

A collage of sports equipment including a football, a baseball, and a basketball. The football is in the upper right, the baseball is in the lower right, and the basketball is in the lower left. The background is dark and textured.

HEART OF A STUDENT ATHLETE

ALL PRO ADVICE
FOR COMPETITORS
AND THEIR FAMILIES

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My History, Early Years

When I started playing football, no one would have guessed that I would become a professional. My favorite sport as a child was hockey. I played goalie on the Lynnhurst Park teams and loved it. We had one season when our team was never scored on. I'd like to tell you that it was great goalie play that kept our string of shutouts going, but I actually faced only two or three shots a game. My biggest challenge was trying to keep warm in subzero temperatures while the game was going on at the other end of the rink. I also played park league baseball and, of course, football. Football was big fun, but the king of sports in Minnesota was hockey. We had volunteer coaches with simple schemes, but I learned something from each of them. If you were to ask my park league football coaches what they remembered the most about me, they would say, "Karl was the stiffest kid I ever saw." That's what made me stand out, not my ability, not my speed or strength, not my potential. I could touch my knees, not my toes. I was just one of the guys. No one could have looked at me and predicted that I was going to be an all-pro player. I was the pale kid in the orange oversized practice jersey, who always smelled like sunscreen.

In ninth grade, I played center for the Ramsey All Stars. I was the smallest starter on the team. Even our wide receivers were bigger. That was the only team I ever played on that won it all. We were the undefeated Twin Cities ninth-grade champions! Our MVP was a running back named Duane Anderson. To this day he was the most dominating player I have ever seen on the football field. I played with John Elway, Shannon Sharpe, and Randy Gradishar. I played against Joe Montana, Eric Dickerson, Walter Payton, Franco Harris, Barry Sanders, and many other all-time great players. Duane was a man, while we were boys. He was six feet tall and was a chiseled two hundred pounds. He ran a 4.6 forty-yard dash and had great vision and drive.

I remember going down south, out of the city, to play a nonconference game against Roseville. Their field had grass like a golf course. We got off the bus and just started rolling around on it.

It was unbelievable. Our sorry dirt and weed patch couldn't be called a field after we saw Roseville's field. Duane must have liked grass, because he covered a whole lot of it that day. He scored over one hundred points himself. Every time he touched the ball, he scored. That was his last season of football. His older brother was playing college football in North Dakota, and the Anderson family wanted Duane to work at the family gas station. I often wonder if he could have dominated in the same way at other levels, or if he was so dominant because he was shaving while we were watching *Captain Kangaroo*. We will never know, and neither will he, and that's a shame.

Parents, if your children have a gift or even just a passion, let them play. Remember, I was just one of the guys on that team. If there is any way humanly possible, let them play. Teach them to follow their dreams. Adulthood and responsibilities are coming fast enough. I know it's sometimes inconvenient, and many sports are expensive, but the challenges of team sports will teach your children life lessons that are vital to their future. Lessons like teamwork, accountability, toughness, perseverance, and leadership that are so highly valued in the adult world become a part of your children's thinking when they participate in team sports.

High School

As a sophomore, I played tenth-grade football for Washburn High School in Minneapolis. My family moved that winter to Edina, Minnesota. Edina is a suburb of Minneapolis, but a world away from my old stomping grounds. It's a very wealthy, very white suburb. Academically Edina has one of the top public school systems in the country. Athletically they have been a perennial power in hockey. As a junior at Edina West, I played JV baseball, JV football, and got cut from the basketball team. I felt like I was talented enough to play varsity football, but I was a new kid with no reputation in Edina. I also had gotten in varsity head coach Stav Canakes's doghouse by missing a midseason rescheduled JV game.

My dad had planned a hunting trip to North Dakota. We were both looking forward to

some father and son bonding time. Dad's time off from work and the motel reservations were all set. Football games don't usually get rained out, but this was a JV game and it was going to be played on the opposition's varsity field. They didn't want a mere JV game messing up their varsity field for the rest of the season, so they rescheduled it to the hunting trip weekend. I was honest and told Coach Stav that I wouldn't be able to make the game because I'd be in North Dakota duck and goose hunting with my dad, and he went off. He read me the riot act, jumped on me about my lack of commitment, and assigned me the unbelievable task of one hundred hills the next week after practice or I would be off the team. A "hill" referred to the sixty yard long, fifty degree bluff that drops off from the school down to the practice fields and a wetland area below Edina High School. Basically, he was trying to get me to quit. To be fair to Coach Canakes, he didn't really know me or my love for the game. The junior varsity coach was new and hadn't filled him in on my domination at that level. I hadn't come up through the Edina sports community and been recommended by other earlier coaches. Coach Canakes also loved to hunt. He even owned two beautifully trained German Shorthaired Pointer hunting dogs and must have been jealous of my plans. He had given up countless hunting weekends to work with the team, so he expected us to do the same.

I wasn't going to quit football. I was a good player who just needed an opportunity to show what I was capable of. I didn't think it was possible, but I ran twenty hills after each practice that week. It hurt. My legs cramped and my lungs burned, but I got through it. This was the first time the possibility of not playing football had come up. Instead of making me quit, Coach Stav's hills made me realize how important football had become for me.

This was my introduction to the theory that success is overcoming obstacles on the way to your dreams. Before then, I had only wished to play college football. Completing those hills made me think that I could go beyond the ordinary, that I was capable of things that were against the odds, that I would play college football. I was going to play football until someone made me

go home.

