey. And I was academically-inclined, [having] a reputation of being a scholar, so my teammates certainly did think I was soft, a push-over, a nerd, a geek, a dweeb, whatever word you want to label somebody who's more interested in academics than athletics, that's what they put on me. But as soon as I was able to demonstrate on the football field that I can play, but also in some of the extra-curricular activities, like boxing after we did 110 yard sprints, then guys gained some respect for me, they believed that I was a part of their group and included me in everything they did after that. Anytime they went out or had a discussion, or anytime they were doing something that involved the team, they'd invite me and bring me along. I wasn't an outsider anymore and I appreciated that.

**What's next for you career-wise?**

Becoming a pediatric neurosurgeon. I'm a second-year medical student at the FSU College of Medicine and it takes four years for medical school and about seven [to earn] residency, so I'd love to stay in Florida, but I'd love to be a physician who works on, specifically, brain cancer and brain

tumors for children. Also, while I'm doing my expertise in the operating room [I want to] educate patients on how to stay healthy, how to stay fit, [and] how to overcome some of these emerging non-communicable diseases that may not be, particularly, tied to neurosurgery, but is tied to general health and wellness. That is very important to me.

### **Any reason why neuroscience in particular?**

Yes I read a book by Dr. Ben Carson called *Gifted Hands* when I was in fifth grade. Dr. Carson is a pediatric neurosurgeon at Johns-Hopkins, who doesn't practice anymore I believe, but he wrote a book about his struggles, his temper, his family and how his mother really forced education on him and his brother as a young child. He also wrote about the fact that he is black and came from a modest background, so I saw a lot of similarities in his narrative with mine, and I looked to him as my academic role model. So I've had an interest in neurosurgery since the fifth grade. Then I went to something called the National Youth Leadership Forum on Medicine in high school where I got to shadow some physicians down in New Orleans Charity Hospital and Tulane Medical Center, and I realized again that this was something I wanted to do. This past summer I basically, re-confirmed my passion for neurosurgery particularly because I went to Children's Hospital of Philadelphia [and] worked with Dr. J. Storm and Adam Resnick, did research with them, and also got a chance to assist and observe some neurosurgery cases. We saw some [complex procedures and] it was a fantastic time, I really enjoyed the science, [and] I found something, again, that I was passionate about that was analogous to how a felt about football. Football, from about six years old to 23, 24, was my life. It dominated everything I did — how I ate, how I slept, where I went, how I dressed, what I did during the day. And now I can see myself replacing football with neurosurgery [and] loving that, giving my all to it, and, hopefully, being a great physician.

### **What were people's thoughts and opinions on your decision to leave the game and study towards becoming a Rhodes Scholar?**

My family was very supportive, actually, because they think along the same lines that I think. They were the ones that helped shape my ideologies so they were very important in that decision process. I don't make any [decision] in isolation, always with the input of my parents and four older brothers.

For friends, they were a bit resistant, at first. They thought I was at the peak of my athletic career, they felt that I could still play. They looked at the competition that was around me and knew I was better than them, that I had more talent than them, and would say, 'Hey, just keep at it, keep going, keep trying, keep attempting to shake this label of being a scholar more than an athlete in the NFL, and if you do that you can land somewhere you can really take-off.' But, again, I looked at myself introspectively, saying, 'Ok, I got drafted into the NFL' Only three players can say they've done that and become a Rhodes scholar. 'I had a chance to play on two teams and make some incredible friends, I earned some capital, and I got that out of my system, now it's time for me to do something that can be enduring, lasting, and can have a broader affect, not just to the people who love football,

but to the people who love football and who don't love football, and who are from this country, and who are from around the world.' Neurosurgery, just being a physician, you can touch a lot of people and change a lot of lives — transform a lot of lives. So that just seems a bit cooler [and] more fulfilling.

### **Who or what was your greatest influence in helping you make your career change?**

Probably my family. I'm very close with my family and my parents. They came from Allentown in the Bahamas just so I can have opportunities like this, to either go to the NFL as a second-round pick in 2009 or go to Oxford as a Rhode scholar. To either stay in the NFL as a 51st, 52nd man on the roster, or go to medical school to become a pediatric neurosurgeon. They came to America and made sacrifices for me and my brothers to be outstanding men, citizens and leaders, and now the hard work that they put in and development in my growth process afforded me the chances to have these great options was a blessing and something that I don't take lightly. My family has been a huge influence on my decision-making process and they've been a part of [that process] since when I had to choose to go to FSU or not. They've been, every step of the way, my number one supporters.

### **What was it like studying at Oxford?**

Oxford was amazing. Where I went to a big, research, public institution with 40,000 students at Florida State, I could go to a classroom and, perhaps, get lost in the back where there are 200-300 kids in a class [and] teachers may never know my name or ever call on me. Then, at Oxford, we had 11 people in my class. There was no way you could hide, you were going to be present in that class, [both] intellectually-present in that class and emotionally invested as well. Also, it was very challenging at Oxford too, with these teachers and professors who were experts in their [chosen] science. They had been published several times, they have given world-renowned speeches, they are just phenomenal thinkers. So me coming into a program like medical anthropology, which is looking at the social and cultural aspects of medicine, it's not black-and-white biomedicine like I'm studying now in medical school. It's more about the other factors that go around the healing process. Gender roles, post-colonial stigmatizations, ideologies, religious backgrounds, how all these things factor into how you become healed and treated. It took me some time to get out of my hard-science, biomedical box and start thinking like an Oxford, or Oxonian ... So it was fun, it was challenging. I traveled a lot, made a lot of great friends, ate some bad food, played a little rugby, endured some bad weather, but I enjoyed the experience.

