For Brandon O’Brien, honor, service, sacrifice more vital than NFL
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By Don Banks

In the whirlwind aftermath of the tragic bombings at the Boston Marathon this week, you may have heard the inspiring story of Brandon O’Brien, the longshot 30-year-old NFL hopeful and former Marine and Iraqi war veteran who felt moved enough by the terrorist act to abandon his football dreams and re-enlist in the military.

As at least one media report quickly pointed out, the echoes of Pat Tillman’s remarkable and heroic sacrifice more than a decade ago, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, were unmistakable.

Unmistakable, but wrong. As it turns out, the real story is even better. It still includes the cherished themes of honor, service, sacrifice and helping those in an hour of need. It just doesn’t happen to bear much resemblance to the fiction that we first came to believe about his life-changing decision, or its similarity to the one-of-a-kind example that Tillman -- the courageous former Arizona Cardinals safety who walked away from a multi-million dollar contract in the prime of his NFL career in order to join the Army and serve in Afghanistan, where he died in 2004 by friendly fire -- provided.

O’Brien wants to set the record straight. In an exclusive interview with SI.com, he said that his decision had nothing to do with seeking publicity or linking himself to Tillman’s legacy. He recoils at both notions.

Here are the facts: The Boston bombings were in no way the impetus for his decision to return to a life in the military. It just happened to be Monday afternoon, while watching the coverage of the tragedy, that he told his agent, Brad Berkowitz, of his final decision. Berkowitz informed the NFL Network of O’Brien’s decision, because unbeknownst to O’Brien, that outlet had been in touch and expressed interest in doing a feel-good story on his efforts this spring to get the NFL to notice him, despite being a 30-year-old receiver who played at NAIA school Montana State University-Northern the past three seasons. The news ended up making NFL.com, where a quote from Berkowitz seemed to link O’Brien’s change of heart to the terrorist attack, and an erroneous assumption was made by the website that O’Brien had already re-enlisted in the Marines, with whom he had spent four years prior to resuming his collegiate football career.

"It was never a case of the bombings happening and I run right out to the recruiter and say, 'Sign me up because of the bombings today,' " said O’Brien, who has no plans to re-enlist in the Marines and is targeting an Air Force special forces pararescuer unit if he can meet the high candidacy requirements.
"Like any other American, I was angered and saddened by what happened in Boston. But in no way, shape or form was that the reason I was considering re-joining the military.

"My mind was made up way before this happened. The timing of it when I told Brad was a coincidence. But I never thought it was going to get out, so it would never have even been a story or an issue. What hurt me the most was the veterans who commented below the NFL.com story and said they thought it was a publicity stunt. I would have preferred this never came out in the media at all. I understand how it happened, but my wish was just to fade away into obscurity to work on what I have to do to attain the hard and difficult goal of becoming a pararescuer."

Likewise, the fact that Tillman's name was evoked in comparison to his own seems to offend O'Brien. He points out that they were on opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of their football careers -- one a Pro Bowl safety, the other a little-known and over-aged NAIA standout -- and with regard to what Tillman sacrificed, both in terms of his lucrative career and ultimately his life. In receiving the Navy and Marine Corps medal for rescuing two Marines that were in danger of being swept out to sea in 2009, O'Brien is no stranger to heroism. But he does not see his decision to give up his football dreams in order to become a search and rescue specialist for the Air Force as comparable to Tillman's decision to become an Army Ranger and go to the battlefield in the middle of his NFL career.

"I would not disrespect the Tillman family or Pat's memory, or the person he was, by comparing myself or trying to put our names in the same breath, the same sentence as that man," O'Brien said. "Everything I've read about him was that he was doing what he believed was right. But I am not anything like him. He had millions of dollars he just walked away from. He went over and did his thing, and I'm grateful for his service. But I'm nothing like Pat Tillman. I have the utmost respect for him, and I'm not a hero. I am the farthest thing from a hero. Hero is thrown around so loosely nowadays.

"I'm not a hero for my prior service, or what I'm trying to do in the future. I'm just a normal guy, and with my time left on earth, I want to help people as much as possible. I see that as being with my military path more so than in football. In 10 to 15 years from now, I want to be able to look back and know my life was meaningful to me and I made a difference in people's lives. That's what matters to me."

