

[music]

Lightfoot:

Mr. Jerrod Johnson. Many of you know him from his previous athletic exploits here. I will say one other word which I haven't said about the other speakers. But I will say about Jerrod, he really reflects the Aggie traditions and values that we have here. He stepped in only three weeks ago. We had one of our speakers that stepped out. And he was gracious enough to say, "You know what, I'll take this challenge and I'll show up." Please give a warm Aggie welcome, and for the Satellite sites as well, for Mr. Jerrod Johnson. [applause]

Johnson:

Thank you. All right. So first and foremost, I'd like to thank the Huffines Institute for inviting me out to speak. I can't stress enough the love and respect I have for this university. So the reason that I was invited here was to speak about me as an athlete dealing with injury. There's some things that took place my senior year that has kind of led me to this point on which I'm going to kind of expand on. So to understand my story, what happened as a senior here at Texas A&M, you've got to understand my past. So, for me, baseball was the first sport that I was involved in. And I call it my first crush because it was my first understanding, it my first experience in team sports. It was the first time I experienced winning, first time I experienced losing. It was the first thing that really got me excited to wake up in the morning. So with that, my parents saw my interest in it and devoted a lot of time and resources to that. So the majority of my life as a child was spent getting hitting and pitching lessons from some of the top people in the city of Houston. And so I was actually clinically and professionally trained to throw a baseball was the first thing I ever learned. So that's kind of the start of my story.

S2 02:03

As I got older, I picked up basketball. I picked up football. And by the time I got to high school was when I realized that if I wanted to play college sports, I probably had a better chance at basketball and football than I did in baseball. Most people don't know this about me, but I actually received my first scholarship offer from Texas A&M as a sophomore in high school, to play basketball. So I committed to A&M first to play basketball and then agreed to play football after that. Once I got here, on campus at A&M, I played football and basketball until, finally, I decided that I was going to devote my times and attention to strictly just football. And for me, I didn't fall in love with the game of football until I stopped playing basketball, until my coach, who I finished my career with at A&M, Mike Sherman, came to coach at Texas A&M. For me, I fell in love with the game when Coach Sherman came because he brought an offense that was upper level. He was coming-- he was head coach with the Packers. At the time, he was the offensive coordinator for Houston Texans. And so when he came and kind of expressed his version of football, kind of what I like to call graduate-level football, I really fell in love with the game. And more than just the game of football, I fell in love with the quarterback position.

S2 03:13

To me there is no tougher position to play in sports than the quarterback position. There's no other sport that's going to test you mentally, physically, emotionally like the quarterback position. So to be in shape physically, to throw, to run, to do those things-- from a mental standpoint, the things that are asked of a quarterback, to memorize hundreds of plays, the situations you have to go through in your mind-- and from an emotional standpoint, you understand from the moment you step foot on campus, you are leading your team. You are the leader of your organization. You are the leader of your team. And everybody knows how important football is here at Texas A&M, you are essentially the leader of the university to a certain degree. So, for me, I fell in love with everything that the quarterback position had to offer.

S2 03:56

Now, as I went on to that, and as I figured out that I loved the position, for me I realized I was a little late to the party. I realized I was late to this whole quarterback thing. I spent my whole life getting baseball lessons and traveling around the country playing for the Houston Hoops, nationally now are the Nike Basketball Team. And I'm new to this football thing. I'm pretty big. I'm pretty strong. I'm pretty athletic. I'm okay at this but I got to learn. And so for the first time, for me-- somebody talked about a throwing motion. Up to that point I didn't know anything about a throwing motion. I just gripped the football and I ripped it. Grip it and rip it, that was my mindset. Put it in my hand, I'm going to make it do what it do. I'm going to get it from point A to point B. And so when I say a release point, all a release point is for a quarterback, is from the time he decides to make the decision he's throwing the ball, to the time your opposite hand comes off of the football, to the time it releases your hand, that's a release point.

S2 04:42

Now, to put it really simply, the longer your release point, the greater the margin of error is. There is a thing called arm slot. What your arm slot is, is the most optimal position to throw the football. So the longer it takes you to get to that arm slot, the greater there is a chance of you not getting to the right spot. The shorter it takes that arm to get to that arm slot, the less chance there are for you to make a mistake in your release to throw the ball how you want to throw it. So, for me, I had a long release because I threw a football like a baseball. But I had kind of figured out from my athleticism, how to kind of make that all work. The first game I started at A&M, I was a sophomore and through my sophomore year I started the last nine games of my retro-sophomore season. After that, going into my junior year, I started all of our games as a junior, of which, I went on to have, at that point in time, the best statistical year a quarterback had ever had at Texas A&M. And so, for me, there was no greater feeling of knowing that all my hard work and everything had paid off and I was finally about to reap the benefits. I was finally getting to that point, and I was finally about to be able to have the opportunity to play professionally. Everything was happening the way it was suppose to.

