The scoreboard read 41-14 when the clock struck triple zero at the end of a little high school football game in the quaint town of King, N.C. The West Stokes Wildcats had just defeated the Phillip O. Berry Cardinals in blowout fashion.

My heart stopped when that buzzer sounded from the heavens like Gabriel’s horn. My lungs ache from the frigid mountain air that consumed them with every gasp of breath I bargained for. My cheeks were saturated with tears that flowed out of frustration and sorrow because I knew when that buzzer sounded, my cleats would never grip the meticulously manicured grass of a gridiron ever again.

I was the first player in the history of my high school to be named Brentson Buckner’s defensive player of the week, first team All-County and lead my team to its first winning record in school history, all in the same season. I had three college offers to play at the next level but no college wanted damaged goods and that is exactly what I was, damaged goods.

It was a mild spring day in 2010. I was running a pick-up game of basketball with a group of friends when I jumped to snatch an alley hoop out of the air that I could not believe was being thrown in my direction. The next time my feet touched the ground, my life was forever changed.
I dislocated my kneecap that day and every offer that I had bled, sweat, fought and cried for was taken from me, but no pain was greater than the anguish I felt that cold night in King, N.C. I never played football for the accolades I compiled during my time as a high school athlete.

I simply played football in hopes that one day my father would open a Saturday morning paper and see my face or read my name and be proud that I was his son. My father stayed 10 minutes away from my mother and I, on the west side of Charlotte, N.C., and I can count on one hand the number of times I spoke to or saw him throughout my years in high school.

Despite this, every time I buckled my chinstrap, ran a sprint or made a tackle, my father was on my mind. Every Friday night before games I would tell myself that I had to play well because this game might be the game he decides to come watch me play, only to look up into the stands game after game and never see him there.

My resentment towards my father fueled the disposition I played the game with, but soon my hatred towards him started to manifest itself in ways that were detrimental to my maturation into manhood.

“Don't get me wrong, you were always a good kid,” Valarie Elliott-Medley, my mother, said. “But you were always so angry and bullheaded to the point where nobody could ever tell you anything.”

In King, N.C., that fall night, I knew not only would I never play football again, but I also knew that I would no longer have football as a coping mechanism for my disdain towards my father. I knew that I would never have another chance for him to see my face in the Saturday morning paper and say, “That's my boy.”
I knew that now I had to come face to face with the reality that I was going off into the real world as a fatherless child. Although I never had a father, my relationship with football taught me many life lessons that every father should teach his son.

The amount of perseverance that a man has in the face of adversity determines the legacy he will leave behind. Also, shortcuts will always prohibit you from reaching your ultimate potential. So I thank football for being the dad I never had.