

Pat Tillman

Duty

On December 7, 1941, “a date which will live in infamy,” Japan launched a sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. The next day America declared war on Japan. Angry American citizens began signing up to serve their country in the armed services. Professional athletes were no exception. Among the eight million Americans who served were 500 major league baseball players and 638 professional football players. Because so many athletes had enlisted in the military, baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis considered shutting down the game until the war ended. Professional football teams were so depleted that some owners combined players just to field a team. The Philadelphia Eagles and Pittsburgh Steelers merged to become the Phil-Pitt Steagles. Football practices were held in the evenings to allow athletes to contribute to the war effort by working in defense-related factories during the day. Baseball games were played mostly at night to allow blue-collar workers to attend, thereby boosting national morale. Americans knew the meaning of duty and sacrifice during wartime, and professional athletes did their part as well.

Baseball hall of famers Joe DiMaggio, Warren Spahn, Hank Greenberg, and Bob Feller proudly served in the military. Ted Williams, widely considered to be the best hitter of all time, enlisted twice. He served as a Navy pilot during World War II and again during the Korean War, sacrificing five prime years of his career for his country. Professional football players also felt a call to duty. Heisman Trophy winner Nile Kinnick died while serving in the military when his plane crashed just short of the aircraft carrier *Lexington*. Maurice Britt and Jack Lummus fought so valiantly that each received our country’s highest honor, The Congressional Medal of Honor.

Lummus almost single-handedly wiped out three Japanese bunkers and was subsequently killed when he stepped on a land mine in Iwo Jima. Britt was seriously wounded in a firefight in Italy, and according to Army reports, “Despite his wounds he personally killed five and wounded an unknown number of Germans, and wiped out one enemy machine gun.” Britt would never play professional football again.

Nearly sixty years after the attack on Pearl Harbor, on September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four airplanes and crashed them into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and into a field in rural Pennsylvania. A combined 2,992 people were killed in these attacks, compared to 2,388 people who were killed at Pearl Harbor. Americans were once again outraged by an attack on U.S. soil. President George W. Bush immediately called for a “War on Terror” and Congress passed a resolution authorizing the president to use military force. Americans expressed their patriotism by proudly displaying the flag and by donating money to the families of the victims. And, just like in 1941, many people began to enlist in the armed forces. There was, however, one notable difference this time around. Only two professional athletes signed up to fight for their country—Pat and Kevin Tillman.

When the brothers enlisted, Pat Tillman was a starting safety for the Arizona Cardinals. His little brother, Kevin, was a minor league pitcher in the Cleveland Indians organization. In recognition of their desire to serve a greater good outside the world of sports, both brothers were recipients of the Arthur Ashe Courage Award, presented during the 2003 ESPY Awards. True to their modest nature, they declined to attend the ceremony, sending their younger brother, Richard, to accept the award on their behalf. They did not want to call any attention to themselves for their decision to wear a different uniform. They wanted no special privileges, no preferential treatment. In the acceptance speech, Richard said, “Pat and Kevin don’t think they

are better than anybody else. They do not feel that the soldiers fighting alongside them are giving any less than they are.”

While this is true, unlike the other soldiers, Pat Tillman left behind a \$3.6 million pro football contract when he enlisted. Many people could not understand why he would sacrifice his dream of playing in the NFL for an annual salary of \$17,316 in the armed forces. Tillman declined all interview requests once he joined the Army, so no one can definitively say why he joined or what he hoped to accomplish. However, based on his reaction to the attacks of 9/11 and the kind of person he was, we can make a few educated guesses. First, his decision to enlist was not a publicity stunt. If it had been, he would have accepted the offers of multi-million dollar book deals, movie contracts, and commercial endorsements. His face and image would have been everywhere. To the contrary, Pat Tillman was a person with deep convictions who made decisions based on principle. The clearest answer as to why he joined the Army Rangers came from Joseph Bush, an Air Force sergeant who just happened to run into his football hero when both were serving in Saudi Arabia. Bush asked the same question many others had: “Why would you give up the NFL for a life like this?” Tillman’s answer: “For the love of my brother. And for the love of my country.” Jim Rome, an ESPN analyst, said, “When he gave up his career to join the Rangers, people said, ‘How can he do that?’ Pat said, ‘How can I not?’”

