

The New York Times

Talent. A Football Scholarship. Then Crushing Depression.

A promising wide receiver hit rock bottom with mental illness and is among a number of college athletes learning about, and dealing with, depression.

By Kurt Streeter

Nov. 15, 2018

Something was wrong. He could sense it.

The feeling had been stalking him for months. The lights were off in his bedroom, and the darkness closed in on him.

Isaiah Renfro, a top freshman wide receiver at the University of Washington, was at his home in South Los Angeles. He had to leave in the morning for spring practice, which was about to start in Seattle. But he could tell: Another storm was coming, a gale of anxiety and depression.

He slammed his suitcase shut and stood near his bed, steeling for a struggle that he was never sure he could win. He breathed hard, and tried to stay on his feet. Now the tempest was upon him. All the pressure. The worries. Football. Family. The feeling that he could never measure up.

He saw only one way out.

He went to the kitchen, careful not to wake his mother or little sister. From the refrigerator, he took a bottle of vodka. In a medicine cabinet, he found some Dilaudid, a powerful opioid painkiller he had used after an injury. He poured the pills into one hand. With the other he drank the vodka. He washed down one pill after another, pill after pill after pill.

He typed a note on his iPhone: “If I die before I wake, I pray to the Lord my momma straight, there is always food on my sister’s plate.”

Back in his bedroom, he lay his head against a pillow and waited.

“It is time,” he said to himself. “It is time to leave this world. It is time. It is time.”

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Maybe you have never heard of Isaiah Renfro. He did not start at the University of Washington, nor did he play in the N.F.L. But you should know his struggle. There are scores like him, young athletes on college campuses grappling with mental illness — a crisis that is only now getting serious attention.

What experts know is this: Recent studies place suicide as the third leading cause of death for college athletes, behind motor vehicle accidents and medical issues.

And nearly 25 percent of college athletes who participated in a widely touted 2016 study led by researchers at Drexel University displayed signs of depressive symptoms.

Since that percentage is roughly in line with the general college population, the findings countered a long-held belief that athletes are less likely than their peers to become depressed — largely because they benefit from regular, emotion-lifting exercise.

As the stigma of mental illness has eased, the reporting of cases has increased. But experts also believe that young athletes now face more stress, which contributes to mental illness, than ever before.

“Performance and parental pressure, social media, more games on TV, more players who think they can go to the pros,” said Timothy Neal, the director of athletic training education at Concordia University in Ann Arbor, Mich., and a nationally recognized expert on mental health and college sports.

The N.C.A.A. is playing catch-up.

“We are still so young in addressing this,” said Brian Hainline, a neurologist who in 2013 became the N.C.A.A.’s first chief medical officer. He cited increasing concern not only about depression, but also about bipolar, eating, anxiety and attention deficit disorders, as well as addiction.

“Mental health is our single most important priority.”

What happened to Isaiah Renfro seemed to be a result of this combustible mix, where brain chemistry meets the burdens of reaching success and then maintaining it.

He was hardly alone in his struggle.

A descent from the pinnacle of college football

Isaiah was fast and strong. Bush Hamdan, Washington’s offensive coordinator, said he marveled at the sight of the young wide receiver sprinting across the field as a freshman. “Size, speed, physicality, he checked off all the boxes.”



At Washington in 2015, Isaiah Renfro tried to haul in a pass in a game against Washington State.
Sean Brown/Cal Sport Media, via Associated Press

If everything had gone according to plan, Isaiah would have been a senior for the Huskies this season. Hamdan could imagine him in a leading role on the current team, which is ranked among the best in college football. “Even when I look at our roster now,” he said, “there is a big hole there, a great big hole. Because Isaiah was that talented.”

He had been one of Coach Chris Petersen’s first recruits, and the Huskies awarded him a full athletic scholarship. But from his initial moment on campus, in the summer of 2015, he did not feel right.

Part of the reason was the grueling slog of practice: the long hours, the intense workouts and the interminable team meetings — day after day, week after week. He had little time to gain a sense of his surroundings. From his dorm to Husky Stadium, he walked a slightly uphill path. He was so sore it felt as if he were climbing a mountain.

“Culture shock,” he told friends back in Los Angeles.

He knew he would be playing elite college football. “But all of a sudden,” he said, he was “part of this big machine.”

It made him feel like a cog.

He nonetheless cast aside his growing anguish and melancholy and showed striking prowess for an 18-year-old. Instead of holding him out for a season, a common approach for freshmen so they can learn the rigors of major-college football, the coaches played him right away.

He had a breakout performance in a victory against Arizona. On his second catch, he broke three tackles and picked up 10 extra yards.

“Isaiah Renfro in the red zone! Impressive!” Petersen told reporters.

