Ball State Daily

The fact is that Snead can't go back. No matter, he's made it. Snead recently signed a contract with the New Orleans Saints that will keep him on the roster at least until training camp rolls around in the spring. In the meantime he's on campus finishing up some of his last Ball State classes.

girlfriend wasn't pregnant at the time, then I might have stayed," Snead said. "Maybe I wouldn't have felt that pressure of trying to support a child. And maybe I could have just went through and finished school. But it didn't work out that way."

The 5-foot-11 receiver's success story is not a common one among Ball State football players. In the program's 91 years, just 27 of its best athletes have been drafted by an NFL team. Including Snead, there are presently four former Cardinals in the NFL and three of them left the program in the spring of 2014. Snead's former teammates, Travis Freeman and Joshua Howard, both above-

average players while at Ball State, tried to go against the odds and play in the NFL as well. While neither made it professionally, they helped set the stage for Snead to pursue his dreams. **Balancing Act** n the fall of 2011, Howard moved to Virginia to train. Then a senior, the Ball State safety would push his body to the limits, trying to get

as fast and strong as possible before his Pro Day. Howard played 44 games and recorded 105 tackles at Ball State, but

that wasn't enough to get him an invite to

the NFL Combine.

sense."

"When you're 20 years old and you have the opportunity to chase your dream, you're not thinking rationally. You're not thinking with the best

Visions of downtime in between workouts and training sessions

old body, to the limits.

encouraged Howard to sign up for online courses so he could finish school all the while. The real challenge came when

Howard pushed his mind, not his 20-year-

Howard failed all of his 18 credit hours

Joshua Howard

that semester. He still hasn't finished his degree. "I honestly went through a very deep, saddened depression stage," he said. Howard was a 4.0 student in high school, but he couldn't balance school and the pursuit of professional football. On top of his academic struggles, Howard underwent emergency surgery for a ruptured appendix shortly after his pro day workout. Doctors told him then that he wouldn't be able to perform any physical activities for about two months following the operation.

There went his shot at making a team that season. And he wasn't going to be able to provide for his 1-year-old child or help

And no sooner than his dreams were

his life took a 180-degree turn.

he wanted to reach his goals of

became.

sense."

Dice Roll

Howard doesn't blame anyone but himself for the mistakes he made. He

temporarily stripped away, Howard lost his grandmother. In one semester's time,

knows he lost sight of academics because he so badly wanted to make it. The more

professional football, the worse things

"When you're 20 years old and you have the opportunity to chase your dream, you're not thinking rationally," Howard said. "You're not thinking with the best

his family financially.

inspiration in his teammate's journey. Snead, a freshman in 2011, didn't even know it was possible to leave school and come back to complete a degree. Little did he know, the same path would take shape for him a few years later.

In 2014 Snead had to consider his child when making the decision to set out for the NFL. Unlike Howard though, Snead was invited to the NFL Combine at the end of his junior year with Ball State.

The sure-handed receiver wasn't positive

hile Howard was going through

bright-eyed Willie Snead only saw

his trying experience, a young,

an NFL team would give him a chance. If he failed to make a roster he could be stuck without a job. That wasn't an option with a baby girl due to be born in August. Ultimately, Snead decided to forgo his senior year because he didn't think he could put up a third consecutive 1,000yard season. A handful of his best teammates, including record-setting

dash. Again, Snead wasn't sure that his performance would be good enough to of senior college football players are

drafted, according to a 2013 report from the NCAA. Those odds weren't great for Snead who, after all, was only a junior at

More players like Snead have declared early for the NFL Draft in recent years. According to the Wall Street Journal, 98 underclassmen were available in last

year's draft -- a 34 percent increase from 2013. In many regards, Snead was just a

who's just a number, he didn't get picked

"It's been a long three days," Snead said after the NFL Draft. "When it didn't

happen, I was sitting there looking at the

Snead didn't have long to sit around. The Cleveland Browns signed him the next day and gave him a shot in training camp. Snead pulled in three catches for 75 yards

in the Browns' last of four preseason

But again, he got cut. Snead was just a

About a month of unemployment passed

And like one might expect for a guy

the time.

number.

TV just puzzled."

up.

games.

number.

before the Carolina Panthers picked Snead up and put him through a similar job cycle. He was let go after one month with Carolina's practice squad. There was no classroom, but Snead sure was learning. "It's a business," Snead said. "I felt that twice." Lessons Learned fter that final game with Cleveland Snead was able to chat with Travis Freeman, his old Ball State teammate. It was a valuable conversation for both of them. "Willie's a brother to me," Freeman said. "I roomed with him before he ever played a down at Ball State. It's somebody that I'm always encouraging."

Freeman encouraged Snead to keep grinding and stay focused on his goals. But that advice wasn't limited only to his

football goals. Much like Howard, Freeman knows just how hard it is to

linebacker in the Mid-American

When he finished his senior season with Ball State, Freeman led the NCAA in career tackles with 465. He was a legit

Conference, and much like Snead, he was

Freeman never secured a contract with an

Organizational Communication. Now he

Municipal Schools, but he maintains how

"It was a tough decision," Freeman said. "To have the opportunity to play at the next level and to have a chance to be a part of an NFL team. Just to have a chance to play at that level; it makes it

NFL team, and returned in the fall of

2013 to finish his degree in

works as a mentor in Cleveland

hard it is to make that choice.

make an NFL team.

a bit undersized.

difficult."

Starter AUG. Coming Back nead locked down a contract with

Team Activities begin.

felt confident he could do the same. Snead said. "Cause that's what my

to school after pursuing the NFL, so he "I always had intentions of coming back," parents always drilled in me when I was younger. It was a special situation that when that time came I had to think about different things." There is less job security for guys like

quarterback Keith Wenning, were leaving. In Snead's mind, chances of improving were slim. "I had to make a grown-man decision," he said. "I rolled the dice." DN Photo | Breanna Daugherty Against The Odds nead went to the NFL Combine where he showcased his skills along with 48 other receivers and 335 college players in all. His mediocre performance was highlighted by a sluggish 4.62-second time in the 40-yardsecure a spot in the NFL. Just 1.6 percent

September 24, 2011 Starter Snead made his first career start against Army. As a true freshman, he pulled in 10 receptions for 180 yards and one touchdown. It was his best game of the season.

Dylan Buell

2012

12:00 AM

and operations, Snead maintained his scholarship status. Quinn has helped several players through similar situations. "It's a scholarship we have within our department that we have provided for him," Quinn said. "It's to help him complete his degree." The athletic department welcomed Snead back, and Quinn said he is excited for the former receiver to be playing professional football. Initially, Snead didn't have the same support from those closest to him. But he saw Howard and Freeman return

New Orleans in the closing weeks

of the NFL season and now he's back on campus taking classes until Organized

And thanks to some help from Pat Quinn, deputy athletics director for compliance

Snead who go undrafted. Plain and simple. But for Snead, he's already considered an internship with the Saints front office in the case that his on-field relationship with the team ends. Plus, he's finishing up that all-important degree at the same time.

He certainly can't go back and change things, and maybe that's for the best.

By Dakota Crawford

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