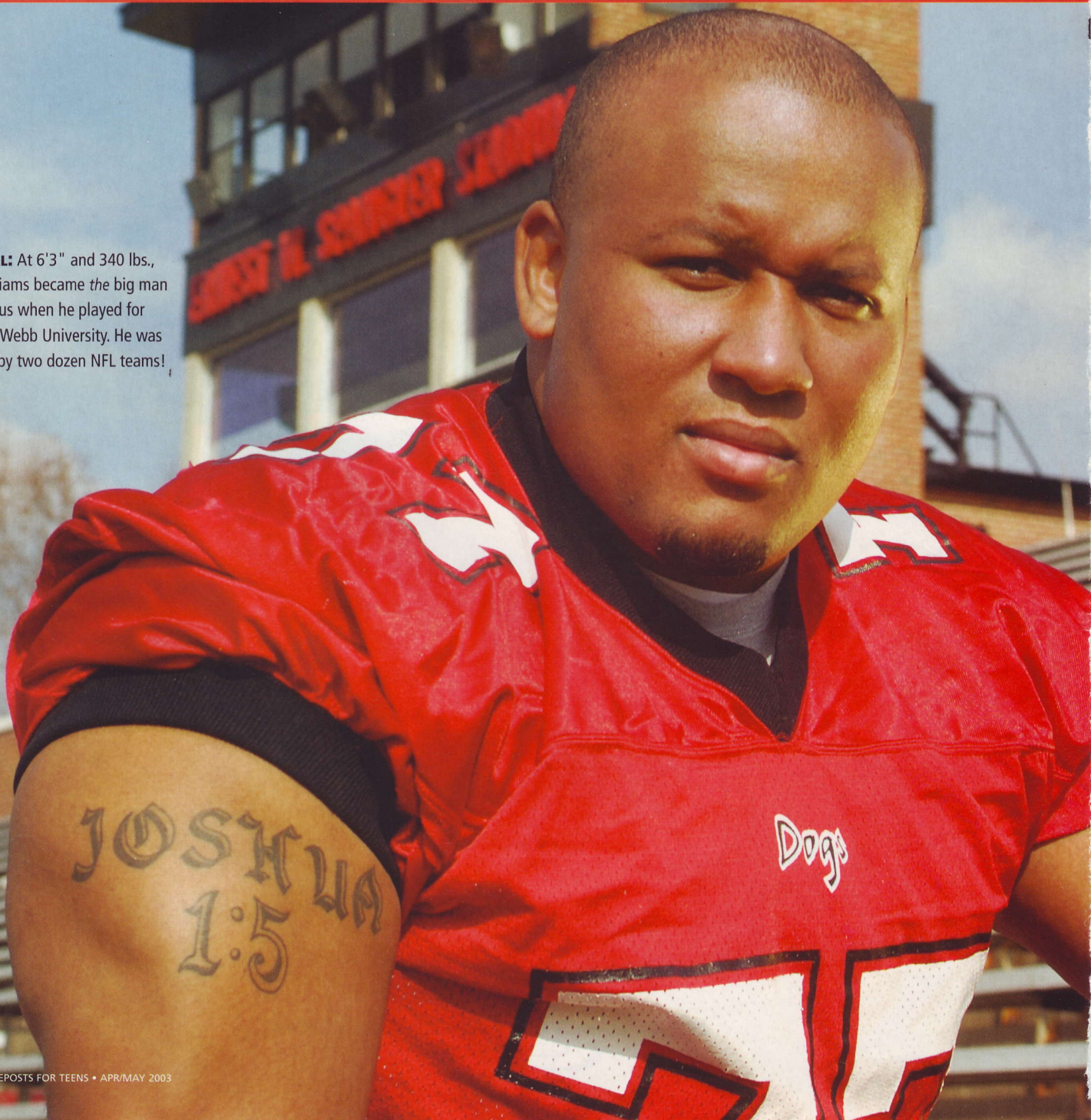


TRUE STORY

Why I Said

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BIG DEAL: At 6'3" and 340 lbs., Rich Williams became *the* big man on campus when he played for Gardner-Webb University. He was scouted by two dozen NFL teams!



JIM STRATFORD

O to the NFL

by Rich Williams

Half the guys in America would have given *anything* to be in my shoes. So why wasn't I happy?

"Love of game fades so All-American says no to draft!"

—USA Today, April 15, 2002

"Who wants to be a millionaire? Not him."