Winter approached. Isaiah joked and smiled to hide his darkening mood. He feared his coaches and teammates would think he was weak. He had always been a good student, and among the smartest players on any of his teams. But now he did not let on that while studying he often found himself sitting frozen in front of his laptop, his head spinning with so many thoughts he could not hold on to any of them. Or that on the field there were times when he would run to the line of scrimmage, unable to recall what his quarterback had just told him to do.



As a freshman at the University of Washington in 2015. From his initial moments on campus, he didn't feel right. Jesse Beals/Associated Press

He confided to his mother that he felt awful. Her response, thinking he was merely homesick, was: Buck up.

He could not.

While in Tempe, for a game against Arizona State, a sense of deep fear, anguish and guilt seized him. He locked himself in his hotel bathroom. He punched a mirror with all his strength, to see how much he could feel.

He would remember feeling nothing.

The next afternoon, he caught three passes for 30 yards.

A week later, the Huskies took a five-hour bus ride to Corvallis, Ore., to play Oregon State. He and his girlfriend had argued, and he felt as if his blood were ablaze. On the bus, he felt dizzy. He closed his eyes and blacked out, he said. Nobody noticed. He woke up just as the Huskies reached their hotel.

Over the phone to his mother, his voice sounded flat and distant. It had been that way for too long, and she realized Isaiah's problem had to be more than homesickness. Worried, she reached out to a sports psychologist in Washington's athletic department.

Isaiah began meeting with her. He told her about his deepest emotions. Together, they focused on why he was playing football. Was he doing it for himself? Or because excelling on the gridiron was something others expected and wanted of him?

Once, he went into a private room near her office and cried.

The therapy helped. He told his mother that the sessions were keeping his life from crumbling. What he didn't tell her was that he had begun to have suicidal thoughts.

Hamdan recalled December of that season, the weeks before a bowl game against Southern Mississippi, when he first began to realize how badly Isaiah was struggling.

"You'd look at him," Hamdan said, "and he just seemed vacant."

Still, neither Hamdan nor any of the other coaches knew the depths of Isaiah's despair.

One morning, walking in the wet, gloomy darkness, Isaiah saw a city bus across from Husky Stadium.

What if he threw himself in front of it? he recalled thinking.

Would he die?

He hoped so.

A tumultuous childhood yields to stardom

Named for the Old Testament prophet of salvation, Isaiah was born and raised in Los Angeles. His parents, Chieko Woods and Barry Renfro, split up when he was 18 months old. For the rest of his childhood, he bounced between them, living in neighborhoods that ranged from the middle-class suburbs of north L.A. to the city's more impoverished south.

Football steadied him.

His father remembered teaching 2-year-old Isaiah hand-eye coordination by tossing miniature footballs to him and backing up a step every time he caught one with confidence. By junior high, he was the fastest, the toughest and the most coordinated player in his youth football league.

Yet he was also sensitive and anxious.



In a childhood photo. Chieko Woods



Isaiah was one of the toughest and most skillful players in his youth football league.
Chieko Woods

He suffered terrible night terrors into his years as a toddler. In junior high, he bit his fingernails to the nub. By the start of high school, he battled a constant upset stomach, which worsened whenever he felt the pressure of a looming game.

"If he wasn't playing well, or if he played well and the team lost," Chieko Woods recalled, "he took everything just so hard."

That included his relationship with his hard-charging father.

"My dad was a football coach first with me," Isaiah would say when he tried to understand his anguish. "Anything he didn't accomplish, he wanted me to accomplish. He played football and didn't make it to the N.F.L., so my football was basically his life."

At first, his father said, he did not want Isaiah to play tackle football at all. But after Isaiah announced he wanted to make it to Division I football in college and then move to the pros, he supported his son with extra coaching and prodding, running his boy through drills and spending what little extra money he had on tutors to hone Isaiah's skills.

"You've got to get some kind of pressure, some kind of push, if you want to play D-I football or pro football," said Barry Renfro, who played at Miami of Ohio in the 1990s. "I had visions of me playing in the N.F.L. I didn't make it to the Promised Land, but I know how to get there and I know what it takes. He got pushed to a degree, but it was hardly nothing tyrannical or nothing crazy."

By the time he was a high school senior, Isaiah had come to pride himself on being strong: The kid without a weakness, the savior of others. Zay, as he became known, was smart and witty. He was 6-foot-2 and had a wide, expressive face. He loved art and fashion. His friends were diverse: white and black, Asian and Latino, rich and poor.

"The guy just had it all," Brock Bell, one of his football teammates, said. "On the outside, always so happy. Carefree. It looked like he was so comfortable in his own skin."

Yet there were cracks.

Few knew that his charisma could fade when he was alone. Sometimes he fled to his room, silent and sad to the marrow.

At the time, he was living with his father. They argued bitterly, prompting Isaiah to move in with classmates. His sadness became more intense. He vowed never to speak to his father again.

