COURTNEY STEPHEN

Courtney Stephen is a graduate of Turner Fenton Secondary School where he was on the football, basketball, and track teams, as well as was a member of his church’s youth group. He is a psychology major with dreams of playing professional football. He is also interested in sociology, international cultures, music, art, and mentoring. The reflective elements of this essay are most important to Courtney because they have allowed him to have a new appreciation for his experiences.

Courtney wrote this essay in Jeanne Jakubowski’s English 103 course during the fall of 2010.
Lying on the floor of my mother’s kitchen, I could barely summon the strength to stand, let alone open the refrigerator door for the drink that I so desperately craved. My mouth was dry, my clothes soaked thoroughly in sweat. I knew I was dehydrated because I had been in this same spot, feeling this way, many times before. Dealing with fatigued muscles, stomach cramps, and vomit became all too familiar post-workout activities. I loathed the feeling of being face down on the cold tiles, counting the seconds until my discomfort would pass, yet I consciously pushed myself to return to the agony again and again. In hindsight, I am glad that I pushed myself.

Growing up, I was a relatively bright child with good intentions. For the most part I did as I was told and always tried to make my parents proud. My parents would stop at nothing to put me and my siblings in an environment where we could thrive. My father worked extremely long hours and my mother always had two or three jobs—whatever it took to keep the lights on. From time to time life’s expenses would exceed our means, yet my parents would repeatedly sacrifice their personal luxuries for the sake of our happiness. Having these kinds of role models to emulate when I was growing up played a generous role in my internalization of life’s greatest virtues: hard work, selflessness, loyalty, and dedication.

The first time that I ever strapped on my shoulder pads I was eight years old and completely clueless. Nevertheless, by the end of my first season I was hooked. The gridiron offered a young boy everything that he needed to develop into a young man. Three times a week I was tutored in teamwork, accountability, and humility. What I saw as a chance to run around and play rough with the other boys actually held a much greater value for me that would not be revealed until further down the road. In the beginning, football for me was just a game, but eventually that game would change my life in ways that I could not possibly have imagined.

By the time I reached high school I had already accumulated six years’ playing experience. Wins, losses, and the phenomenal memories in between all became too numerous to
keep track of. One day, during the summer leading up to grade ten, my brother approached me about my future with football. He spoke of the great financial, academic, and social opportunities that the game had blessed him with. The conversation would not be one that I would soon forget. Already, the passion that I had for the game could be contested by no other aspect of my life. For a while I tussled with the idea of pursuing a Division-1 football scholarship, very well aware of the monumental commitment and the tremendous sacrifices necessary to achieve it. Accordingly, after some encouraging words from those whose opinions mattered most to me, I made a decision that I was going to earn a scholarship and play Division-1 NCAA football.

For the next three years, I dedicated my time to preparation. An innocent fifteen-year-old when I began training, I was somewhat ignorant of how I would achieve all that I had set out to accomplish, so I sought guidance and devised a plan. Leading up to graduation I would cross paths with many influential and successful people to whom I became somewhat of an apprentice. Some of these people were my coaches, others my older peers, while some were of no formal relation to me in anyway. People categorized by the latter included an ex-military medic who became my training partner at the gym and a professional football player from the Canadian football league whom I met at a summer camp, among many others. Regardless of relation, all of these individuals played irreplaceable roles in my development as both a player and, more importantly, a person.

Daily I would find my way by bike, bus, or foot to the local YMCA so that I might develop my immature body. I ran on vacant soccer fields in my neighborhood to condition my lungs and quickly became a familiar face to the walkers who would pass by after dinner during the evenings. When winter and spring came around it was time for basketball and track and field to stay in shape outside of football season. During the school year, I woke up early to train before class and then stayed late to train again after the last bell. I enrolled in the only kinesiology course offered at my high school so that I might understand better how to get the most out of my body. On the internet and in magazines I read article after article about the principles and methodologies of weightlifting, speed training, and the like, all the while working a part-time job so that I could afford to buy my own bus tickets and
fund my participation on the teams at school. It was to the point where it seemed as if all I did was football or football-related.

To some of my peers with similar aspirations, my lifestyle was commendable but not realistic. For instance, many of my friends would be willing to come to the gym after school during the week, but as soon as the weekend arrived football took a back seat to extra hours of sleep, shopping downtown, and partying at night. The expectations I set for myself were definitely high, but I could not see how doing what was necessary could be considered unrealistic. Keeping sight of my goals, despite the countless distractions facing a teenager in the city, required a great deal of commitment, but over time also helped serve as a great lesson in dedication and perseverance. To me, it was as if every ounce of effort that I put into football was returned to me through the satisfaction of knowing that I was getting closer to my goal. By the time I had reached my senior year I had invested so much into earning that Division-1 scholarship, physically, emotionally, and every other way humanly possible, that it was almost gratifying enough to simply see a better person when I looked in the mirror every morning—but not quite.