—Sports Illustrated/CNN Web site, April 19, 2002

"Top prospect decides NFL just isn't his bag."

—Associated Press, April 19, 2002

Last spring, at age 23, I did the unthinkable. I pulled off my helmet and walked away from a \$500,000 signing bonus and probably a \$3 to \$4 million professional football contract. Afterward, my agent, Brian Parker, fielded phone calls from every team in the league. All the callers asked the same question: "Why?"

As a senior offensive lineman at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, I attracted lots of attention. My playing ability stood out enough that the NFL rated me a sure, mid-round pick in the upcoming draft. Almost everyone I knew was excited.

Except me.

For months, I'd been agonizing over whether or not I wanted to play in the pros. But whenever I admitted that to the people close to me, they pretended not to hear. Only my mom and a few of my close friends seemed concerned about the feelings that consumed me.

Back in high school, I loved football so much that I even looked forward to practice. Just putting on the pads gave me a rush. And the first time I heard, "That was Rich Williams on the tackle," announced over the loudspeaker . . . well, I felt like *the man*.

I also loved the fact that all the players and the coaches cared about each other. We bonded like family. And although I never dreamed about playing in the NFL, I did fantasize about becoming a power lifter and someday owning my own gym.

College changed everything. My new teammates and I were tight, but I didn't go along with a lot of the things they did—drinking, partying, and girls. So I became a loner. And although playing before thousands of screaming fans upped the excitement level, it also maximized the pressure. I felt like I *had* to perform.

That's why I watched *Gladiator* before every game—to pump myself up. But my body took a beating. During the season, I

couldn't walk right. After every game, my knees ached, pain shot through my left ankle, and if I tried to sprint without warming up, everything in my whole body would crack. I suffered four concussions.

Besides the physical strain, what made college football most stressful for me was when the coach made me switch

opposing players. Afterward, one of them brought a psychiatrist to my hotel room. They aimed a spotlight hot on my face while the psychiatrist bombarded me with questions. He wanted to know everything about me—from what time I went to bed at night to my attitude toward my mother.

The deeper I went into the recruiting process, the more I seemed to lose myself.

positions. He recruited me as a nose guard, which is on the defensive line. Then, after my first year, he moved me to offense. "That's where the team needs you," he explained. He insisted I'd perform better there. "You're really good, Rich," he said. "There aren't many people who can do what you can."

Turned out Coach was right. Not only did I outmaneuver and overpower most of the defenders, I caught the eye of the NFL. But I still didn't like the position. With blocking, you're just standing there, pushing aside the oncoming linemen. I missed the excitement of tackling. For me, football went from being a game to being a job.

The one bright spot was that my dad was so proud once the NFL started paying attention to me. Suddenly he started calling me every week. When I got selected for the Blue/Gray all-star game, he drove all the way from Virginia to Montgomery, Alabama, just to watch me play.

The Blue/Gray gives professional scouts a chance to evaluate the top college players. And by "evaluate," I don't mean just on the field. The night before the game I had to stand up in the hotel ballroom, in front of 400 guys, wearing only my underwear. Scouts circled around me—taking notes and snapping pictures—like I was some poor soul dragged off a slave ship. The only thing missing was the auctioneer.

On the field, I played the game of my life. The scouts cheered when I made two "pancake" blocks, flattening and plowing over the bodies of the

Had anyone wandered by, I would have looked like a prisoner being grilled by the cops. My heart thumped in my chest and I wiped my sweaty palms on my pants. It was Christmas Day and all I wanted was to go home.

My dad understood how I felt. But later, when I suggested quitting the game, he panicked. "No, boy," he cried, staring me hard in the face. "Don't you even think such a thing. You keep right on playing football."

So I did.

I traveled to the Senior Bowl in

January and held a private weight-room workout in March. Representatives from 24 teams saw me bench-press 225 pounds, 37 times in succession—the second most of any NFL prospect. But my heart wasn't in it.

For years I'd prayed before every game, asking God to lead me and direct my path according to his will. Now my prayers changed to: "Lord, if you want me to play, give me the heart to play. If not, then help me quit."

Meanwhile, all kinds of agents were calling and hammering at me. Not a day went by without them leaving at least eight messages on my answering machine. I ignored most of them.

But something scary was happening to me. The deeper I went into the recruiting process, the more I seemed to lose myself. The pressure got so bad that I began taking it out on my girlfriend, refusing to take her places or even talk to her. My grades started slipping. And I spent more and more time just lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling.