Tillman might not have provided the public with a definitive answer as to why he enlisted, but judging from his emotional reaction on September 11, 2001, it is safe to assume this event played a significant role. On that terrible Tuesday morning, Tillman watched the events unfold from the Phoenix Cardinals media lounge. He watched the towers collapse and his fellow Americans perish in the rubble left behind. He was angry, emotional and helpless—unable to do anything to stop it. In the ensuing days, Tillman seemed profoundly influenced by the terrorist

attacks. "I was dumbfounded by everything that was going on," he said. "In times like this, you stop and think how good we have it. I have always had a great deal of feeling for the flag, but you don't realize how great of a life we have over here...A lot of my family has gone and fought in wars, and I haven't really done a damn thing as far as laying myself on the line like that." Eight months later, in May 2002, Tillman joined the Army. Eighteen months after that, Tillman completed a grueling training program at the Army Ranger School to become a member of the world's best light-infantry fighting force. In April 2004 Tillman found himself in Osama bin Laden's backyard fighting terrorists. Three weeks later, on April 22, 2004, Tillman was killed in an ambush, leaving behind a grieving widow and thousands of fans.

According to firsthand accounts of the attack, a small detail of Rangers was traveling with an informant to recover weapons in a dangerous section of Afghanistan. During the mission, al-Qaeda terrorists and Taliban sympathizers ambushed the Rangers. At the time, Tillman's platoon was split into two squads. Tillman's squad was in the lead, while the second squad was tied down in a "killing zone." U.S. Navy Seal Steve White described what happened next: With his fellow Rangers in trouble, Tillman instinctively "took the fight to the enemy uphill to seize the tactical high ground from the enemy. This gave the others in the downed vehicle time to move off that target. He directly saved their lives. Tillman sacrificed himself so his brothers could live." For his heroism and gallantry on the battlefield, Pat Tillman was posthumously awarded the Silver Star and the Meritorious Service Medal. According to the Army, Pat Tillman was killed while fighting "without regard for his personal safety."

To date, more than 1,500 soldiers have died in the Middle East, but this was the first time many Americans could associate a face with one of the casualties. Pat Tillman was known as the famous football player who gave up a pro career to fight for his country. His death seemed

to put things in perspective, forcing Americans to face the realities of war. “In sports we have a tendency to overuse terms like courage and bravery and heroes, and then someone like Pat Tillman comes along and reminds us what those terms really mean,” commented Michael Bidwell, vice president of the Arizona Cardinals. Those who knew him mourned his loss. “What we lost in terms of a person is really something that a lot of us would like to have, those kinds of convictions and the kind of character and attitude that he had about living daily life,” said Larry Marmie, former defensive coordinator of the Cardinals.

Pat Tillman lived life to the fullest. He was a man of substance who had that “it” quality—something intangible that you can’t quite put your finger on, but you know it when you see it. Jake Plummer, a former teammate, tried to define this elusive quality in Tillman. “He was something special... He had an intensity you can’t describe. It was an inspiration for everybody who played with Pat.” Marc Flemming, a former high school teammate, added, “He had a passion for what he did until the day he died. That is something most men never will achieve.” Larry Marmie said, “The real sad part is that they [Americans] didn’t really know Pat Tillman as a person.” The real Pat Tillman story isn’t about how he died, but rather how he lived.

Pat was a bicentennial baby, born on November 6, 1976. His father, Pat Tillman Sr., was an attorney. His mother, Mary, was a substitute teacher. Pat was the oldest of three boys. The family lived in a suburb of San Jose, California. During his youth—and for that matter, as an adult too—Pat marched to the beat of his own drum. It was widely reported that his favorite word was “dude,” and his attire usually consisted of a pair of cutoff shorts, a T-shirt, and a pair of flip-flops. If he was not riding his mountain bike or using his roller blades, he might have been climbing trees or jumping off the porch roof. Apparently, rambunctious behavior was par for the course for this youngster. According to his dad, “He has always liked testing himself.”