S2 05:50

But for me, November 26, 2009, I'll never forget that night. One, it was the best game I ever played at A&M. It was my best statistical game. It was on national television against the number two ranked University of Texas team. But at the same, at the end of that game was the first time in my life I'd ever felt pain in my throwing shoulder. So up until that point, my ability to throw was always what kind of separated me. I got my confidence from my ability to throw. And so after that game, I went and saw the doctors and they told me that, "You know what, you have some fray on your rotator cuff." At the time, I didn't know what that means. Honestly, I still don't exactly know what exactly that means, but they said I had a partial tear in my rotator cuff, I had a partial tear in my labrum. They're just going to clean it up and everything will be fine. So me being the competitor that I was, my thought process was I have all these things that I need to get ready for for my senior year. So I rushed back, in two months I was back throwing again. I wanted to get to our spring game. I did that. After the spring game, I spent the entire spring and summer traveling around the country, doing the quarterback circuit that all quarterbacks do. There's Manning camp, the League 11 camp, all these different things that you do, trying to prepare for my senior year. And once my senior year came, it was about my second day in the training camp and I realized that, why is everybody staring at me when I throw the ball? And up until that point, people looked, but nobody was staring at me. And after enough questions of kind of, "Are you okay? Are you sure your shoulders okay?" I'm looking at everybody like, "Yeah, I'm good. I'm fine. I don't know what you're all talking about. What are y'all--?" So I finally pulled myself to the side and I watched the tape after practice, and realized, man, that doesn't look right. And the more I realized it didn't look right, it

also didn't feel right. Okay, so this is a picture from my senior year of essentially my throwing motion. If you can see, as far as that ball is away from my body, that's not the optimal throwing spot to throw the football. Okay? So I found a video online that is actually from somebody filming one day at practice that they're going to play next, me throwing the football that year.

S2 07:48

Okay. So if you noticed the way that I threw that football, there was no bend in my arm. And I can get into a whole deal of all the things that are bad about that ball, and it pains me to see that's what I decided to put on tape back then. So as my senior year went on I didn't really know what to do. I felt funny but I didn't-- I mean, what do you do when you're the preseason Heisman, number two in preseason Heisman voting, you're the preseason Big 12 player of the year. At this point you're your school's all-time leading passer and you're three-year team captain but you understand that you have little to no control over that football. I tried to do what every athlete generally tried to do and I tried to push through it. Which, for me, led to the hardest year of my life. I experienced extreme failure because there was nothing that I could do to fix my situation. And the best way I can put it was I was lost. There's no worse feeling than sitting on the turf on national television after turning the ball over four to five times and watching your team lose when all these expectations for yourself and everyone else were for you to do so well. So, for me, I really struggle with that.

S2 08:52

So after that game I end up getting pulled and I didn't play the last six games of my senior year. And that was something that was very hard for me to deal with, but as I look back on it, it is what it is. So Coach Sherman was very fortunate to send me to see Dr. James Andrews, who's one of the top orthopedic surgeons in the country, to try to get an explanation, because he couldn't really understand what exactly happened with my shoulder. How do I go from my greatest strength being throwing the ball to now that's kind of my greatest weakness? And so I go to Dr. Andrews, and the first thing that he says to me, and he sees lots of patients, but the first thing that he says to me is, "So how much baseball have you played in your life?" and for me it was surprising to hear that. I'm like, "How do you know that?" and he said, "Well, son, I looked at your MRIs, and the makeup of your shoulder looks a lot more like my MLB baseball pitchers than does the football player, and the rehab that you need on your individual shoulder is twice as hard than most other football players do to your career or your history in throwing a baseball. Right now your shoulder strength is at a two, and it should be at a five." And this was, timing-wise it was something frustrated to hear post-senior year after my draft stock plummeted and I lost millions of dollars from the ways that my senior year went.

