

From hero to zero, and back again: The life and tales of John Garrish Jr.
By Bryan Cytron

The years of grinding on the gridiron, the months of conditioning and time spent at the gym and the hours and days spent in pursuit of being the starting quarterback had finally paid off.

John Garrish Jr. now 23, was a junior at Boca Raton High School in Florida in 2006. He lurked in the outskirts for more than a year and finally, his shot came. Not one to back down from a fight, he seized his opportunity.

The triumph, the setback and the comeback

“I worked extremely hard to get the starting qb (quarterback) position my junior year,” Garrish said. “For most of my sophomore year, there was a quarterback a year older than me that was pretty much assumed to be the starter as a senior the following season. He was a solid kid and one of our best defensive backs on the team. Spring practice was my opportunity to beat him out for the starting role and I did. When the fall rolled around, there was great anticipation for our season.”

Boca Raton was ranked 5th in the state with more than a dozen potential division one players on the roster. Garrish was set to assume the biggest football responsibility of his life, but suddenly, that hit the back burner after a shocking twist.

“My mom would actually miss my first game as a starter because she was hospitalized for a couple of weeks,” he said. “She had to have life-saving surgery on her stomach. This was a very sad time for me and her missing the game was just salt in the wound. She had never missed a game of mine and never did again until college, when I was thousands of miles away.”

His mother, Anna Garrish, was hospitalized a number of times, but battled through it and eventually recovered. Her daughter, Nicole, switched schools to help her out during the process. This meant that she could witness her two children at every Boca Raton home football game that season. However, that was short-lived.

“I thought everything was starting to come back together for our family,” Anna said. “I had my son as the starting quarterback-proud momma! On the sidelines, I had my daughter cheering at her new high school as the cheerleading captain-proud momma again! I stood tall and proud in the stands, watching my two prized possessions at the highest honor positions on the football field. I got to enjoy that for about one hour, before John limped off the field.”

Garrish blew out his knee and had a torn ACL. He says he did it on a ‘freak play’.

“For trick play possibilities, my coach always used his qb as the ‘personal protector’ for the punter, which meant the man standing between the long snapper and the punter about five yards deep,” he said. “We had a holding penalty, which brought us back inside our

own five yard line with a long fourth down. Our punt team came on and with the short field, the punter had to move up a couple yards so his heels wouldn't be out of the back of the end zone. That meant the punter was closer to the snapper and ultimately closer to me. The opposing team got pressure on the outside and it was my responsibility to pick him up. As I ran to block him, the punter punts and hits me in the shoulder pad. Miraculously, the ball bounces off me, onto the field and right into my hands. I then ran for 50 or 60 yards and go to make a move on the return man for the other team. As I juked left and right, the cornerback for the opposing team dove at my knee as soon as I planted with my right."

Knowing just how talented her son was, and how badly he wanted to play the game, Anna realized the magnitude of the setback.

"Imagine the devastation of an aspiring football player losing his junior year of college scouting," she said. "Talk about your world crumbling around you."

The Garrish family searched for the best surgeon they could find, and chose the one employed by the Miami Dolphins. Anna says she will never forget the preliminary steps in that process.

"I remember when the doctor came out of surgery and told me how bad John's knee was and that we might want to prepare him that he may not be able to play football again," she said. "Our first follow-up visit, the first sentence out of John's mouth was 'when can I start rehab and how long will it take before I can get back out on the football field.' The doctor told him this falls on him and how bad he wants it."

Garrish's coach, Chris Kokell, did not even question if he could return. It was just a matter of when.

"At first, I was like there is no way JG is injured-he is way too tough," said Kokell, now a 34-year-old ESPN West Palm football broadcaster in Florida. "Once I found out the extent of it, I felt bad for the seniors on the team that year. I knew that they wouldn't reach their goals without him. I didn't feel bad for JG though. I knew there was nothing that was going to stand in his way towards greatness."

Garrish's path back would take a lot of soul searching. Forty minute drives before school to rehab, as well as attending all football practices and games with a clipboard in hand, was just the half of it. He joined the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) at his high school, relying on his faith to get him through it all. Moreover, he changed his eating habits and getting good grades became a priority.

Garrish acknowledges that the setback was a painful one for many reasons, but he says it was also a blessing in disguise.