### **Do you feel that individuals with higher intellect are discriminated against in the NFL?**

Well, I can't say that flatly, I really can't. I can say that if you have a mind where you can think on issues that are sensitive and you have the capacity to speak outwardly about these issues, that may be viewed as a potential distraction for teams, unfortunately. I think the NFL knows what works. They know that if a guy comes to work, keeps his mouth shut, goes [and] lifts weights, watches film, goes

to practices, goes to the training room, gets himself healed, gets himself ready and plays on Sunday, they're good with that. They also know that if somebody is an exceptional talent, however, but does happen to speak out, they can deal with that too. They also know that somebody, perhaps who gets in trouble in certain lanes of issues, maybe DUIs or domestic violence cases, may not be [the same] anymore with the Ray Rice situation. But certain lanes of problems, the NFL can, again, mitigate that situation. But it is rare for them to see a player who stands out and advocates for issues that are either, social in nature, or maybe have some reverberating effects on the NFL itself. So any kind of change, any kind of newness to a league that has been so successful, financially, and so successful in the American culture [where they] get into the hearts of people who watch and fans around the world and the around the country, it's going to be difficult to be somewhat of an individual with forward thinking and progressive mindsets. But I will cap the statement that I just said by [adding that] if you are an exceptional talent — talent beats anything, any day of the week — you have undeniable talent where they cannot deny you or refute what you can do on the field for them, you basically can say what you want and do what you want because that's pretty much the way the NFL works, and has worked.

### **What do you miss most or least about football, both collegiately and professionally?**

What I miss the most is the camaraderie in the locker room, being able to have that fellowship and brotherhood with your fellow teammates. That's super important and, I think, a very under-appreciated and undervalued part of the sport. What I miss least about football in the NFL would probably be the business side of it. It really took some of the fun out of playing on Sundays. Yes it was fun to get paid, it was fun to play the sport, no question. But it was not fun coming back into the locker room and thinking 'I may not be here tomorrow,' or, the guy sitting next to me who I have developed a relationship with may not be here tomorrow. Or seeing some guys who, perhaps, weren't incredibly talented in your mind but were being paid very much so they had to be played more because they were being paid [and were] an economic investment. Seeing the business side of the sport was a bit discouraging. However, people told me that this was going to be a part of the NFL game, it's just different when you are [actually] there and are experiencing it.

### **Seems like the bureaucracy, was a little overwhelming.**

Yes, the bureaucracy certainly left something to be desired. The sport is still beautiful [and] fantastic, it still means so much to me. I'm not here to complain or demean what football has done in my life, [because] it certainly transformed and transcended me to new heights. However, that aspect of the game was something that, if I had a magic wand and could zap away one part, that would certainly be my first target.

### **Have you ever contemplated taking up a job as an analyst or broadcaster to stay connected to game and culture?**

I have never contemplated that. The only thing I've contemplated as far as being close to the game would be being a consultant or specialist in neurosurgery or brain concussions and some of the health issues that are going on. Especially with chronic traumatic encephalopathy and traumatic brain injury that you see in a lot of football players now.

**What was the most valuable lesson you took away from your unique football experience?**

To be comfortable with who you are. To understand your purpose and understand that, despite how your dreams may not materialize how you anticipated them to when you were six years old, you're still making change and people are still very proud of you. That's something that I had to consistently remind myself [because] I didn't have the same kind of prolific success in the NFL as I had in college, or in high school, or in junior football. However, I felt that people still respected my journey, they respected the decision I made to take Oxford before the NFL and they still looked up to me as a role model. And I appreciated that and never took it for granted, the way people have drawn inspiration from my story. So I would say that self-assurance was probably my biggest takeaway from playing football.

**What message do you want to relay to the students here at JMU and other universities?**

Well this is a fantastic university and I want to relay to students here, in particular student-athletes, to really engage yourself and take advantage of this fertile institution that has so many resources and so many opportunities for you to grow and be successful. The world is looking for great leaders in aspects of medicine, law, education, law enforcement and political and international affairs [and] there's a void. And the next group of leaders must come from these outstanding institutions like JMU. I always love to stress, and really implore to the young people I speak to who are going to be the next people at the table sitting around and making decisions, to resource, network, to edify your intellectual capital, to meet new people and to get outside of your comfort zone. Don't just stay with your friends, but go outside and meet some people who look a little different than you and come from a different background. If you can truly become a total, well-rounded leader in a great place like this that wants you to be a total, well-rounded leader, then your success after will be nothing but great. You can have an outstanding impact on me when I get older because you'll be the ones making decisions for the older folks like us who want to see America and this world continuously move forward and make progress and have better days. I think JMU is no different. Outstanding potential, outstanding talent here that just needs to be cultivated and one day will flourish and thrive and blossom into something spectacular.

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