S2 09:59

So, for me, after that point it was a quest for searching for answers. I still had a dream to play professional football, and it was now how do I try to obtain that dream. So if you look at the picture on the left, that's me throwing the combine. You can see how far that ball is away from my body from where my elbow is pointing. You can then see I went undrafted due to my throwing motion, and then I signed with the Eagles. I was released after two weeks because once again I mean I was throwing beach balls. It wasn't a pretty thing to watch me throw a football. So the next picture you see is a guy by the name of Kevin Murray, who was an Aggie legend, who played here, who knew my dad, my late father, Larry Johnson, and called me and said, "Look, I can get your throwing motion right." So I moved up to Dallas. I spent eight weeks and I pretty much relearned to throw a football from scratch, like a child would do. And honestly, I'm forever indebted to him because I learned how to throw a football. And it's crazy to think that up until that point, I'd never actually learned how to throw a football. I just did it all off all natural ability, and once that injury kicked in, I no longer could do that. So I'm forever indebted to him for learning how to throw a football.

S2 11:00

So if you look at this picture right here, it just gives you a little-- so the top left of my A&M jersey, that is me throwing my senior year. You can see where my elbow is pointing and where the ball's pointing. You can see me at the combine still doing the same thing. And finally, see when I signed with the Pittsburgh Steelers, after working with Kevin, you can see my arm slot. And that looks a lot more like what a football should look like coming out of a quarterback's hand. So, for me, Mr. Murray gave me the opportunity to chase my dream, and I got several opportunities to play in the NFL. I got a chance to play for the Steelers, the Bears, the Seattle Seahawks, and as of late, the Baltimore Ravens. And as of a couple of months ago, my last team I put on a jersey for was the Cowboys. And so, I'm thankful for that opportunity, but as I think back, it is one of those things to where my situation was time sensitive. And it hurts me, and it's something I got to live with for the rest of my life. About the fact that when I needed that information most, it just wasn't there. And I don't blame anybody. I don't blame the doctors. I don't blame my coaches. I don't blame anyone. It was just a situation that no one really had the answers. Trust me, A&M gave me all the resources. They tried the best they could. My coaches tried the best they could. There just wasn't enough answers there at the time that I needed it. And at this point, it is what it is.

S2 12:10

So, for me, I asked myself, "How did I get to this point?", which leads me to my personal crusade. And so I started my own business down at Houston called the Quarterback Club of Houston where I specialize in giving quarterback training for kids, everywhere from second-graders all the way up to pro guys. And for me, my crusade is I never want a kid to play this position of quarterback that has tons of highs but trust me, everybody knows from everybody who plays Sunday morning quarterback at their house, there's a lot of lows playing quarterback too. There's a lot of fingers pointed, there's a lot of good, there's a lot of bad, there's so many things that come from it. For me, I don't ever want a quarterback that I work with to ever feel lost. I want them to have the answers to the test. I want them to at least know how, what, or when to fix the issue they got going on, so I never want them to feel lost, because there's no worse feeling for a quarterback or anything in any field of life, than being lost and not having answers.

S2 12:58

So, for me, as I sit and have this talk, and I've heard all these great speakers talk and I've been thankful to be around them and to learn so much from them, I think that a huge part of what I believe in is education through exposure. I thankful to be exposed to this situation myself because a football player, as the coach, you don't get around these people of high-level academia that much. So I try to learn and think about as much as I can to take back with me to make me a better coach. And so I think back to Dr. Andrews and how did he know that I played baseball? He was exposed to so much. And so I challenge all of you. There's a lot of things going on in life right now that are bigger than this room. I challenge you all to expose yourself. There's no greater education than exposure. Expose yourself to things you don't know and you can always bring that into your field. So, for me, I try to-- when I meet a client, when I meet a kid, I want to know everything about them prior to that point. What kind of music you listen to, what you like to do for fun and, more importantly, what sports do you play? If I have a kid who played baseball, I can talk certain things with him. If I had a kid you played basketball, I can talk about release point and follow-through and finishing with your wrist. I can have that conversation with him.

