



How Football Saved My Life

By Vincent Gandino

I was shot three times in the chest at 18 years old. I was told my dream to play football was over, but it was football that made my dreams come true. I'd like to share my story.

All I ever wanted to do was play football. After a challenging recruitment process, I was accepted to Marist College to play for the Marist Red Fox Football team. One week before leaving Queens for my first year of summer training camp, my life was turned upside down. I was driving my car with two friends when we got into what seemed like an innocuous fender bender. A young man who had taken a stolen car for a joyride, crashed into the side of my car. When I got out of my car to see what his story was, he pointed a 9-millimeter directly at me.

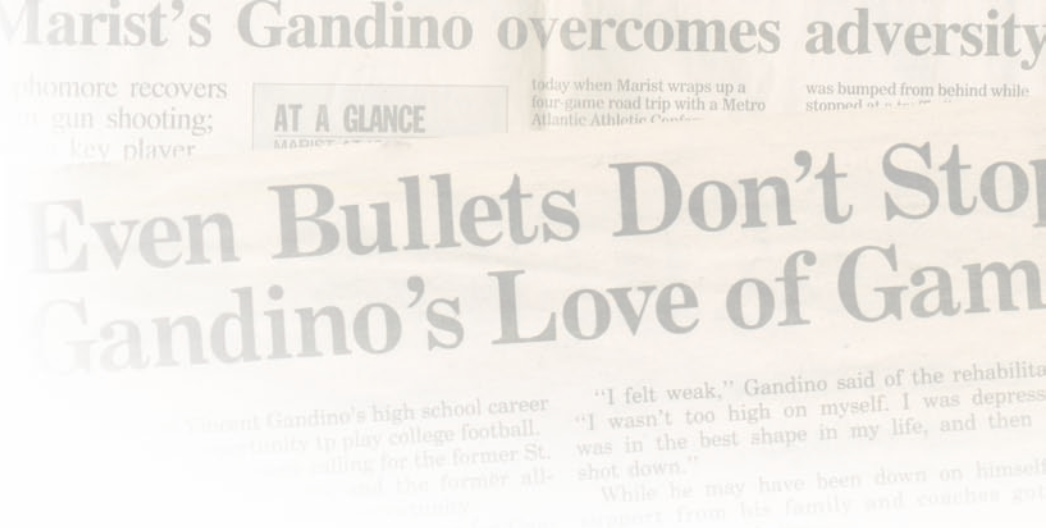
"You're not going to shoot me over this, are you?" I asked.

He answered with four shots to my chest. Three struck.

The doctors at St. Johns hospital told my parents that most people would not have survived these injuries. The physical conditioning I endured to play football literally saved my life. The doctors however, regretted to tell me that I would never play a contact sport again. I knew that was not my fate, and I wouldn't allow it to be. One year later, I started as a defensive back for the Red Fox's. Dedication, discipline, self-worth, confidence, the will not to give up, and to overcome adversity are a few of the sports-lessons that enabled me to power through my recovery.

I became an inspiration to many, but my nightmare wasn't over. Eleven years later the wounds reopened. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder had been lurking for years and finally made its unwelcome arrival into my reality. One night, my wife rushed me to St. Johns hospital again for an emergency surgery. The scar tissue from my original surgery had nearly caused my intestines to snap. Again, I found myself in a hospital bed, faced with a recovery to conquer. Without the goal of playing football this time, my recovery process was not the same, and depression reared its ugly head. As a freelance website developer, working from home, it was easy to withdraw from the outside world. I lost 25 pounds and slept about an hour a night. I started to believe I should not have survived those bullets.





I began intensive therapy and realized the lessons I learned as a kid playing sports were applicable to every area of my life. On and off the field, I knew that life was about dedication, self-worth, confidence and the will to overcome adversity. At that moment I knew I was shot for a reason, and that was to help others truly understand these lessons that saved my life twice.

I decided to dedicate my life to encouraging others to embrace the opportunity afforded by the experience of sports. I believe that young adults who play sports will carry with them core values and invaluable lessons for the rest of their lives. I decided to return to my high school to coach football as a volunteer.

My dedication to the encouragement of dreams through sports has manifested into my current endeavor, CheckMySkills.com (CMS). I recognized that, just like 14 years ago, the recruitment process for high school student-athletes is quite frustrating. I set out to change that. My life experience as a student-athlete, a high school coach, and a website developer has helped me realize how I can change the high school-to-college sports recruitment process.

CheckMySkills.com is an online recruiting and networking community developed to provide solutions for the recruitment issues faced by student-athletes, their parents, high school coaches and college recruiters. CheckMySkills breaks down the exposure barriers for student-athletes and eliminates the radius limitations for recruiters. It also offers recruiters an invaluable recruiting management tool. CMS gives high school coaches the resources to guide their athletes to compete on a collegiate level while providing parents the organization and resources to find scholarships and the best school for their children.

Playing football saved my life. The conditioning gave me the physical strength to endure being shot. The will to play pushed me to recover the "unrecoverable." And the values gave me the courage to rise above all adversity. It is my purpose to pay it forward and create a positive environment to encourage sports to students throughout the nation.