He vowed, too, that one day he would play in the N.F.L. and have the means to move his mother and half sister out of the blighted neighborhood they lived in as they struggled financially.

His drive resulted in injuries. He ripped a meniscus and wrenched his back. During the first half of one game, he rammed his head so hard into a tackler's knee that he had trouble remembering the rest of the night.

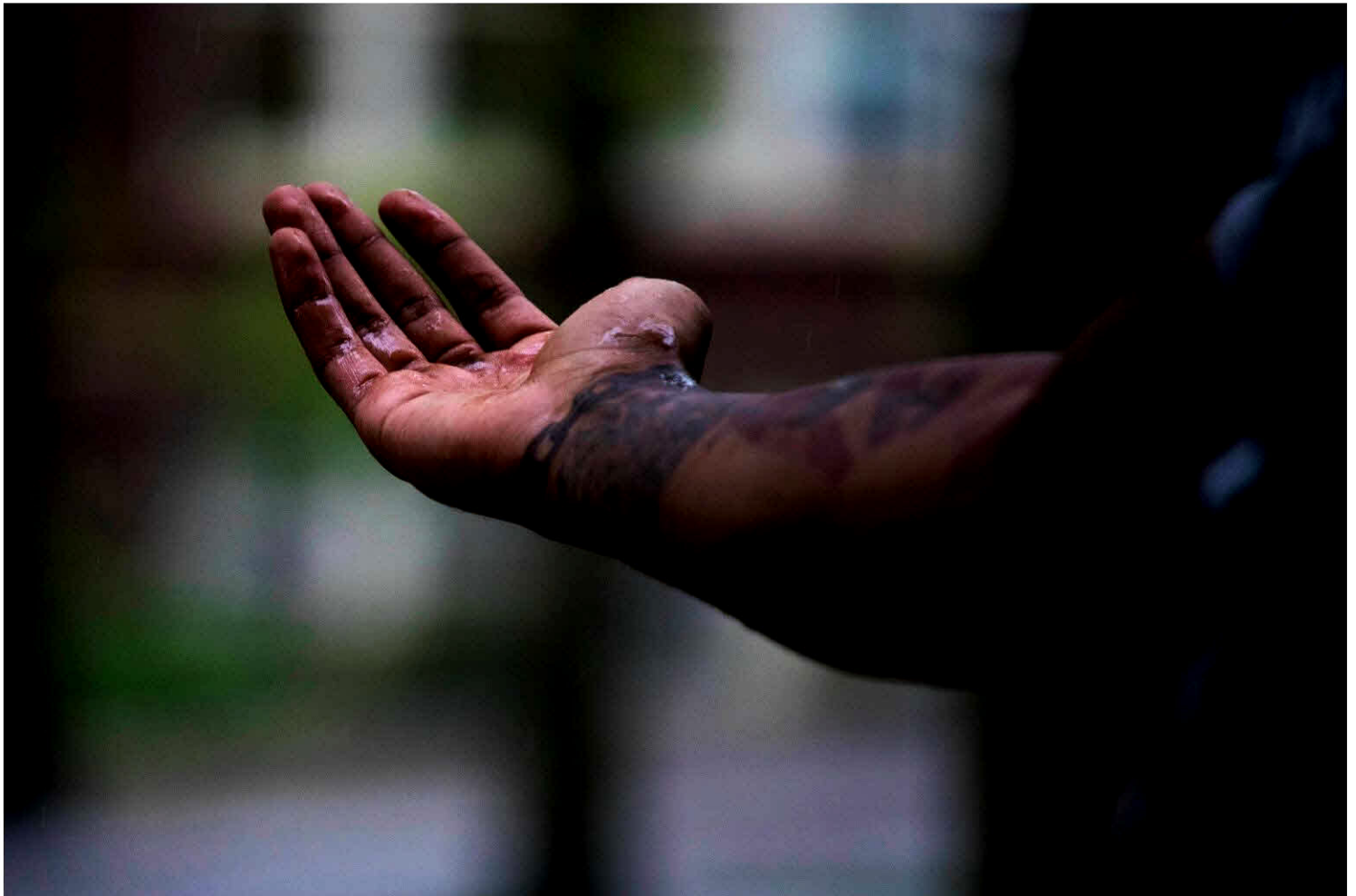
A friend urged him to sit out for a while. But he refused. "Who else is going to play my part?" he said. "Who else is going to carry the team? Who else?"

Mark Serve, the offensive coordinator for Sierra Canyon School, where Isaiah played high school ball, recalled an outburst the normally unruffled wide receiver had after an opposing team taunted him with racial insults in a game.

At halftime, he fell apart, blaming himself for letting his teammates down and raging at the opposing players.

“Did you hear what they’re saying?” Isaiah shouted, tears flowing, when Serve confronted him. “Did you hear? Why are they calling me that? Why? I’m not going to take it anymore!”