Pat's competitive edge served him well when he began playing sports at Leland High School, a large school with a strong history of athletic achievement. Because he had not hit puberty by the time he entered high school, Pat was a scrawny-looking freshman. Nonetheless, he was a good athlete and excelled in baseball and football. However, when Pat was told by the baseball coach that he would not make the varsity baseball team, but was welcome to play on the junior varsity squad, he told the coach that he had decided to focus solely on football. The coach responded, "Pat, that's probably a bad decision, because if you're going to play a college sport, it will have to be baseball. It certainly won't be football!" The baseball coach turned out to be the first of many people Pat would prove wrong in the upcoming years.

At the end of the football season, Pat was one of four freshmen approached by the varsity coach and invited to move up to the varsity team for the next year. The other three students declined because they preferred starting on the junior varsity team, as opposed to potentially riding the bench on the varsity team. Pat, however, was quick to accept the offer. He loved a challenge and did not let uncertainty or fear rule his life. He continually set high expectations for himself and raised the bar at every opportunity.

In one playoff game, for example, Leland was ahead 55-0 at halftime. Before the second half kickoff, the coach told his star player, "Pat you're done for the day, and I don't want you playing any offense or to play any defense." A few seconds later, Pat ran onto the field to take his place as the kick-returner on special teams. He returned the kick-off for a touchdown. As he walked to the sidelines, Pat confidently looked his coach in the eye and said, "You mentioned nothing about special teams." To prevent any further misunderstandings, the coach confiscated his helmet and shoulder pads for the remainder of the game.

By the time Pat was a high school senior he was a legitimate football star. He averaged 10.9 yards a carry as a fullback and led the team in tackles with 110 as a linebacker. His team finished 12-1 and Pat was named the Central Coast Section co-player of the year. An opposing coach spoke highly of Pat's athleticism. "He is a man among boys. He reminds me of Ronnie Lott on defense. I really believe he's the best overall athlete I've seen in my coaching career."

Despite his dominance on the football field, only three Division 1-A schools expressed any interest in Pat. One of those schools was Arizona State University. Head coach Bruce Snyder later explained his initial reluctance to offer Pat a scholarship. "I kept looking at this guy that did not fit the physical profile. He was too short, too slow, didn't weigh enough. But whenever I watched tape, he was always the best player on the field." At 5'11" and 195 pounds, Pat was a classic "tweener"—too small to play linebacker and not fast enough to play cornerback. During a campus visit, however, the coaches were struck by Pat's personality and ambition. Without a doubt, his potential could not be measured with a scale, a yardstick, or a stopwatch. Pat's heart and character clearly outweighed his physical stature. The Arizona State coaches became convinced that Pat had what it took to succeed at the collegiate level. They offered him the last scholarship of 1994.

Pat Tillman did not look or act like a typical college jock. He grew his hair well below his shoulders, earning the nicknames "Goldilocks," "Blondie," and "Braveheart." If he had not been so driven and focused, he could have easily been confused with a surfer-dude waiting for the next big wave. But he was driven and focused—and not just with football. His grade point average for his first three semesters at ASU was consistently at 3.5 and above. Tillman was not enrolled in the typical blow-off classes that many big-time college athletes take. He was a marketing major and aced courses in accounting, economics, statistics, and communications.

Pat Tillman was named the *Sporting News* Honda Scholar-Athlete of the Year and was named to several Academic All-American teams. At a time when the average student is on the five-year plan, Tillman graduated in three-and-a-half years with a GPA of 3.84. When asked how he managed to be so successful in academics, he said, “It’s something that if you want to do it, you can do it. The classes are there to take. I just had the motivation to do it.”

Tillman was on an accelerated course with football too. The coaches at ASU had wanted him to redshirt his first year, meaning he would sit out his first year without losing a year of eligibility. This practice allows freshmen to mature on the bench and have more playing time as fifth-year seniors. When presented with this option, Tillman was not interested. “Coach, you can play me or not play me,” he said, “but I’m only going to be here four years. And then I’ve got things to do with my life.” In another interview, he explained, “There’s a lot of opportunity out there in this country, and I’m going to reach for the sky...I want to be a billionaire eventually and do whatever I want. I’m not exactly sure how I’m going to do it, but I’ll figure it out.”

With dreams like that, Tillman wasn’t worried about a simple thing like playing time. His only goal was to do his best. Thanks to his hard work, Tillman quickly became one of the best special-teams players and even started a game at linebacker as a freshman. As a sophomore, he continued to do everything that was asked of him and became the team’s sixth-leading tackler.

