

00:00

I wake up in a hospital bed and I'm surrounded by doctors. Everything is hazy. I've been in and out of consciousness for over a week. The doctors are telling me that I have a bad infection in my leg. They say that they've operated eight times already. They say that at one point my fever spiked and my immune system started attacking my body. I went septic and almost died. And then one of the doctors says this: "As we speak, flesh-eating bacteria is crawling up your leg. It's getting closer to your vital organs every minute." Good morning to you, too, doctor.

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(Laughter)

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Let me back up. I'm a professional football player. I played quarterback. And two weeks earlier, two defenders, almost 500 pounds of muscle, crushed me at the same time. It sounds scary, but honestly, it's pretty normal in my line of work. This time, though, my leg was bending where it shouldn't. I had what they call a compound spiral fracture, which means that my leg was twisted and snapped diagonally, kind of like a corkscrew. And yes, it's as painful as it sounds.

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I knew right there on the field that my season was done. What took me a little longer to figure out was that my life was about to change forever. Two years after that gruesome injury, I actually ran back out onto that field and led my team to the playoffs.

01:36

(Applause)

01:42

But what I want to talk about today isn't some rousing comeback story where the crowd chants my name. I want to talk about the stuff that happens out of you. The stuff that athletes like me don't want to discuss because we think it makes us look weak. I want to talk about fear, anxiety and self-doubt. Because if I wanted to really fully recover from my injury, I didn't just need to learn to walk and run again. I also needed something to run towards, something to live for.

02:14

After that first hazy conversation, in order to save my leg, the doctors actually removed part of my good thigh and reattached it to my busted-up leg. Now, they didn't know if the muscle would take, so after the surgery, every hour, the doctors and nurses would come in, unwrap the wound, apply a gel and search for a heartbeat in the muscle. Every time I would make them put up this big white sheet to block my vision, because from what I could tell, it wasn't a pretty sight. My leg was essentially a giant open wound. When the doctors and nurses were back there, my wife would be back there with them trying to cheer me up. "It looks so good."

02:59

(Laughter)

03:00

"Babe, it's so cool."

03:01

(Laughter)

03:03

There was no way she was going to get me to look down there. The truth is, I couldn't bear to. Not because I couldn't stomach it, but because I couldn't accept what had happened to me. This went on for months. At the time I was wheelchair-bound, at home, my wife had to be there for me every second of the day, even helping me to go to the bathroom. I spent most of my days sitting propped up on the couch just thinking, was I ever going to walk again? Play catch with my kids again? Wrestle with them on the living room floor? All this for a stupid, meaningless game?

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To that point, my life had been so big, so full of possibility, but now it all seemed to be spiraling down, like that fracture in my leg. And I'll be honest, this wasn't the first time that my mind had been twisted up like that.

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Let me tell you how my career started. I was this nothing college recruit. But in my last two years at school, I played pretty well and somehow catapulted up to be the first pick in the NFL draft. Over the course of a couple of months, I went from a guy most people hadn't even heard of to the next great quarterback to the San Francisco 49ers. Joe Montana, Steve Young, me. I was a 20-year-old kid at the time, and I didn't handle that pressure well. I got really, really anxious.

04:35

Do I really belong here? How long until they find out I'm a fraud?

04:41

The questions paralyzed me. I was absolutely terrified to make mistakes, and I was desperate for others' validation. It followed me around 24/7. I got to where I couldn't eat before games, I constantly felt nauseous. I'd be at the dinner table with my wife or some friends, and I just ... I wasn't there. To the outside world, I was playing this game I loved. I'd achieved what millions of kids grow up dreaming about. But in my mind, I was sinking like a stone.

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It stayed that way for the better part of five years. I'd have some success, but then I'd get injured or get a new coach. And the cycle would start over again.

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And then I got two key pieces of advice. The first came in the form of a guy named Jim Harbaugh. He was my coach at the time. Now, what's best about coach Harbaugh is he simply does not care what other people think about him. He couldn't be more comfortable in his pleated khakis and tucked-in sweatshirt.

05:49

(Laughter)

05:51

Now, coach Harbaugh used to tell the team the same thing right before we would take the field on game day. He would say, "Play as hard as you can, as fast as you can, for as long as you can.

And don't worry." "Don't worry." It sounds simple, and it is, but I guess I didn't really believe it was possible until it came from somebody that I trusted.