Serve, who is black and Latino, understood Isaiah’s anger. But because of Isaiah’s usual composure, the response seemed outsized, frenetic, unhinged. “Looking back on it now,” Serve said, “I wonder about that moment. Was that a sign? What, exactly, did we miss?”



Isaiah Woods, formerly Renfro, put out a hand to feel a sudden downpour as he waited to welcome guests to a university sports function in April. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

From a hospital bed, reminders of the past

Isaiah first tried to kill himself shortly after Christmas in 2015. He swallowed leftover pills that University of Washington Medical Center records show were Xanax, an anti-anxiety medication. They were not strong enough to do the job. He felt dizzy and sick to his stomach, but somehow, a few hours later, he trudged somberly off to practice. That day, he crossed a threshold that psychologists say is dangerous: Going from thinking about suicide to actually attempting it increased the chances that another, more lethal attempt would follow.

Isaiah soldiered through the Seattle winter.

In March, during a break, he went home to his mother's house in Los Angeles. It was there that he drank the vodka, there that he swallowed the Dilaudid, there that he lay on his bed and told himself it was finally time to leave this world.

"It is time. It is time."

But hours later, he woke up.

He wrote on his cellphone: "You're alive.

"I'm not supposed to be here."

He told no one what he had done. He still felt a duty to his team. He returned to Seattle, determined to endure. But there were signs he would not make it.

Rob Scheidegger, head trainer for the Huskies, noticed. "This wasn't the happy-go-lucky-seeming kid who I had met earlier in the year."

He decided to visit Isaiah in his dorm room. There was nothing on the walls. No photos. No posters. The curtains were closed. The room reminded Scheidegger of a cave.

Isaiah stood near the door. He moved and spoke slowly. Scheidegger told him to reach out to the athletic department psychologist.

He did.

But by dawn, another storm seized him.

"I need to go to the hospital," he remembered telling the psychologist over the phone. "I need to go now."

PATIENT HEALTH QUESTIONNAIRE (PHQ-9)

Patient: ISAIAH RENTRO Date: _____During the last 24 hours, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?

	Not at all	Several hours	More than half the hours	Nearly every hour
1. Little interest or pleasure in doing things	0	1	2	3
2. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless	0	1	2	3
3. Trouble falling/staying asleep, sleeping too much	0	1	2	3
4. Feeling tired or having little energy	0	1	2	3
5. Poor appetite or overeating	0	1	2	3
6. Feeling bad about yourself -- or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down	0	1	2	3
7. Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television	0	1	2	3
8. Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed. Or the opposite -- being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual	0	1	2	3
9. Thoughts that you would be better off dead, or of hurting yourself in some way	0	1	2	3

Please rate the strength of your beliefs below (0 = not at all and 10 = completely)

I wish to die

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

I wish to live

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

At the hospital, a doctor wrote on his intake form: "Suicidal ideation, worsened recently by life stressors." Isaiah had "a plan, along with means to carry out this plan (prescription anxiety and depression medications)."

He was assigned a room in the psychiatric unit. "In there by myself, cut off from the world, I felt like a crazy person," Isaiah recalled. "I mean, I had to face it: I was really in a psych ward."

His days were filled with rest, contemplation and therapy. Doctors told him that the mental illness he struggled against was not his fault, that depression and anxiety had deep biological roots, which probably were affecting his brain chemistry.