"The ACL injury may not have been the best thing for my football career, as the four early offers I had were dropped and I missed the most important season for recruiting

purposes,” he said. “But it changed a lot about who I am. I was then a ‘football player,’ and that’s all I looked at myself as. It was my identity. I was the stereotypical football player in fact-very arrogant, cocky, drinking alcohol at the age of 15 and disobeying parents orders. You name it and I was into it. Looking back, I hate the person I was, and I’m grateful for the injury as a sort of spotlight that allowed me to recollect my thoughts and turn my life around.”

In the process back to stardom, Garrish relied on inspiration from both naysayers and the ones close to him.

“It came at a time when ACL injuries were a football player’s death sentence, and many people believed I would never play again,” he said. “But through all of the journey, my friends and family always told me that everything happens for a reason. The first time I heard that was when I was lying on the floor with my injury, and it then rang true for my entire career.”

The comeback started with an adjusted timetable after he lost 25 pounds in the two weeks following his surgery, due to a loss of appetite. It continued with “the most painful exercises” in his life. He still received calls from the schools that had previously recruited him. They said that if he matched the season he started a year before, the offers would come his way. This was huge motivation for him. It took a tremendous amount of work ethic, which Garrish says he got from his father, Josh Garrish Sr.

“I learned the concept of hard work from working with my dad on Saturday’s when I was 11,” he said. “Duties included mowing lawns, trimming bushes and raking leaves. It didn’t seem like much trouble to me because it was something I did at our own house weekly. It’s quite a bit different when you have to do that work for 20 houses in one day, and then do it again tomorrow. It was extremely hard work but my dad was never unhappy doing it, so that made me realize that hard work is meaningful and positive.”

Through it all, the school newspaper set up a blog to document his journey back. This created a sense of excitement in the community for his return to the field. It finally came, and the crowd went crazy.

As game time of the first game approached, fans stood in the stands with the number five painted on their faces and arms. When he took the field, JG-bow chants poured out from the stands. His supporters likened him to Florida football legend Tim Tebow. Amongst the loudness that reverberated across the stadium, Garrish had the game of his life, and he says it couldn’t have happened at a better time.

“My first game back was the most exciting game I ever played in,” he said. “It was against our rival school, Delray Beach Atlantic High School, another powerhouse in the state. It was said after the game that this was the most division one recruited players on the field at once, as 15 of our 22 went on to play division one, while 17 of theirs did.”

“It was truly a college atmosphere with press and cameras everywhere. It was the game I worked my whole life for. All off-season doubters said maybe I’d be able to throw but that there was no way I’d be able to run as well. Well, I started this game with three rushing touchdowns and two passing. It was the game of my career and I wouldn’t have wanted it to come in any other game. The fans made me feel so welcome and made me feel a part of something great. We got out to a 35-7 lead to actually lose on a last second Hail Mary pass. It was the game of everyone’s nightmares, but surprisingly, I wasn’t as sad as you’d expect. I proved I belonged in the conversation for best in the state, and our team proved it could play a close game with the number two-ranked team in the state, so all wasn’t lost.”

Air Force Academy

Garrish was determined to prove everyone wrong that said he couldn't get recruited by a division one school. Every night, he would search the Internet and get five schools and addresses for his mom. The next morning, she would send out a packet with his stats and a copy of his highlight film. Each night, both of them would wait for the phone to ring from a coach looking to recruit Garrish.

Garrish’s storied senior season earned him 13 scholarship offers, with 11 asking him to play safety. Intent on playing quarterback, he waited for the right call and ultimately, the right fit. Finally, it came from the Air Force Academy on Christmas Eve in 2007.

“I cried because I could hear the excitement in his voice when he called me to tell me the news,” Anna said. “He said it was everything he wanted. He often thought about joining the military. It was the best education he could ask for and they are a division one football team! Our visit to the academy sealed the deal.”

Garrish was told he would play quarterback, but was immediately forced to play outside linebacker when he got to the first practice. He was shaken by the news.

“I felt a sense of betrayal and anger,” he said. “I could have gone to any other school that offered me a scholarship without a military affiliation, but I chose Air Force to play quarterback in the triple option system. Regardless, I wasn’t going to let it bother me, so I strapped my helmet up and worked as hard as I could in my new position.”

As he moved up the depth chart, things were looking up. However, that came to a crashing halt in week six, when he was diagnosed with a concussion. It was his third major concussion and first while competing collegiately. After missing two weeks of school and military training, he began to question his place at the academy. Realizing the toll it took on Garrish, his military leaders offered him the chance to discharge honorably, and he took it.

