

Whatever It Takes to Win

by: *W. D. Simpson*

On the morning of December 4th, 2009, I hopped out of the bed so early that I had taken a shower, brushed my teeth, washed my face, gotten dressed and eaten breakfast, all before my alarm clock sounded. It was Friday, the last day of school for the week, and the day when all my big football games were played. Tonight, we were playing against Miami Christian High School, the top-ranked team in the state. They were ranked number one, but Pensacola High School, my school, was always feared by everyone. They were no different. They didn't want to play us. I liked school, but I couldn't wait until 3:30, so I could start getting ready for the game.

I had been training for college football ever since I was five-years-old. Everything I ate, drank, did, didn't do, etc... all these things were geared towards my goal of one day being a superstar NCAA football player with the Florida State Seminoles. I was just over six-feet-tall, 230 pounds. I had even grown my dreadlocks to look like Trent Richardson, who was the all-star running back at my school before I got there. I wasn't as good as he was, but I was good enough to be compared to him on a regular basis, which was good enough for me.

I usually jogged to school, listening to my gospel playlist. However, on game-days, like today, I didn't do anything to tire myself out. I rode the bus with all the other kids in my neighborhood. I had breakfast as soon as I got to school. Then I checked in with Coach Washington. Normally, I would go to homeroom next, but since we had a recital in two weeks, I went to see the chorus director every morning. I was a soloist in the school choir. I was in the youth choir at my church also.

On my way to choir rehearsal, I bumped into one of my teammates, literally, Actually, he bumped into me, really hard. His name was Chris, and I'd known him almost my whole life. He was an inch shorter than me, a few pounds lighter than me, but for the most part, we looked very similar. He was darker than me, with a curly bush, trying to grow it out enough to grow dreads. We had a weird relationship. We lived in the same neighborhood, did a lot of the same things, but still, we never got to be very close. I always felt like we should be, but it's always been obvious how much he hates me.

Everybody knew Chris and me. In Pensacola, where I grew up, everybody knew everybody. My family knew his family. The neighbors, the church... everybody knew everybody down there. Pensacola was a rural town when I lived there. It was as country as any other southern town you could think of. We were known all around the country for sports, football mainly. If you were a halfway decent player coming out of

high school from my town, you were destined to be recruited heavily in all 50 states. The running back that went here before me is starting for Alabama University now. He's on a full scholarship. That's worth like \$140,000 overall. Some people don't make that much at their full-time jobs, and he's getting paid for playing ball. That's what I want to do, get a free ride to college for doing what I love to do. But I don't want to go to Alabama. I'm working on a scholarship to Florida State University.

FSU has been following a few players on my team, including Chris and me. All of the players they've been scouting play different positions, so it doesn't really matter to them, but Chris and I play the same spot. There's no way they would recruit the both of us. Competition is a funny thing. It can fuel you or burn you. In my opinion, competition always brought out the best in me. The only thing competition did for me was push me to be better than my best. But for some folks, like Chris, competition took on a different meaning. For people like him, competition doesn't mean push yourself... it means pull others down. I always wanted to beat Chris, but I wanted both of us to do well. Chris, on the other hand, never tried much harder to be better. Instead, he focused on trying to make me look bad. I can't really prove it, but I know that's how he thought.

It was December 4th. We had a game coming up on December 9th, a Friday night game against our division rivals, Pine Forest High School. We had extra long, extra hard practices every night that week. This was definitely the biggest game of our season. Coach told Chris and I how important it was for us to remember that we were teammates, not opponents, if we wanted to win this game. I kept that in mind. He didn't seem to.

When game-time arrived, I was ready. I had the best game of my life. I was by far the brightest shining star on the field. Chris didn't have a good game at all. It seemed like he spent more energy hoping for me to fail than on getting himself ready for the game. My team, my coach, my school... everyone was excited, and I was on the tip of everyone's tongue. Florida State had scouts at the game, and they loved every second of the show I put on.

The following week, I was named PHS's MVP for the year. They put my picture up on the wall, right next to last year's winner. The whole team was sitting in the front three rows of the auditorium when I received my award... all but one single player who decided not to come. Actually, there were two players missing. Derek wasn't there either, but I didn't pay them any mind. It didn't really matter to me. Derek and I weren't really friends, just teammates. I didn't hang out with people who drank, smoked, or used drugs.

On Sunday, my pastor recognized me for my achievement in front of the whole congregation. Everyone was so proud of me, which made me extremely proud of myself. I was happy from the moment I'd found out I'd won, but now, I was really starting to feel pride. Rev. Johnson always tried to be like a father to me. I lived with both of my parents. I wasn't from a broken home, but my pastor felt like every man and

woman in the church was responsible for being a mother or a father to each of the children. I was a big boy on the verge of being a full-grown man, but in the eyes of my church, I was still a child. St. Anthony's Church took care of me, and one day, I'll be in the position to take care of them in return.

When church let out, I had to stay for another couple of hours. I had rehearsal with the youth choir. We were performing at a big Christmas concert with several other church choirs. We needed a lot of work. I was asked by Mrs. Blackburn, our choir director, to sing the lead on three songs, and do two solos. I had been spotlighted within the church before, but never in a big recital like this. I was extremely nervous, and part of me didn't want to accept the honor being bestowed upon me. But I felt that turning down the solo would be somehow disrespectful to God, and that's something I could never do.

When I returned to school on Monday, people were looking at me funny from the time I arrived at the building until lunch. When I got to the cafeteria, I sat at a table in the corner of the room with my girlfriend, Denise. I told her that people were looking at me funny and that it was bothering me. She said it was because people were jealous of me, "and by the way, congratulations again on your award."