This resilience or stubbornness continues to serve me well as the years go by. One of my six keys to success is dedication, which I define as hard work, constant learning, and refusing to quit. I learned this trait from my parents, who learned it from their parents. Both of my grandfathers worked in the stockyards of South Saint Paul, Minnesota, for Swift and Company. My paternal grandfather, Fred Mecklenburg, was a carpenter, while my maternal grandfather, Art Malo, was a truck dispatcher. They were both hard-working blue-collar men, who loved their families and were great examples of work ethic. My parents both graduated from the University of Minnesota, and through hard work and refusing to quit they have accomplished amazing things in their lives. My dad finished his undergraduate work in three years, so he could get on with medical school. He became an obstetrician gynecologist and later an infertility specialist doing microsurgery to allow formerly sterile women to have children. As he approaches his seventy-third birthday, he is still practicing medicine as the head of OBGYN at Fairfax Hospital in Virginia. My mom got her degree in home economics. As her four children grew older, and she had more time, she got involved in the antiabortion movement, eventually becoming president of Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life. She then helped to form American Citizens Concerned for Life and became that organization's first president. She was later appointed deputy secretary of Health and Human Services and served the Reagan administration for six years in that position.

Our parents' accomplishments set a great example for my siblings and me, but their commitment to and interest in our lives was even more important to us. Both of my parents are professionally successful, and yet they found the time to support each of us in our schoolwork and extracurricular activities. Their expectations for us were unstated but clear. The four of us would work hard and be successful. I remember bringing home a poor report card once, and instead of lecturing me, my dad disappointedly philosophized, "Oh well, I guess someone has to

be the garbage man.” That was his way of telling me that my future was my choice. It was my choice to be successful or not in my life. My parents’ example was right there, in front of me every day, showing me that hard work and perseverance pay off.

Parents, what you do in your life will impact your kids more than what you say. Take the time to be involved in their lives. You can’t expect your children not to drink and drive if they see you doing it. You can’t expect them not to lie when they see you tell convenient lies. They won’t be held to a higher standard than you hold yourself to. My parents have spent their lives serving others. My siblings and I were raised with the understanding that we would do something socially significant with our lives. My sister, Carol, has worked as a psychologist in American schools overseas. She and her family have worked in Scotland, Germany, Holland and now back in Minnesota. My brother, Fred, is raising his young family while managing his wife’s family business back in Edina. My brother, Eric, is a writer and an English professor at Hilo Community College in Hilo, Hawaii. Before taking that position, he was an English professor at the College of Micronesia. My involvement with numerous charities and career as a motivational speaker have allowed me to use NFL notoriety in a socially significant manner. Each sibling is a success in his or her own way, making a positive impact on the lives of others, following in our parents’ footsteps. Your kids won’t be clones of you, but your values and your work ethic will have an impact on them. Point out positive examples of work ethic in adults and other kids. He’s a hard-working guy, or she’s a hard-working gal should be top praise. Don’t forget to praise your own children’s efforts whenever possible. There is nothing more common than wasted talent. Only with great effort can potential be fully reborn as success.

The other significant thing that happened my junior year in high school was that I met Kathi Northfield. We were chemistry lab partners, and the chemistry was just right. I asked her to go to the homecoming dance with me, and we’re still an item. I think I knew it was love when we slow danced to “Color My World” on that first date. We’ve had our ups and downs, but she

has been my wife for twenty-five years now and is the love of my life.

As a senior, I got cut from baseball and hockey but made the varsity football team. I worked extremely hard lifting weights and running through the spring and summer months and found myself starting at both tight end and defensive end. I had grown to a solid six one, two hundred pounds, and still loved to smash guys. We had a great regular season that year, going undefeated and shutting out seven of the nine teams that we faced. My highlight for the year was picking up a fumble and rumbling sixty-five yards for a touchdown to win the annual Edina West versus Edina East crosstown rivalry game. The Edina West Cougars won 13–6. Every regular season game that year was in the rain or snow until we got to the playoffs. We went in to the playoffs undefeated. Our defense had been dominant in the bad weather against regular season opponents. We lost our first round playoff game to Richfield, in a blowout, on a rare beautiful November afternoon with a dry field. I guess we were mudders, or had no team speed, or just weren't ready to be champions. It's hard to tell in football. One bad day in the playoffs and you're done. My old teammates at Washburn won the state championship that year, and my teammates from Edina West won it the following year.

I had a great senior year both as a blocking tight end and a defensive end. After being named all state at both positions I was recruited by the University of Minnesota, Northwestern, and numerous small colleges. I had always wanted to play for the Minnesota Gophers, like my childhood heroes had, and it looked like it was going to happen. When I visited Northwestern, they wanted me to play tight end. I always liked defense best, so I told them that I was going to play defense in college. They lost interest, but I didn't care because I was going to "the U." When I made my recruiting visit to Minnesota, the student host assured me that the scholarship was mine if I wanted it. The defensive line coach was gung ho about having me there, so I thought I was in. I didn't even bother visiting most of the smaller schools. I was going to be a Gopher. Then on national letter of intent day, I got a call from Minnesota saying that they didn't

have a scholarship for me, but that I was welcome to walk on. Neither my parents nor I had ever gone through the recruiting process before. We didn't know how it worked or what to expect. Coach Canakes, my high school coach, was depressed by our early exit from the playoffs and wasn't convinced that I had what it took to play at his alma mater. He hadn't recommended me to Minnesota. I felt betrayed. I still loved football, but I wasn't going to play for Coach Cal Stall at Minnesota.

I quickly called a few local division two coaches who had shown interest earlier. Both North Dakota State and Augustana College in Sioux Falls were still interested. North Dakota State was a perennial division two contender for the national championship, but they didn't have a strong science department. I was planning to follow my dad's footsteps and become a doctor, so strong biology and chemistry departments were mandatory. Augustana had a very strong science department. I took their offer of a one-third scholarship, with the promise that if I played well they would bump it up to a full scholarship. The Augustana Vikings had never contended for a division two national football championship, but I was going to get a great education and still have the opportunity to play football.