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SPORTS

WELLNESS

Tracking athletes' mental health, with help from Nick Saban



Walt Norley was a star quarterback at Germantown Academy before playing at the University of Georgia. Walt Norley

Alabama is all-in with former Germantown Academy star's platform.

By Matt Breen
Staff Writer

Walt Norley was in Spanish class in 1980 at Germantown Academy when his football coach pulled him into the hallway. There was someone waiting for the star quarterback in the office, coach Jack Turner said. Norley asked him who it was but Turner told him to just wait.

"I walk in the door and there's Tony Dorsett in a mink coat," Norley said.

Such was life for a prime-time

recruit. One minute, you're learning a foreign language. Next, you're talking to the Dallas Cowboys' superstar running back about why you should follow his path and attend the University of Pittsburgh. Norley had scholarship offers from nearly every program in the country. He was on top.

Soon, it was all over. A once-promising trajectory ended with Norley throwing just one pass in his college career. Norley had back surgery as a freshman at Ohio State, transferred to the University of Georgia, tore his hamstring, and had another back surgery. The buzz that followed Norley around the halls at Germantown Academy fizzled once he went to college.

"It takes a toll," he said. "I see it

now. Now there is care and there's education. They have mental health and behavioral health teams that did not exist back then. I've talked to other athletes from my era and we wonder if we had something like that, would we have been able to overcome something like that? Especially me. My freshman year at Ohio State was demoralizing, to go in there with all the expectations and not be able to compete."

Four decades later, Norley is aiming to improve mental health care in college athletic programs and make sure current athletes' experiences are better than his. His company, OnBalance, which launched earlier this year and hits the market this summer, is a tool for

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college programs to better identify athletes dealing with mental illness or disease. Norley said the platform is "the first of its kind." And it already has support from Alabama football coach Nick Saban.

Norley, who was diagnosed as bipolar when he was 25 years old and managed the disease while building a successful business career, thought a few years ago about the effect the pandemic would have on the mental health of young people. He wanted his seventh company to help solve that and soon narrowed his focus to athletics.

Saban — who recruited Norley to Ohio State — sent a video message to Norley's family when Norley's mother died in May 2022. Norley called to thank him and Saban asked him what he was up to. Norley talked about his latest idea and asked Saban how much his program focuses on mental health.

"Come down here," Saban told him.

Saban, appearing last month on Norley's podcast, said he learned when he was coaching at Michigan State in the 1990s that you can't separate a player's physical ability from his mental approach. Saban has spent his career learning about human behavior and his program tries to identify any issues an athlete is facing.

He told Norley about a Mer-

cedes-Benz plant near Alabama's campus and how there's a clothesline that runs through the assembly line. A worker is told to pull the clothesline if a car part he or she is assembling does not fit. An engineer then knows to come fix it so the plant doesn't produce a line of cars that aren't right. Saban thought it was a great idea and asked plant officials what the biggest issue was.

"They said, 'Getting people to pull the cord,'" Saban said. "Nobody wants anyone to think that what they're responsible for is not going exactly right. So this goes right along the line of the stigma that people don't want to reveal an issue that's very treatable and can be very helpful to their future, but it's part of the human condition. Hopefully by awareness, we can help people overcome that."

Norley's product hopes to identify issues when athletes aren't pulling the cord. Saban introduced him to Dr. Ginger Gilmore, the Crimson Tide's director of behavioral medicine. She has worked at Alabama for nearly 30 years and helped create the behavioral health program for the school's athletic department. She agreed to join the advisory board of Norley's company, and the Crimson Tide are using the product during its pilot process.

"I hope it brings everyone together," Gilmore said. "In everyone, I mean different tangents of the student-athlete's world which

includes coaching to on-campus offices that are there for all students. Everyone can come together in the appropriate space to communicate and provide the student-athlete with the best care and plan that they need for that moment in their life."

Norley's platform can be used by a program's coaching staff, academic advisers, psychiatrists, clinicians, athletic trainers, and everyone else who cares for athletes. The data they input — which includes things such as days in care, attendance in class, and practices missed — helps produce a performance metric for an athlete that can indicate if an athlete's condition is considered mild, moderate, or severe. It will help identify if a student is struggling with a mental illness or challenges.

OnBalance, which is FERPA and HIPAA compliant, allows members of the "care team" to track every interaction an athlete has with others on the staff and organize conversations, appointments, and referrals. The quicker they identify an issue, the quicker the athlete can be helped. Norley thinks his product can be used by all teams from amateur to the pros.

"It's like a knee," Norley said. "If you let a knee go further and further, it's going to become more problematic and take you longer to get back into competition. It's the same with mental health. If you let depression slide and don't get treatment early on, you're going to



Dallas Cowboys star Tony Dorsett stopped by Germantown Academy in 1980 in hopes of swaying Walt Norley to the University of Pittsburgh. Walt Norley

slide deeper into depression, and when that happens, the outcome is going to take longer if you can get to a resolution."

Saban was a 28-year-old defensive backs coach when he recruited Norley to play for Earle Bruce at Ohio State. Saban was the same as he is now, Norley said. He was intense and matter-of-fact and his knee always seemed to bounce as he spoke. But he also knew how to connect with Norley's family as he became close with his parents and siblings.

"He was the one coach who didn't promise me the moon," Norley said. "He said, 'You're a heck of a high school football player and

you have a lot of potential. If you perform at the next level, you'll play. If you don't, you won't.' No one said that. He still does that today."

That's why Norley went with Saban instead of the others, including the star in the mink coat. And now the coach he trusted is the same one who opened the doors of his powerhouse program to his new business.

"He knows that the intersection between mental and behavior and athletic performance is essential," Norley said. "He's innovative. He's a leader. The foundation was laid by him."

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