Many people did not know what to think of this free-spirited guy. “When it was cool to have his hair long, he wore it short. When it was cool to have it short, he wore it long,” said his brother-in-law, Alex Garwood. On the field, Tillman was known as the “hit man” but off the field he was a deep thinker. Even Tillman’s road-game roommate believed he was misunderstood. “People thought he was a crazy guy, but I would try to tell people that Pat was one of the most level-headed guys I know,” he said.

Still, Tillman was unusual in many ways. During training camp the team would head to the mountains and hold twice-a-day practices. During the breaks, most players were so exhausted that they found a quiet place to relax. Not Tillman. He spent his leisure time climbing fifty-foot cliffs and jumping into the water below. During the season, he would regularly climb a 200-foot tower—in his flip-flops no less—just to clear his mind and contemplate the future. No wonder people thought he was crazy. He also read everything he could get his hands on. He would then test his knowledge by choosing controversial sides of an issue and debate his friends just for the fun of it.

On the field, Tillman was becoming one of the best linebackers in the country and making a significant impact on ASU team. The highlight of his college career was the team's upset of the defending national champion Nebraska Cornhuskers, ending their twenty-six-game winning streak. ASU finished the regular season undefeated at 11-0, but lost the Rose Bowl when the Ohio State Buckeyes scored a go-ahead touchdown with nineteen seconds remaining on the clock. It was a heartbreaking way to lose the national championship.

While the ASU football team did not fare as well during Tillman's senior year—finishing the season at 9-3—he led the team in tackles and was named Pac-10 Defensive Player of the Year. Not bad for an undersized linebacker who was only recruited by three schools. According to one teammate, Tillman had more important qualities than size. “You see a guy like that smashing people, it makes me want to do the same thing,” his teammate said. “It's all about heart. He's just about the strongest person, mentally, I've ever met.”

If people thought Pat Tillman was too small and too slow for college football, imagine what the pros thought of him. He would have to prove them wrong too. In the 1998 NFL draft, 243 players were selected over the course of seven rounds. The Arizona Cardinals selected Pat

Tillman as the 228th pick in that final round. “When we drafted Pat, we had three picks in the seventh round, the last round of the draft, and we picked him with the 7C pick,” said Vince Tobin, former head coach of the Cardinals.

Tillman came that close to not realizing his dream of playing in the NFL. If it weren't for his tenacity and work ethic, he wouldn't have been drafted at all. Because the Arizona Cardinals and ASU shared the same football stadium, several of the coaches had agreed to observe Tillman run some drills. This fifteen-minute workout turned into a forty-five-minute ordeal because Tillman wouldn't let them leave until he performed every drill to the best of his ability. “He wouldn't quit,” one coach said. “By the time the workout was over, his shirt had come off and he was diving onto the ground. That type of commitment, that type of drive, that type of inner passion that he had, showed through after we took him in the seventh round.”

Tillman did not care what round he was drafted—he just wanted an opportunity to prove himself. And he did. The first thing the Cardinals did was move him to free-safety, a position he had never played. Without missing a beat, Tillman hit everything that moved and, against all odds, became the team's leading tackler during the pre-season. Apparently that's all the maturation he needed because the Cardinals named him as the starter for the first game of the season. Tillman ended up being the spark that set fire to the team. His head coach said, “I had an affinity for Pat because his toughness was contagious. Other players fed off of him, and that's not just a line.”

The Cardinals made the playoffs that year for the first time in fifteen years and won their first playoff game in fifty-one years. In 2000, Tillman set a team record with 224 tackles. It was about this time that Tillman began to get attention from other NFL teams. The St. Louis Rams reportedly offered Tillman a contract worth \$9 million. He turned down the opportunity to make

more money, opting to stay with the Cardinals. His reasons were simple. “I felt loyalty to the coaches,” he explained. “I’ve come a long way, and it’s because of them.” Tillman added later, “I try not to make decisions based on money.” Loyalty was one of many character traits Tillman possessed.