As she was saying that, three guys were walking past the table. They obviously heard what she said. One of them responded by saying to his two friends, "yeah, and I guess now we know how he won it."

"What are they talking about?" asked Denise.

"I have no idea!" exclaimed A.J.. After school let out, I ran into a couple of my teammates who wanted to explain to me what was going on. Instead, they told me that Coach Washington wanted to see me, and that he would tell me everything. I rushed immediately to his office. He sat me down and started talking to me about what he'd heard. Apparently, someone had started a rumor that I used steroids in order to get where I was. The rumors weren't true, but they were enough to turn a whole school of fans, friends, athletes and others against me. I was floating on cloud nine when I woke up this morning, and now--without doing anything wrong--I just wanted to go somewhere and hide my face from the rest of the world. I was ashamed and embarrassed, and I wasn't even guilty!

My coach silenced me. Then he asked me if there was any truth to the rumors. I could tell that he believed me when I told him the answer was no. However, he could believe me because he knew me very well. The scouts from Florida State didn't know me from any other athlete. What would they do if this rumor made its way to them? Unfortunately, my coach had the answer for that. He told me that news of my rumored steroid usage had already made it to the FSU scouts, and that they were no longer interested in me. In fact, they were now planning to offer a scholarship to Chris, since I was no longer on their list.

Walking from my coach's office to Denise's car, I saw Chris getting into Derek's car. That was odd. I had never known them to be together at all outside of football

practice and football games since the day we all first met. Now they're riding around together.

A few days later, I arrived at school very early. Taking my gym bag out of Denise's trunk, I saw two police officers escorting three students out of the building in handcuffs. One of them I didn't know. The other two were Chris and Derek. When I made it to the crowd at the front door of the building, I heard that one of the custodians had caught Chris trying to break into my locker. When he confronted him about it, He found a bottle of pills hanging out of his pocket. The custodian said that he probably wouldn't have paid it much mind at all, but Chris and Derek's reaction when they noticed the pills were out in the open gave everything away. He took them to the Dean of Men. The Dean called the police. The police came and picked them up.

Everything was starting to make sense to me now. Rumors were spread about me using steroids. Those rumors just-so-happened to make their way to the FSU scouts. And the person who most wanted to that scholarship not to go to me was now hanging out with someone we all knew had been using steroids ever since ninth grade. They were trying to break into my locker. They were going to plant those drugs in my locker so that all the rumors would be *proven* true. I felt like I was the star in a bad movie. I needed to step out of this role for a minute and regroup. I decided to go see Rev. Johnson after school.

I told him what was going on... everything. I told him about Chris, Derek, the rumors, the police, the scholarship... everything. He listened. He explained to me that what I was going through right now was not my fault. According to the reverend, there were several people around me who couldn't find it in their hearts to be happy for me. Instead of cheering me on, it was easier for them to just try to tear me down. He told me a story of another man whose peers were troubled by his greatness and decided that the only option they desired to pursue was to tear him down. And while he had to suffer for his own wonder, he never turned on those who turned on him, and he has been more than a legend ever since.

"And that man was...?"

"Jesus!" said the reverend.

I really needed to hear that. As much as I love my family, my team and my coach, the Lord was the center of my life. I always wanted to talk to about everything with my pastor. The church was my source of strength, and I needed them in my life. They never let me down.

That weekend, I cleared my mind of everything going on. I spend Friday evening with my family. I spent the entire day Saturday with Denise. And on Sunday, I sang with my church choir in the Christmas Show. It was a huge relief... huge, but temporary.

That Monday, I was called into the principal's office. He knew me really well, and he knew that I would NEVER do illegal drugs of any kind. He never paid attention to those rumors about me, not for one minute. He saw me as the most trustworthy kid in the school. He wanted to speak to a few players on the football team so he could figure

out what was really going on. I sat outside his office, nervous and confused. I knew he was going to ask me about Chris and Derek. What was I going to say though? I had very little knowledge, very big suspicions and very heavy emotions. This situation was becoming too much for me.

He called me into his office. As soon as the door closed behind me, he told me to take a seat. Before I could even finish adjusting the seat, he asked his first question. "You don't like Derek Blake very much, do you?"

"Why would you say that, sir?"

"Because I have eyes, Aaron James, and I'm not an idiot."

"That's my teammate, sir. That's my only feeling about him."

"Okay, what about Chris?"

It was incredibly difficult for me to remain calm, especially with everything they had tried to do to me over the past couple of weeks. "Same answer, sir."

"Do you have any knowledge of them being steroid users? Your reputation is invaluable with me. You are a young man of great merit. What you tell me will strongly influence what I say to the school board, the police, and the recruiters from Florida State University."

I thought about what my pastor had said to me. I thought about what Jesus would have done in a situation like this. And I responded, "I have no evidence at all of them being drug-abusers, sir." There was a little more conversation, but nothing else relevant. He told me that he respected me more now than he did before. I thanked him, and then I left his office.

Chris approached me a few days later. He told me that he heard about my conversation with the principal. He also heard that my words had a lot to do with him not being stripped of his scholarship. He asked me why I didn't turn him in. I just looked at him for a second, then I walked away.

On Sunday, I went to church just as I did every weekend. But just before the end of the service, the pastor announced that a scholarship fund had been established by the church three years ago. And in three years, people had continued to donate to it, but the church had no one to sponsor to college. The church had decided to make me the first St. Anthony's Baptist Church College Scholarship recipient. The church had raised enough money to send me to school, and my parents wouldn't have to pay anything. So in eight months, I will be a freshman at Florida State University!