S2 14:03

So, like I said, I really challenge you all to-- your prospective fields to really try to expose yourself to as many different things as you can, so that you can kind of bring it back into your situation. And so finally, as I sit and I think about my purpose and kind of how I-- what gets me to sleep at night, I think about all the things that's happened

to me and how I've gotten to this point. I'm almost thankful for it because I'm a firm believe and, like the quote says on there, "The purpose--" excuse me. [inaudible] my contacts-- "The purpose of life is discovering your gift. The meaning of life is to give your gift away." And I think that the purpose of my life and things I've been through really gave me, not only a story to tell, but I honestly feel that the things that I've been through is going to help the next generation. And I think I've been put on here to share my struggles that I now see as a gift with them so that they don't have to go through the things that I did. So I'm thankful for this opportunity. I'm glad I could share my story with you guys. And as always, thanks again. [applause]

- S1 15:13 Good job. Not going to let you lawyer up [crosstalk] some answers here [laughter]. Jerrod, thanks for sharing that with us. That's tough to talk about I bet.
- S2 15:22 Yeah, it is. But like I said, if somebody can learn something from it and I'm kind of at peace with it all and I think it all happened for a reason.
- S1 15:31 Well, we've got several questions for ya. Eddie V from Augusta University asked, "Do you have any advice for athletes suffering or recovering from a severe injury?"
- S2 15:40 The best thing I can tell anyone recovering from an injury is rest. I can't stress enough. Do not come back sooner than you think you need to be because you can't take things off the table. What I mean by that is once it's out there, it's out there. So I think it's best if you sit back, you heal, and you wait and you don't get back onto a field unless you fully understand you can fully perform at your maximum capabilities. Because it may not only hurt yourself, it may also hurt your team. So honestly, swallow your pride, which is very hard to do for athletes, and I'd say don't get back on that field until you fully know you can perform your job at the level that is expected of you.
- S1 16:14 Speaking of that, so if you had to do it again, knowing what you know now, would you have waited another month or so before you came back?
- S2 16:20 Honestly, yes. I probably would've waited a couple more months until I flat out knew that I was physically healthy as opposed to rushing to meet these so different things. And it came from a good place. But being older and wiser in my situation, that's something I love to share athletes is, don't come back from injury until you fully understand you can perform at the expectations you set for yourself.
- S1 16:38 Yeah. And that's one of the reasons that we have athletes come to Huffines discussion because we want to hear from the athlete's side as to what they're thinking about. So that's a really important message. We have Chelsea G. says, "As an athlete that develop their skills from a young age, how do you feel about children specializing in sports very early? From you experiences, would you encourage diversifying kids in different technical sports?" And we got that question from a couple other people as well.
- S2 16:59 Yeah. So, for me, I actually think I understand no matter how much I say, "I believe in diversifying sports" to someone who's played football, basketball, and baseball all the way through my senior year, I think there's something to it. I think there's hitting a game winning shot in basketball would help you hit a game winning pass in football. I'm all for it. And not getting burnt out in the sport. But if you're ever so inclined to pick a sport or you're parent who believes differently, because there's people who believe differently and I deal with them all the time, with me doing the quarterback training, just make sure you mix structure with play, if that makes sense. So for a younger kid especially, I think it's a good thing for him to learn that the proper techniques, the fundamentals, the right way to do something. But it's just as important to roll the ball, let him go out there with his friends, and him develop his own kind of identity through just natural free play as well. The combination of the

both is what makes it because you can't be too structured. Because the end of the day, any sports a game and you got to play it. But at the same time, you can't-- you don't want to go too old to where you don't have the technique to where it come back to bite you as you're older. So I'd say yeah. The structure's great. Just never lose sight of the fact that free play and free experimenting, trial and error is just as important as the structure as well.

S1 18:06 The structured stuff make them bored when they're young, [laughter] right?

S2 18:07 Yeah.

S1 18:09 We got this from Daniel, "Would you say that recovering from your injury was more physically or mentally challenging?"

S2 18:15 I'll honestly say it's both. And that's another reason why I say don't come back until you're fully healthy because from a mental standpoint-- I think mental health is also a huge deal. That's something I also feel passionate about. It's a huge deal involving athletes is when doubt creeps in, it's hard to get it out, if that makes sense. And so coming back from something and you're not fully yourself to see something not go the way its supposed to, that can linger with you. And half of having success and athletics is confidence and understanding. And so I think it's even. And honestly, the mental part is maybe harder because it's deeper than-- you have a reason why you physically can't run if you have an ankle or something. But when you have a mental block, that's way deeper than that. So I think it all kind of goes together but I think they're about even with mental and physical issues.

S1 19:01 Thank you so much for being here.

S2 19:01 Always.

S1 19:02 We're all just enjoying it. Thank you.

S2 19:04 Thank you. [applause]

[music]