Wagner College: the ups and the downs

Determined to continue his football career, Garrish transferred to Wagner College, a small liberal arts school in New York. After a successful spring at quarterback, he suffered a “very black” concussion on the final scrimmage of the preseason during his sophomore year.

“From what I hear from teammates, it was a very scary situation,” he said. “I had the idea of returning until I met with three doctors. They all said that it would be smartest if I discontinue my football career. The lasting effects was what worried my family and I, and we mutually decided that I would hang up my cleats and retire from football.”

Garrish’s dreams may have been dashed, but his teammates will always hold a special place in their heart for him.

“John clearly showed more passion than anyone I ever met,” said teammate Steve Ciocci, who is now a 23-year-old Assistant Offensive Line Coach at Wagner. “He didn’t believe in no-win situations and was exhausted after every workout, every practice and game event because he gave everything he had. He wasn’t content either to be the best at Wagner. He really wants to be the best in the world. You don’t see that in too many people.”

After his career-ending concussion, Garrish couldn’t bear standing on the sidelines and eventually switched sports.

“In order to fulfill my scholarship agreement at Wagner, I would have to perform team-related duties,” he said. “I loved basically being an assistant coach [for the team], but watching my teammates practice made me really miss the sport. I felt like a little kid on punishment, watching his friends play outside. So, I decided I wanted to find a sport that I could compete in. The one that made sense with the lack of contact was track.”

In addition, Garrish started the FCA at Wagner. Ciocci served as his right hand man, and will never forget the impact they made.

“Together, we really helped build the organization into an amazing community service driven event that organized different charities such as Operation Christmas Child, visits to the hospital to see children and different fundraisers for cancer research, world hunger and all sorts of charities,” he said. “The group started off as a small group and grew to around 50 members by the time John graduated.”

About a month before graduation, Garrish experienced the most devastating news of his life. His sister had a brain aneurism and passed away on April 21, 2013.

“It was by far the worst day of my life, and I hope no day in the future ever meets the sadness that I felt that day,” he said. “It was really unfortunate for this to have happened so early in her life. I felt completely out of control and sad for my parents. I just didn’t know how and still don’t know how to console them.”

Despite his uncertainty, his mom says that her son was her savior.

“John was my rock through this whole tragedy,” Anna said. “He held me together when I thought my life was over. He made me open my eyes to all the people who have surrounded me with so much love and support during this rough time in my life. John constantly reminded me how much Nicole and he loved me and the bond and love our family shared throughout the years.”

Garrish says he will always cherish the time he and his sister spent together.

“We spent what seemed like every waking second together, both at home and outside,” he said. “I remember playing childhood games. She would play house, and I would play with her, as long as she would agree to play football with me.”

Upon graduation, Garrish received the school’s ministry award for school service, something he called an honor and a privilege. After graduation, he looked to continue track at graduate school.

The hiccup and UNT

Garrish was all set to transfer to the University of Missouri for graduate school, and to live out his final time as a college athlete. Just when he was about to sign the papers, the school moved to the Southeastern Conference, which by rule, would make him ineligible to compete collegiately for a year.

He and his family saw this as a sign from Nicole that Missouri wasn’t where he was supposed to be after all. He found the University of North Texas, and after visiting the campus, never looked back.

Majoring in sports psychology, he made his mark early and often on UNT track. Garrish set the school records in the weight and hammer throws. Just like his high school teammates and coach, his track coach admired him as a competitor and a person.

“John has a tremendous amount of athletic ability, work ethic and professionalism toward life,” said Pete Abbey, who has more than 15 years’ experience coaching Track and Field. “I don’t care what sport he takes up. John will be successful at it.”

Garrish, set to graduate and get his masters in May, is no longer eligible to compete at the college level. He has shifted his focus toward the future.

“My dream is to compete at the US Olympic trials in 2016,” he said. “Just to be there and be able to compete would be a complete honor. I plan to embark on my new career as a strength and conditioning coach.”

He already has an interview set up for Rutgers University in the summer. He has not ruled out being a football coach somewhere down the road. Whatever he pursues, his

parents believe he will achieve his goals because of his past experiences and his relentless determination to succeed.

“From the knee injury at Air Force to the concussion at Wagner to the news at Missouri, it broke our hearts that he continued to face adversity,” John Garrish Sr. said. “The thing is though, if he let any of it get him down, he didn’t show it. He has always looked adversity in the eye and stared it down.”