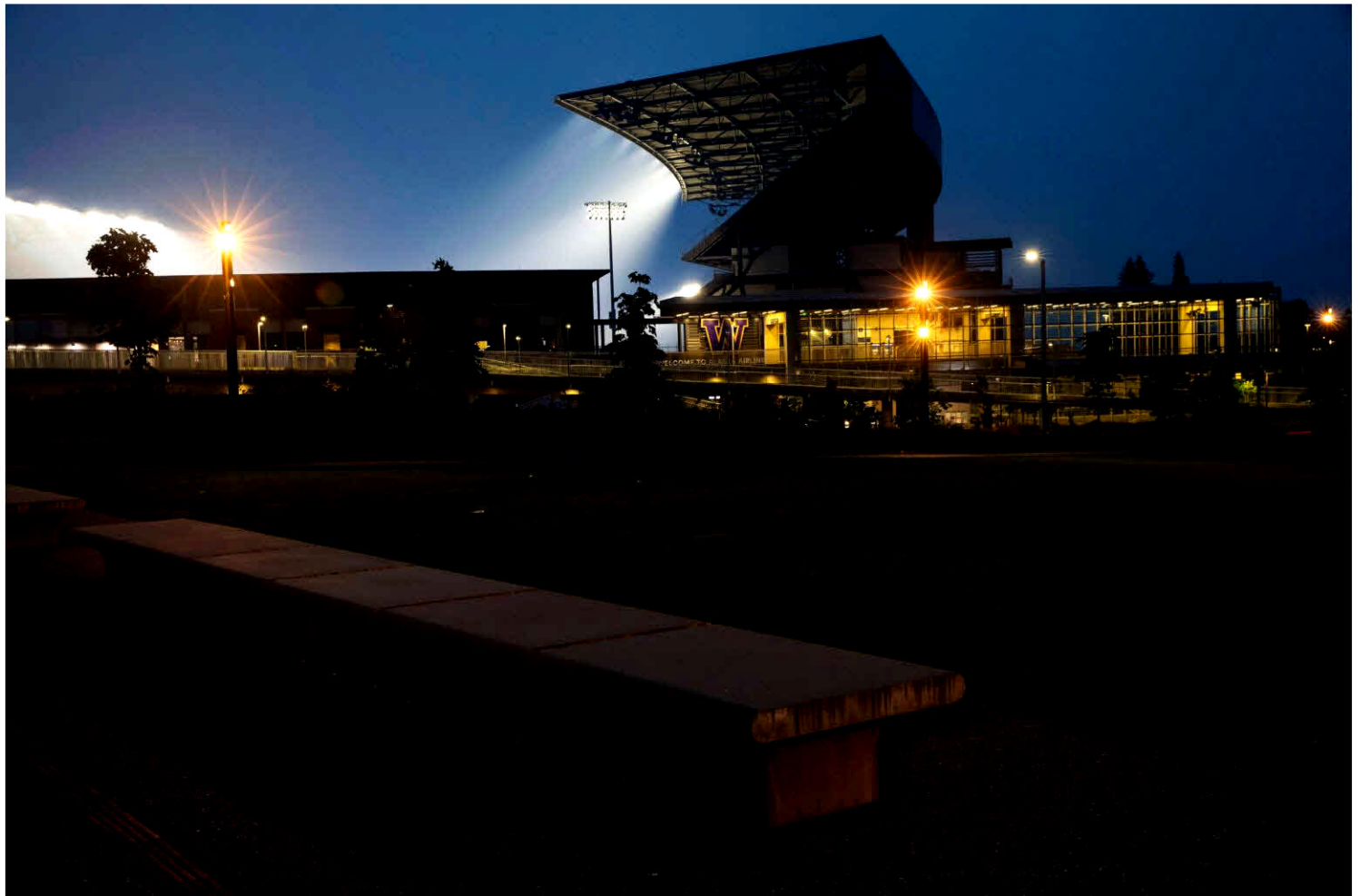
Isaiah barely communicated with his parents. His emotions toward both, he said, were too raw. He also did not want his teammates to know where he was. He had long been able to keep his troubles from his coaches.

But by now Coach Petersen knew. Through a spokesman, Petersen declined to be interviewed for this article, but several people said he had begun meeting regularly with his staff to discuss Isaiah and to make sure he was getting the help he needed.

As much as he respected Petersen, Isaiah did not want to talk to him. Doing so would have reminded him of football — which he was trying to get away from.

“Inside the hospital, I could think,” Isaiah said. “I just finally had the space to do what I needed to do to heal.”

Sometimes he ambled along a tree-lined path on the hospital grounds. Husky Stadium loomed across the street.



The view from the University of Washington Medical Center included Husky Stadium, which was situated nearby. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Spring practice was in full swing. He could hear the air horns that signaled drills. With each blast, he flinched.

What he thought of most was quitting college and football, for good.

Isaiah was back in Los Angeles with friends when he tweeted his decision. The tweet was from his heart and to the point.

out of bed in the morning. This entire year I pushed through and gave it my all, till I had none left. I hate failure so I felt like I'd be cheating myself by quitting. But I started to see myself changing... I wasn't the same, I lost love for the game I've been playing ever since I could walk, and it seemed more like a job to me than fun. Waking up in the morning got harder and harder, till it got to the point where I didn't want to wake up at all. I missed spring practice because I was checked in the hospital. I was in a special program for people like me, that taught me how to cope with my problems and what to do when I hit my lowest of lows. I didn't know how bad I got until it was almost too late. But coming out of the hospital, I have a better outlook on life, I'm more and more happy each

But coming out of the hospital, I have a better outlook on life, I'm more and more happy each day I wake up, because I'm able to wake up. I feel that for me to continue my process of getting healthy again I need to step away from the game of football. I will no longer be playing football and will no longer be attending UW. I want to thank Coach Pete, Coach Bush and all the rest of the coaches and staff, for the opportunity and for the continued support. I also want to thank my teammates for allowing me to be a part of the brotherhood that is the football team. And for all the dawg fans out there for making me feel like I was worth something every time I put on that jersey and stepped on the field. This isn't the end of me, just the end of a certain chapter. I will conquer



Zay Woods
@WaveGodZay

Been debating on posting this but this is me taking steps in the right direction to becoming myself again..

