

My Longest Year

By Dan Giuliani

The year 2003 is like a blur to me. Looking back, I have trouble distinguishing one month from the next, which is why I find it so ironic that at the time it felt as though 2003 would never end. Out of the 24 years I have lived thus far, it has seemed to be, without a doubt, the longest.

So why did it seem so long? In 2003, I finally did something about my life-long foot pain.

I had lived with foot pain since I could remember. I used to have so much pain in the morning that I could hardly walk to the shower and, especially after basketball games, could sometimes not walk at all. I tried countless remedies from orthotics to physical therapy. So when I visited with Dr. Sig Hansen at Harborview Medical Center, the rest of my options were practically exhausted. That was the summer of 2002, right before I began my first season of college football.

Together, Dr. Hansen and I devised a plan: Cut through my left heel and restructure my foot immediately following the season and perform a less-severe operation to relieve pressure on both feet by effectively loosening my calves. Recovery would be 8 months to a year depending on setbacks, so the best case scenario predicted my stepping back on the field right at the beginning of my sophomore season. It felt to me as if there was no choice in the matter. The present condition of my feet was beginning to severely hinder my ability to perform on the field.

After the surgery I began the long process of rehabilitation. I found comfort in my teammates as they were patient and encouraging, but I still became overwhelmingly frustrated at my inability to join them in our workouts. I watched as my leg strength diminished and my cardiovascular endurance regressed. Three months post-surgery the cast came off and I began pedaling on the stationary bike. Then came the elliptical trainer and bodyweight squats. But my recovery was not coming quickly enough.

Let's be clear about one thing. When it comes to football, the only feeling worse than being injured is not being on the team at all. Watching my teammates push each other beyond their natural limits as I sat in the corner and stretched was almost too much to bear at times. In addition, the camaraderie that is built during that first off-season in college is hard to replicate and I always felt as if I was catching up to my classmates. That was the longest year of my life.

Fast forward to August of 2003 – nine months post-surgery. I am about to head back to school and join my teammates for training camp. Only one problem... my foot is still not completely healed! I still feel a jarring pain in my heel whenever I step on my left foot. So I go back to Dr. Hansen and he tells me that I should consider taking the season off to let my foot fully heal. But there is NO WAY I am going to let that happen, so I decide enough is enough and it is time to play.

Every season, Colby College opens training camp with a test of sixteen 110 yard sprints in under a certain amount of time depending on position. Repercussions were immense for any upperclassman that did not pass the 110s. Now picture this: I have not run in nine months. I have not properly lifted for nine months. My surgery is still not healed and there is still a considerable amount of pain in my foot. Plus, I had not even gotten close to passing the 110s my freshmen year. But when I stepped on that field to begin the test with my 70 teammates, I realized that there was no way I was going to let them down.

Since my physical capabilities were limited, I was forced to rely almost entirely on mental strength and perseverance. What else could I do? Somehow a switch was flipped in my brain. The word "fail" ceased to exist to me and as the test began, I was like a different person, determined to succeed at any and all physical price.

I passed the 110s that day and collapsed afterwards onto the grass in agony and relief. When I was helped up by the very teammates I had sacrificed for, it was like rising out of a dream. Later that day, while sitting in the training room with my feet in buckets of ice-water, I reflected on the experience and came to the realization that I had, for the first time in my life, harnessed the power of my mind to achieve a physical end. Ever since, I have been able to draw upon that experience as inspiration when I need to really center my focus to perform.

I am a better person for having gone through that difficult year of rehabilitation and the subsequent fitness test. Discovering the ability to draw on the power of my mind in times of physical distress has proven invaluable to my athletic career and to my development as a human being. I've learned that the mind can overcome nearly any physical limitation if you can figure out how to harness its power.

So although 2003 was the longest year of my life, it was also arguably the most important to my development as an athlete. I did not get any bigger, any faster, or any stronger, but the mental capacity I gained has served me better than any physical attribute ever could.