As the last weeks of my senior year approached, I was absolutely crushed. I sat in the basement of my house with my head hung over a shoebox full of letters from schools asking myself where I went wrong. Up to this point everything was happening right on cue, just as I had envisioned it. I worked hard, scored well on my SAT, and collected enough accolades to be more than proud of, but for some reason I was still sitting at home in Toronto, Ontario, Canada with no scholarship offers. My failure had me beside myself questioning the very passion that once drove me to get up and face each day with purpose. Universities that would call my house each week just stopped calling. Schools that once spoke of the great programs they offered suddenly were no longer interested in my enrollment. Needless to say, this was a time of great disappointment for me.

“I don’t know where I went wrong! Am I really not good enough?” I asked my brother in a dejected tone. He readily catered to my vague request for his guidance. Thankfully, he always knew what to say. Over the following summer we had frequent dialogue that would prove helpful in the transition to my contingency plan. The following school year I was a freshman at a small school in
southern Ontario called Wilfrid Laurier University. With a renewed focus and some slightly different goals in place I got back to work. This time I would leave no stone unturned. Because my brother no longer lived in Toronto, and thus would not be able to be a part of my college football experience, I made a pact with him before my freshman year at WLU. During one late night motivational phone call I promised to make a noise so loud in the Canadian league that my brother, 700 miles away in Elgin, Illinois, would hear about it.

After two years at WLU I was selected as a captain by my teammates and coaches and had garnered much recognition across the country. With the help of my team and my coaches I was able to earn both conference all-star and national all-star credit. In addition, I was blessed with the priceless chance to do a promotional commercial for my league that aired on national television on a major Canadian network. This brought with it invaluable networking opportunities with numerous influential people and for that I was extremely grateful.

During my sophomore year at Wilfrid Laurier University I truly became a believer that everything in life happens for a reason. I may not have been in the place that I had envisioned myself back in high school, but I was living prosperously and enjoying my success close to home where the majority of my family could be there to share my accomplishment with me. I had come to appreciate life for all that it had to offer and found a greater desire to try to make the most of every new situation that I was placed in, because I knew from experience how inconsiderate life could be concerning one’s ambition. During my four semesters at WLU, I managed to generate a new level of appreciation for my academics and began to truly push myself in the classroom with that same dedication I applied before to football. Soon I would find that triumph in the classroom is just as sweet as that which comes from anywhere else.

Following my sophomore year life was good, but it felt somewhat incomplete. With all that I had been able to accomplish attending school in Ontario, it made me wonder what might have been possible if I had been given the shot to play in the NCAA. As became the custom in the times I needed guidance, I called my brother in Illinois. We discussed my options and thought that it would be worth the chance to call around and see if anybody would be willing to grant a Canadian transfer student with only two
years of eligibility left. Thankfully, Coach Kill, the head coach of my brother’s Alma Matter, Northern Illinois University, was willing to take a chance on me.

There I stood with one more shot to capitalize on my dream of playing NCAA football. The conditions surrounding my opportunity were not perfect, but in life they seldom are. I would have to walk onto the team without a scholarship and pay my dues as a practice roster player for one year. After that year, if the coach saw fit and felt that I would be capable of contributing to the team, then he would grant me my scholarship. So all summer long I woke up with the sun and revisited the same soccer fields in my neighborhood that I once graced as a high school student. I would return home only to refuel and then head back out to the YMCA for another session. This time I would not be refused. I often worked to the point of physical exhaustion, fearing failure upon my arrival at NIU in the coming school year. When I arrived home from the gym, sweater soaked and muscles sore, I always went straight to the kitchen. There I would lie on the cold tiles trying to sip water as I counted the seconds until the stomach cramps and nausea passed.

Now as a student-athlete at Northern Illinois University, I look back on those days and smile. Before each practice I walk into the locker room and put on that cardinal and black with pride. Before leaving my locker, I make sure that I take a second to appreciate the road I traveled to get to where I stand today. To me, having my name at the top of my locker is a symbol that I didn’t give up on a dream. Sitting in that locker, I am glad that I endured the days of lying on the tiles of my mother’s kitchen. Daily, I make a conscious effort not to forget where I have come from while still focusing on the fact that I came to NIU in pursuit of a goal. These days, when I encounter challenges I pay a visit to my locker to put life back into perspective. Thankfully behind nearly every locker in that locker room I have a teammate with a story similar to mine. Because of that common bond, I can now say that I have a surrogate family of 115 brothers whom I can count on to help me while I am here with them.