Brandon O'Brien's college coach remembers 'one hell of a kid'
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By Vinnie Iyer Sporting News

Brandon O'Brien is choosing to re-enlist in the United States Marine Corps over continuing to pursue his dreams as a 30-year-old NFL draft prospect next week. The reality is the former wide receiver never really stopped being a Marine.

It was originally reported that O'Brien re-enlisted because of Monday’s Boston Marathon bombings, but O'Brien said on Wednesday that is not the case. He told BeyondSportsNetwork.com that he had decided weeks ago that professional football was not the route he should take in life and that the military remains a passion for him.

O'Brien told the website that he has not yet enlisted but plans to do so soon.

Still, O'Brien is unique in that he is trading in a possible football career to serve his country.

O'Brien played college football last fall at Montana State University-Northern, his last of three seasons there. His head coach was Mark Samson, who remembers O'Brien just as much for what he brought to the school as a person as for what he did for the program as a talented player.

"My first impression of him was that he was one hell of a kid," Samson said. "He stood tall and shook your hand. You could only think, 'We've got something special here.'"

During his 30-plus years in football, Samson hasn't coached another player with a similar background. When O'Brien arrived in the small town of Havre, Mont., in 2010 as a "breath of fresh air," he still had a great passion for football—after his four years (2005-09) in the Marines had sent him to the war in Iraq twice. It was enough to take the Florida native all the way to Big Sky country.

In the spring of 2010, Northern got a 6-1 receiver who looked the part of a dominant small-school athlete.

"The Marines had chiseled him," Samson said. "He was fast and strong with good hands, as you would expect, disciplined on the field. He still had the military mentality—everything was 'yes sir' or 'no sir.'"

While the Montana State-Northern Lights benefited from O'Brien's love of football, it didn't take long, in a town of less than 10,000 people, for O'Brien to become beloved for what he already had done as a hero away from the game. When O'Brien wasn't earning the respect of his teammates and coaches, he was inspiring the campus and community.

In October 2011, before the Lights' 41-20 win over intrastate rival Montana Tech, O'Brien received the Navy and Marine Corps Medal on Military Appreciation Day.
While serving at his base camp of North Carolina's Camp Lejeune in 2009, O'Brien had saved the lives of two fellow Marines. The soldiers had been in danger of drowning when caught in a riptide, until O'Brien acted quickly, diving into the water and swimming to their aid before he and another Marine were able to pull them out.

"I was just helping some Marines out," O'Brien told the Havre Daily News. "I would hope that if I was in that situation someone would come to my aid, so I don't think an award is necessary for just helping somebody out."

All through his time of playing the game he loved at Northern, O'Brien did so with what Samson calls a "heavy heart."

"Deep down inside, his thoughts were with the Marines and all those guys he was serving with, and who they had lost," Samson said. "It was who he represented."

Samson admits O'Brien is missed in Havre, but there was always the realization that he would go back to where he was needed more.

"He rarely was comfortable talking about it, but when he did, it was about how his only job was to go over there and help," Samson said. "He said there was some unfinished business that he wanted to be there to finish."

O'Brien had told Samson that he knew he had something to fall back on if he couldn't keep playing football. He couldn't pass up another chance at what he has deemed his life's main calling.

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