1,768 3:05 PM - May 29, 2016

[767 people are talking about this](#)

A return home with eyes on a fresh start

We met at Du-Par's, a venerable diner at the Original Farmers Market in Los Angeles. It was late February, just over two years since Isaiah Renfro had last stepped onto a football field.

His smile was open and hopeful. He told me that he wanted to tell his story to ease the stigma of mental illness, especially for young black athletes like himself. Helping others soothed him. He still needed that. He recalled the jolt he had felt upon hearing the news that Washington State quarterback Tyler Hilinski had committed suicide just a few weeks previously. Isaiah had known Hilinski, who was also from Southern California. They had played in some of the same summer football leagues.

Even though he was taking an antidepressant, he told me that coming home to Los Angeles had not unfolded the way he had hoped.

A few weeks after returning, a judge granted Isaiah's petition to change his surname to Woods, his mother's maiden name, from Renfro.

Meant to signal a fresh start, the change provided a boost, however short-lived. "I had no confidence in myself," Isaiah said. "I was just shattered. No self-belief to start moving forward."

He endured weeks and months of rudderless inactivity and doubts.

He lived with his mother, but that, too, became a source of stress at times. It was hard not to feel he had let her down.

There were long walks in the Los Angeles foothills and a job in an ice cream shop near Venice Beach, which forced him to be around people.



Isaiah with his mother, Chieko Woods, at a football practice at Portland State. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

A big part of surviving was Madison Bickel, whom he met when she came to Los Angeles on a visit from college in Portland, Ore. Bright, ambitious and empathetic, she centered him.

He told me they had begun talking about his future. Aside from catching a few televised minutes of the 2016 national championship semifinal between Washington and the University of Alabama, he had not paid attention to any sports since leaving Seattle. But football, he had come to realize, was still deeply a part of him. He missed the camaraderie. Missed the competition. Missed lining up against a defensive back, matching wits and physical skill.

What if he went back to the game?

He decided it would not be wise to return to the bright lights and the grind of a big-time school like Washington.

Maybe Portland State, a team that played home games in front of a few thousand fans and had just gone winless for an entire season. Portland State, which occasionally played the best-known schools but was in a conference stocked with unheralded teams like the Southern Utah Thunderbirds. He loved the idea. He could join Madison. Maybe he could get back into the game he still loved, but with less stress.

Before long, he was back at Sierra Canyon, practicing under Coach Serve's watchful eye. At first, he felt tentative, but he also felt something good: He finally realized he needed to prove that he could handle stress and succeed.

For himself. For no one else.

A second, uneasy chance

He sat on a leather chair in the small office of Bruce Barnum, the head coach at Portland State. He looked Barnum in the eye and unspooled his story.



Portland State Coach Bruce Barnum welcomed his players' increase in concern about mental illness. "It used to be that kids never came to me about this stuff," he said. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

“He didn’t hold back,” Barnum said. “He told me about all the dark closets, all the difficulty he had experienced. His willingness to confront this stood out in a way that I’ll never forget.”

Barnum had a keen sensitivity to the emotions of his players after two of them died in 2016: one from an overdose and another from a complication after a tonsillectomy. That same year, a player’s child was killed in a car accident.

The losses had cast a cloud over the team. But even apart from those terrible deaths, Barnum said he had seen an increase in concern about mental illness among his players.

“It used to be that kids never came to me about this stuff,” he said. “It did exist, but nobody wanted to talk about it. Now they are coming to me all the time with things that are serious — a handful in just the last few months.”

To Barnum, Isaiah was not just a significant talent; he was also someone who could be a beacon, proof to his team that mental illness could be tamed.

“I will be paying attention if you come here,” Barnum told Isaiah. “But I can’t know everything. Come to me if you need help. I know where to get it.”

Isaiah accepted a full scholarship. He started college in time for three weeks of spring practice in March.