06:16

Around the same time, I had a teammate named Blake Costanzo. Blake was a linebacker who was a little nuts. Before games, he would run around the locker room and he would get in everybody's face and he'd ask, "Are you going to live today? I'm going to live today, are you?" At first, I didn't get it. But then he started to win me over. He was a guy who approached the game in the exact opposite way that I did. He was taking the challenge head on. He was fully present, right in the moment. Right in my face, just live. These ideas were a counterweight to all my doubts. And wouldn't you know it? I started playing better. Started having fun again, and we started winning.

07:07

For the rest of my career, I would talk to a small group of teammates before games and tell them some form of the same thing. Just live. And even as I got traded twice and replaced by a couple of great young quarterbacks, I stuck with that ethic. But when my leg got infected, I completely lost that perspective. You might as well have taken that white sheet I was hiding behind and draped it over my face because I wasn't really living. And once again, I needed somebody to help me snap out of it.

07:39

That spring, I started rehabbing at a military facility called the Center for the Intrepid. Because while my injury was unheard of for a football player, it was eerily similar to that of our wounded warriors. Basically, my leg exploded like I stepped on an IED. Before I got down there, I'd watched hours and hours of videos of these double and triple amputees and a lot of guys with injuries like mine who were going on to the Paralympics or rejoining the Army Rangers or the Navy SEALs. I was in awe of them. I wanted to be like them. But one of my PTs, Johnny Owens, made sure I knew right away it wasn't going to be easy to get back on my feet. Literally.

08:24

The first day I was down there, I was doing a balance exercise on my good leg and he just shoved me right in the chest. "Come on, Alex." Then he shoved me again. "Come on, you can do better than that." Then he did something that changed my recovery completely. He handed me a football. You see, after spending years and years of my life with a football in my hands, I hadn't touched one for months since my injury. It was like reattaching a lost limb. He told me to throw from one knee. I zipped one to him. A better kind of spiral. From that point on, if you put a ball

in my hands, I felt stronger. I did my exercises better. I can't explain it, but I felt lighter. I felt alive.

09:14

After that first visit, I felt like I had permission to dream again. I thought about getting back out onto the field. If I make it back, great, if I don't, who cares, at least I was living for something. And that's the mentality that carried me through my recovery. Through numerous setbacks, both physically and mentally, I eventually got cleared by the doctors. I actually made the roster. And then, 693 days after my injury, I got the call to put on my helmet and take my first snap in a game.

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Now, I wish I could tell you that the crowd went wild, but there was basically nobody there because of COVID.

10:00

(Laughter)

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And still, running onto that field, I had so many mixed emotions. What a rush. But to be honest, I was absolutely terrified. Practice was one thing, but a real game? Was my leg going to hold up? I found out on the third snap when this huge defender launched himself onto my back, I tried to take a few steps, but I went down. It's still the most liberating feeling in my life, getting back up, knowing that I'm OK.

10:44

I'm proud that I made it back out onto the field, but I'm more proud of what got me there. Not the physical journey, but the mental one. I've learned that so much of the anxiety that holds us back in life, it's self-inflicted. We make it worse on ourselves. And it's OK if we need somebody to help us snap out of it. For me, that was my wife, a military guy, a maniac linebacker or an eccentric coach. They taught me that I had to see my fears for what they are. And that's why, looking back, I know that my recovery didn't actually start when Johnny shoved me in the chest. First, I had to pull back that white sheet. For weeks and weeks, I'd been hearing my wife tell me how great it looked. She helped me get to that point. I was ready. And when I finally did it, it looked way worse than I had expected.

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(Laughter)

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What I saw was not cool. It was grotesque. Mangled and deformed. All kinds of purple and blue and red. Fair warning, these pictures are a little graphic. But my leg went from this, the black is the dead tissue, to this. And this. And this. Before it could get rebuilt. But I saw my leg for what it was. And it was mine.

12:33

These days, I've come a long way with this guy.

12:38

(Applause)

12:51

This thing that once represented everything I feared, everything I had lost, it's probably the thing I'm most proud of in my life outside of my wife and kids. So, yeah, I guess she was right, it is pretty cool.

13:06

(Laughter)

13:09

These scars, they're not just a reminder of everything I've been through, but more so, everything that's in front of me. They stare me in my face. Challenging me to be myself. To help others out of their own spirals when I can. Now, you might not have a leg that looks like this. But I'll bet you've got some scars. And my hope for you is this. Look at them. Own them. They're the best reminder you'll ever have that there's a whole world out there. And we've got a whole lot of living left to do.

13:49

Thank you.

13:50

(Applause)