The cynic would quickly point out that as much as O'Brien was giving up on football, the game was almost certain to give up on him any day now. Could you be a longer longshot than to be 30, with a sizable gap on your football resume due to a military stint, and coming out of the obscure Frontier Conference as an NAIA product? True, O'Brien dominated statistically as a receiver/punt returner for Montana State University-Northern, and his 6-foot-1, 220-pound measurables and 4.56-second 40 and 4.08 short shuttle times recently were more than respectable.

But after three months training at the Athletes Performance Institute in Dallas, in anticipation of hopefully getting signed as a collegiate free agent, O'Brien said he began to have a change of heart about football once he returned home to Florida early this month. His priorities, he realized, would never be football first, and all else second. In essence, O'Brien began to see professional football as something other than a game. It would have to be his career, and it no longer held the same appeal in that light, if he could even fulfill his decade-long quest to reach the NFL.

"In these last three months I've been training and talking to people who have made it or are trying to make it in the game, I saw that it is a business," O'Brien said. "A lot of the fun is taken out of it. It's a business, and you're trying to take someone else's job. And they want to keep that job, and keep the money coming in, and keep the roof over their head. It's very serious stuff."
"I knew I was a longshot going into it. I knew at best I’d be an undrafted free agent and have to make the team through special teams. And I was cool with that, just to get a chance to see what would happen and give my ability to a team, just play my ass off. Even if I had made any real money from it, people who know me know I would have donated so much of it to the Wounded Warrior project anyway."

Upon self-reflection, O'Brien started to see a career in football, as short and potentially sweet as it would be, would have been somewhat self-centered. He could reach and help people by playing the game. But he could help even more, and more directly, by re-starting his military career, in a new fashion.

"Once I got home from Dallas and things calmed down, I got away from football and realized I've got this calling in my heart," O'Brien said. "I prayed about it, and realized, even if I’m playing football for two or three years -- because, again, I’m 30 -- how many lives can I really touch during that time? Is that really doing enough with my life to help people who really need it? And the answer is no, I'm not. Playing football for a couple years is not the same as me being in the military and helping people with my own hands and my own energies.

"Especially being in the field of pararescue. They're helping people every day. They're not killing people. They're saving people. I did some big-time soul-searching, but this is the path I decided to go on. And it was a freeing feeling to let go of football. I needed to close that chapter on football, and I have such a peace about it now."

Talking with O'Brien, I was reminded again that while we like our stories cut and dried, and hopefully setting off the same emotional triggers that other feel-good stories have done for us in the past, there's usually more nuance, complication and thought that went into someone's decision or action than we first presume. O'Brien’s story got short-handed into a clone of Tillman's this week, because it fit our preconceived notions of what heroes do. It's lazy of us, and O'Brien bore the brunt to some degree, taking criticism and questioning of his motives that he didn't deserve.

He would have preferred to not speak about his change of life plan, or his choices. But it was important that someone got it right, and the facts were known.

"I never wanted this public, because we don't serve for notoriety, and we don't serve for pats on the back," he said. "Any of that stuff, that’s not me. I’m talking to you because this is the last interview I’m ever going to do. I need to set the record straight. What came out, came out. Now I have to make sure the real story is there. After this, no one is ever going to hear a word from me again. And that's how it should be."

Like a future in the NFL was, O'Brien's potential new career path is far from assured. There's a 90 percent failure rate for the candidates who are accepted into the nine-week course to become one of the less than 400 members in the Air Force's special forces pararescue unit. Unlike his football training centering on sprints, short distances and explosion, O'Brien will have to shift gears to stamina and endurance training. He needs certain minimum scores on a PAST test (Physical Ability Stamina Test) to even be considered for acceptance into the program at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio.

"It's a super hard course, but it's something I'm willing to embark on," O'Brien said. "I know it's going to be very, very hard, and I'm going to have to push myself to limits I never thought I could attain. Even more so than the past three months training for the NFL. But it's worthwhile, constantly helping people. That's what I want to dedicate my life to. Helping people not just here, like when something like what happened on Monday in Boston takes place, but around the world, too."

Sounds like a hero to me. Football may have suffered a loss of sorts in losing O'Brien once and for all this week, but gains were clearly made elsewhere.

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