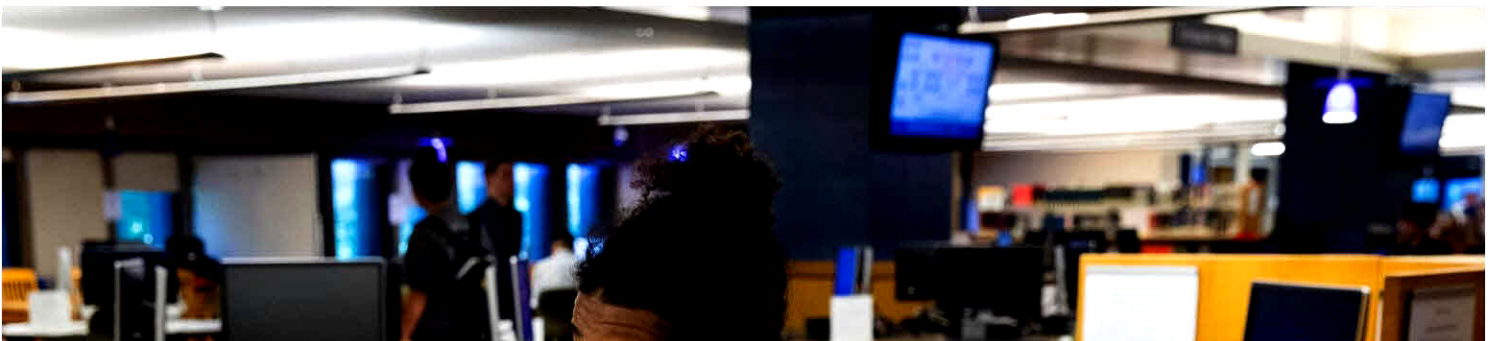
I watched a lot of those practices. After two years off and all that he had gone through, he was not what he was at Washington, but there were flickers of it when he would acrobatically snatch the ball amid a thicket of defenders.



Isaiah Woods on Portland State's campus in August. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times



Picking up his Portland State uniform. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times



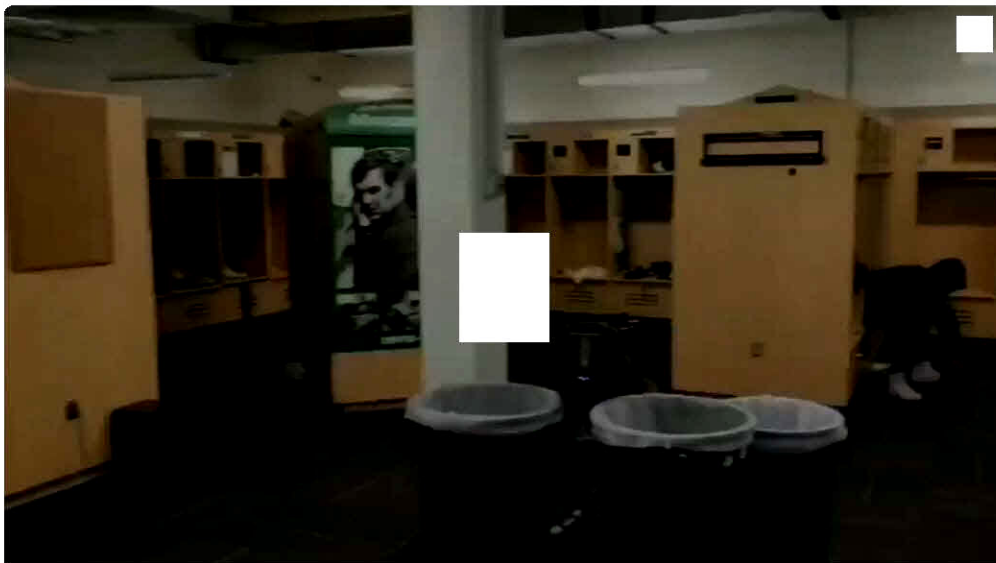


At the university library, during a rough stretch over the summer. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Isaiah told me there were still times when he could feel stress gathering. But so far there had been no full-blown storms.

“Progress,” he said. “Yep, progress.”

He emerged as a leader. His fun-loving side was starting to show. He led his teammates in a music video. There he was, shirtless, dancing in the Portland State locker room, holding a boom box that blared the rap hit “I Bet You Won’t” as other players leapt around him.



Zay Woods
@WaveGodZay

Me: "Mom can I sleepover my friend's house?"

Mom: "Hurry up and go before I change my mind!"

Me:

2,685 1:07 PM - Jun 8, 2018 · Portland, OR

[784 people are talking about this](#)

Word spread about what he had been through and his willingness to discuss it. It was not long before teammates came to him for advice on dealing with their own emotional and mental troubles, as Barnum had hoped.

"Isaiah is so easy to talk to about stuff I normally wouldn't tell anybody," said one player, who confided to me his own struggles with depression. "It's easy because he will just listen and then come up with some wisdom."

Yet one day over the summer, the tempest holding just off shore rumbled in.

It came after his girlfriend's car broke down during a trip they took to Crater Lake. They were stranded for a while and got a hotel room, where panic suddenly tore through him.

"Oh, my God, I thought I was doing better than this," he said, moaning. Madison tried holding him as he trembled. "I thought I was past this part," he told her. "I will never be able to beat it. I'll never beat it. It's just too much."

Finally, he slept. When he awoke, his mind was blank, as if it were trying to push away the pain.

A few days later, I asked Isaiah and Madison what had caused the panic attack. Isaiah said he could not be sure. Just as he could not be sure what had caused his underlying depression and anxiety in the first place.