While many people talk about leading a principled life, Tillman lived one. According to one of Tillman’s former professors at ASU, Michael Mokwa, “If you look at Pat’s life, his theme always was to look deep into himself and determine what was right or wrong, good or bad, appropriate or not appropriate, and then to generate his values through this.” Mokwa added, “Once he grabbed a value, he just relentlessly stuck with it and turned it into action.”

Material possessions did not mean much to Tillman. When other NFL players were buying flashy cars and living in mansions, he was still driving his old Volvo station wagon and living in a modest home. Not only that, he frequently rode his beat-up Schwinn bicycle to work in the stifling 115-degree Arizona heat. For most professional football players, the rigor of an NFL season is demanding enough. Not so for Tillman. He challenged himself by competing in triathlons and marathons in his spare time. He thrived on competition and loved to push himself to the limit. “Doing stuff like this gives me something to focus on,” he said. “I feel like a bum not doing anything in the off-season.”

Pat Tillman was admirable but not perfect. Like anyone else, he made his share of mistakes. When Pat was seventeen, for example, he came to the rescue of a friend who was attacked by an older man outside a pizzeria. In defending his friend, Pat used more force than he should have and was later arrested for felonious assault. He pled guilty and spent thirty days in a juvenile detention center. While it was noble thing for him to defend his friend, Pat realized he had made a mistake in going too far. “I’m proud of that chapter in my life,” he maintained. “I’m

not proud of what happened, but I'm proud that I learned more from that one bad decision than all the good decisions I've ever made...It made me realize that stuff you do has repercussions." Pat apologized, took responsibility for his mistake, and learned from it. He was given a second chance, and he made the most of it.

Unfortunately, there are no second chances when it comes to war. If Pat Tillman had not been killed in Afghanistan, there is no limit to what he might have accomplished. His former college roommate thought Pat's life was going to lead to something big. "If Pat were still alive and had made it out of that thing in Afghanistan, he would be back here trying to change stuff, trying to make things better by running for office or something like that," he said. "I believe he was going to run for some high office, if not president." Tillman possessed the power to change people, according to his brother-in-law, Alex Garwood. "Man, I spent just a few hours with that guy having a couple of beers, and he changed the way I think about life. He made me want to be a better person."

Radio broadcaster Jim Rome, master of ceremonies at Tillman's memorial service, put things into perspective. He said, "Pat is a hero...I can't wait to sit my son down and tell him how much I admire Pat and tell him about the legendary Tillman intensity, his hunger, his desire... I don't want to be like Mike [Jordan]. I want to be like Pat. I wish I would have spent more time with Pat because Pat's the man I want to be. Pat's the man we should all want to be."

Many other prominent people attended Tillman's memorial service and gave moving tributes. Maria Shriver, California's First Lady, said, "He was a glorious and shining example of honor, service, and devotion to a cause and a power much greater than himself." Senator John McCain, no stranger to war himself, had these words to say: "Pat's best service to his country was to remind us all what courage really looks like and that the purpose of all good courage is to

love. He loved his country and the values that make us exceptional among nations.” Dave McGinnis, former Cardinal head coach, talked about Tillman’s character. “There was never a question where Pat Tillman stood. The character of a man is a very valuable thing...The character of a man is his ability to make a decision and stand by it. Pat defined the word ‘character.’” Finally, veteran football coach Lyle Setencich left Pat’s friends and family with these words: “God bless Pat Tillman. God bless Pat Tillman.”

There are many lessons we can learn from the life of Pat Tillman. He demonstrated the importance of having a dream and working hard to reach it, regardless of what others might say along the way. A strong belief in yourself can overcome the criticism of those who do not believe you can achieve your goal. Thanks to self-confidence and hard work, Pat Tillman was an overachiever in every facet of his life.

He also demonstrated that true happiness comes from leading a principled life. He valued the ideals of loyalty, modesty, and duty over material possessions, fame, and self-gratification. Tillman applied these principles to every decision in life and earned respect from others in the process. He was not afraid to be his own person. Pat Tillman was unconventional and free-spirited, and it served him well.

Finally, the story of Pat Tillman reminds us that words like sacrifice and hero have real meaning and should not be used lightly. America was saddened by the loss of this hero in wartime, but we should be grateful that he and other brave men and women are willing to sacrifice so much for their country. For his heroism and sense of duty to his country, we owe Pat Tillman a debt of gratitude.