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FOOTBALL

Eden used mission for personal growth

Vinny Pezzimenti

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No one could have predicted the way things would play out. Not even Josh Eden.

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How could he have known that he would so soon develop into the kind of defensive end that made tackles' stomachs churn and kept offensive game planners awake late into the evening? How could he have known he'd be selected All-Patriot League following his sophomore season at Bucknell?

That's when the doubt crept in. It hung there in Eden's mind and wouldn't go away.

A Mormon, Eden had submitted all the paperwork, answered all the interview questions and was on schedule for a two-year mission ... that was set to start, of all times, shortly after the player's dynamic season in 2007.

"I was kind of bummed," Eden, a former all-state selection at State College Area High School, says now. "I kind of second-guessed myself a little bit before I went. I was like, 'Do I really want to go?' I just had a great season."

That feeling of indecisiveness stayed with Eden during his first month in Fresno, Calif. He kept thinking, "Maybe this isn't for me."

Then, he and a fellow missionary happened to stumble upon a poor soul who, as it turned out, forever altered Eden's outlook on life.

Eden and the other missionary were biking home one Friday evening, their 9 p.m. curfew approaching fast, when they encountered a drunk man staggering on the edge of the street. They gave him a card with their phone numbers on it, not certain they would ever see him again.

Two days later, there he was in the same section of the city, drunk again.

"We found out that he had been drinking Listerine for the past eight months of his life because it was cheaper than alcohol," Eden recalled.

By Eden's account, the man was quickly approaching death.

Perhaps he was a lost cause. Perhaps not. No matter, Eden visited him every day. He cut the man's hair, bought him groceries, made sure he was still alive.

"Five weeks later," Eden said, "he stopped drinking. He doesn't drink anymore. He's a registered nurse."

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And finally, Eden realized why life led him here. This was where he was supposed to be, making a difference. Football could wait. In fact, it had to wait.

“I feel almost like a completely different person,” Eden says now. “I can look back on my life before I went on my mission and see the areas that I wasn’t doing very well in. It kind of makes me sad that I wasn’t doing the things that I knew I could have.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is that I just realized my personal potential.”

Now, football season is officially three days away and Eden, a junior, is back. Bucknell opens at Duquesne on Saturday night. Eden is expected to be in the starting lineup. He owns aspirations of gaining All-Patriot League honors again.

Some things haven’t changed, but then again, so much has.

Bucknell is breaking in a new coaching staff. Many of Eden’s teammates two years ago are long gone. He is one of the old men of the group, set to turn 23 in October.

And Eden, who is listed at 6-foot-4, 265 pounds, confesses that he is bigger, faster, stronger — that he is essentially more physically mature and more equipped to confound opposing offenses than before.

“Just being two years older has made a huge difference,” he said.

How more disruptive can Eden be? He finished among the Patriot League leaders in sacks both his freshman and sophomore years, when he started each of the Bison’s 22 games. He registered 41/2 sacks in his second season and had at

least one tackle for loss in nine of 11 games.

Not bad, but Eden wants more.

“I’m definitely going to make the time here I have at Bucknell very special,” he said. “I have two more years here and it’s probably going to be the hardest two years I work in my life to try to get as good as I can at football.”

Eden spilled plenty of sweat this past spring to merely regain football shape.

While in Fresno, there was little time for exercise. His days started at 6:30 a.m. and included an hour to study and reflect, an hour to brainstorm with other missionaries and many hours spent trekking the city in search of those to uplift — drug addicts, alcoholics, you name it.

So it was, for two straight years.

“You do it every day, 365, no breaks,” Eden says.

But football was never too far away. Eden would drop down to do sit-ups and pushups during free moments. While sitting down to eat lunch and dinner, his mind often wandered off to the gridiron.

“I just want to play as long as I can,” he says. “It’s something I think about all the time.”

Eden returned to State College on Jan. 5 and to Bucknell on Jan. 24. With eyes on the upcoming season, he remained in Lewisburg for the summer to work out.

The hard work is paying off. Eden was recently voted one of four team captains. The other three are seniors.

Every day he sees ways that the missionary experience has changed him. During preseason camp he often found himself checking in on the team’s freshmen, making sure they were OK.

“I wish somebody would have done that for me when I was here my freshman year,” Eden says.

Who could’ve predicted Josh Eden would turn out this way? Not even Josh Eden.

“It’s more important to focus on other people,” he says, “because that’s often the times you learn the most about yourself.”

Vinny Pezzimenti is a sports writer for the Centre Daily Times. He can be reached at 231-4629 or vpezzime@centredaily.com.

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