Madison Bickel kept a close eye on Woods as he went through a rough patch over the summer. He had suffered a panic attack, and was also weak and fatigued from a virus that had kept him from working out for nearly a month. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Madison chimed in, pointing out recent studies linking depression to concussions and the blows to the head common in football. It was something she worried about. But Isaiah said he did not. He said the studies were too new, too inconclusive. Besides, he figured, wide receivers get hit in the head far less than linemen or linebackers.

What about Hilinski, the Washington State quarterback who had killed himself, the young player Isaiah had known? The autopsy showed signs of early-stage chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or C.T.E., the condition that many researchers have linked to a host of health issues, including deep depression.

Isaiah said he did not know about Hilinski's brain-study results. And he was resolute. "It is not going to stop me," he said.

In August, weak and thin from a virus that had kept him from working out for nearly a month, he worked his way in once more with the team.

A few practices in, he strained a ligament in his knee and was forced to the sideline for days more.

He grew gloomy, convinced he was letting down his teammates, letting down the coaches who had given him a second chance. Saddled with growing despair, he began having trouble getting out of bed for morning treatments on his knee.

Barnum noticed. He met with Isaiah in his office again. “There is no pressure here,” Barnum recalled saying. “Even if you never play a snap for us, just having you here and seeing you graduate, seeing you keep learning about yourself, that’ll be enough.”

He made sure Isaiah connected with counselors. It was an important step. Since leaving Seattle, Isaiah had refused to visit a psychologist. He had insisted he was strong enough to forge past tough times with willpower and a daily antidepressant. Now he began seeing a therapist again.

“I’ll have to manage it for the rest of my life,” he said of his mental illness. “You see, it doesn’t just go away like most people think.” He paused and gathered his thoughts.

Woods took a moment to deal with a spell of nausea at a Portland State practice in early August. Later in August, he rehabilitated a knee injury that kept him from playing in the first two games of the 2018 season.
Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

For his return to the game, Woods, center, chose a program, Portland State's, where he could satisfy his thirst for competition but face less pressure. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

A hug from Madison Bickel after Isaiah played for the first time this season. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

“That doesn’t mean I can’t live my life. It doesn’t mean I can’t go for my goals.”

The season was about to begin. There was one big goal ahead. He had to achieve it to prove to himself that he was on the right path.

He had to take the field for a game.

A test on the field

Isaiah slammed his helmet to the ground. He crouched for a while behind a low barrier, as if he did not want to be seen.

Nothing was going right for him. Portland State was playing its third game of the 2018 season, but its first at home, at Hillsboro Stadium, in front of a few thousand fans. By the middle of the third quarter, he had been on the field for a handful of snaps. Not a single pass had been thrown his way. He put a towel over his head and sat glumly on the bench. Sensing despair, a stream of teammates sidled beside him, reminding him to stay positive.

But staying positive had not been easy. Just before the season opener, the team's trainers ruled that his knee had not healed. So he stayed home when the Vikings bused to Reno to play Nevada.

The next week, his team had gone to Eugene to play Oregon. Isaiah suited up, but because he had missed so much practice, he sat on the bench for the entire 62-14 loss. On the bus ride home, he barely spoke.

Now it was Sept. 15, and his Vikings were playing the College of Idaho. Madison was there with her parents. His mother had flown to the game from Los Angeles. He imagined starring in front of them, scoring at least once.

"I just want to show I can play," he told me, days before, his voice both full of hope and doleful.

But by the third quarter, the Vikings were dominating — only he still wasn't much a part of the mix.

Then Barnum shouted across the sideline, "We're going to get Isaiah the ball!"

The Vikings roared.

Isaiah leapt from the bench.

Isaiah Woods played for the first time this season after coming back from bouts with depression. Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

He fastened his helmet and sprinted on the field.

At the snap, he took a single step back, caught a spiral, and tore toward the goal line, stiff-arming a defender as his teammates on the sideline erupted in joy. Fourteen yards later, he was pushed out of bounds.

It wasn't a touchdown. There would be no touchdown for him on this day. He wasn't happy with that.

But this much Isaiah knew:

He was back.



Isaiah Woods ended up playing in most of Portland State's games this season. He did not emerge as a starter and had only a handful of catches. His best performance came on Friday, in the final game of 2018 for his four-win team. He had three receptions for 24 yards in a 74-23 loss to Eastern Washington. Throughout much of the season, his performance and playing time wore heavily on him. But therapy sessions with a campus counselor helped him gain an increasingly mature perspective, as did regular chats and his growing bond with Bruce Barnum, his coach, who plans for Isaiah to have a major role on the team next year. "Maybe not playing as much as I wanted when I came back to the game was a good thing," Isaiah told me this week. "I am not a patient person, and this season taught me patience. It taught me that I need to remind myself to slow down, enjoy my surroundings, the people around me, the process I am on. And most of all, enjoy my life."