Finally, I signed with Brian. Brian was cool, for an agent. But he didn't understand my doubts about football. "Richard, don't stop now," he urged. "You might change your mind."

What did I know? Maybe I would. So I kept going.

Each spring, the NFL designates two weeks during which prospective draft choices make recruiting visits. Brian scheduled five trips for me. Miami was first.

This could be kinda cool, I thought to myself, driving to the airport. *Half the guys in America would kill to be in my shoes.*

But my excitement evaporated as soon as the flight attendant pointed out my seat. I'm 6'3" and weigh 340 pounds, yet the Miami Dolphins flew me on coach! I squeezed into the middle seat between an old man and a big woman. By the time I arrived, my stomach was growling. But nobody offered lunch. I bought crackers from a vending machine.

All day, I sat in my undershorts while doctors poked and probed me, and scheduled me for X-rays. When I produced a urine sample, they made some guy stand and watch to be sure I wasn't

BLOCK PARTY: When coaches moved Rich from defense to offense, he quickly earned a rep for mowing over the opposition.



manipulating them.

At dinner that night, my steak tasted good. But I didn't like the Dolphins' cocky attitude. All they talked about was their team and how great they were. I just sat there, nodding my head.

The Dolphins noticed, because afterward they told Brian that I was "too quiet." As soon as I got home, we talked about it.

"It's like Sin City down there," I said. "Anything goes. I don't fit in."

"Maybe you should try loosening up a little," he suggested. "Lots of guys don't like their jobs. But with a \$3 million paycheck you'd only have to work a couple of years and you'd be set for life. Just think about it."

I was thinking about it—24/7. But I still didn't get it. That night, I lay awake with my head spinning. *You hear about professional athletes snorting cocaine, beating up their wives, and getting convicted of DWI—and these guys are complaining about me!* As long as my football skills measured up, why should I have to change my personality?

Sure, the money would be nice. But was it worth sacrificing my health, privacy, and self-respect? Was it worth working at a job I didn't enjoy and living a lie? I already owned a truck that ran, and I was on track to graduate from college. I could still barbecue with my friends and if I felt like it, I could strut around wearing a tank top in cold weather. I didn't need \$3 million.

What I *did* need was courage. While I seemed to have plenty of it on the football field, I lacked what it took to disappoint my coach, my friends, and my dad. Especially my dad. "I love you, Rich," he said at the end of every telephone call.



FACING FORWARD: Rich's sights these days are set on power lifting. (He can already bench-press 225 pounds 37 times in succession.) "My goal is to win the World's Strongest Man competition in Hawaii," he says.

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with phonies who pretend they're my friends.

The fact that I hadn't lifted weights in the past seven days compounded my anxiety. Pumping iron fuels my confidence in a way that football never could. It gives me my edge—makes me tough so I can handle life. I hadn't missed a week of workouts in four years.

My decision was clear. I'd bow out and let some other guy move into my spot. Throwing the tickets into the trash, I picked up the phone. "Take my name off the list," I told Brian.

Today my life has returned to normal. I work out five days a week. I'm happy hanging out with close friends. And I'm planning a future career as a strength and conditioning coach.

My dad still thinks I'm crazy for turning down the NFL. A lot of my friends and most of the rest of the world think the same thing. But professional football

Maybe I should let them draft me, accept the signing bonus, and show up at spring training. Then I could just hold back a little. I'd get cut from the team, but I could keep the cash. Nobody would ever know.

But that would require cheating a team that believed in me. The numbers on my digital clock glowed 2:00 a.m. before my mind shut down enough to sleep.

The next morning dawned sunny and warm. I woke up excited about working out and seeing my girlfriend. Then I spotted the airline tickets. *Oh, no, I forgot! I'm flying to Houston today to meet with the Texans.* And that's when I lost it. Five months of pent-up anger boiled to the surface. *I've had it with being told what to do! I'm sick of feeling miserable while trying to make other people happy. And I'm fed up*

isn't for everybody. And no matter how talented I might be at it, I wouldn't be happy. You can't find happiness chasing after the dreams of others. You've got to follow a dream of your own. ♦

Rich graduated from Gardner-Webb University last December with a bachelor's degree in sociology. In January, he started training at the police academy and eventually hopes to patrol the streets with a K-9 unit. (Imagine getting pulled over by a cop whose bicep fills your entire window!) Rich is still a fitness nut—he dreams of owning his own gym one day and spends most of his spare time pumping iron, working toward becoming a world-class power lifter.