

12 is the number of my idol, Tom Brady. It's the sum of all the letters in my name. It's also how old I was when I started high school.

In short, I skipped two grades: first and sixth. Between kindergarten and eighth grade, I attended five schools, including two different styles of homeschooling (three years at a co-op and one in my kitchen). Before skipping, I was perennially bored.

But when I began homeschooling, everything changed. Free to move as fast as I wanted, I devoured tomes from Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison to London, Kipling, and Twain. I wrote 10-page papers on subjects from Ancient Sparta and military history to the founding of the United States and the resounding impact of slavery. I discovered more than I ever had, kindling a lifelong joy for learning.

While high school offered welcome academic opportunities--studying two languages and taking early science APs chief among them--the social environment was a different beast. Many classmates considered me more a little brother than a true friend, and my age and laser focus on academics initially made me socially inept. I joined sports teams in spring and built better relationships, but my lack of size (5'1") and strength relegated me to the end of the bench. Oftentimes, I secretly wished I was normal age.

That secret desire manifested itself in different ways. While I've loved football since I was a little kid, I soon became obsessed with personal success on the gridiron--the key, I figured, to social acceptance and the solution to my age problem. I had grown up obsessively tracking my New England Patriots. Now, instead of armchair quarterbacking, I poured hours into throwing mechanics and studying film after my homework each night. Itching to grow, I adopted Brady's diet, cutting dairy, white flour, and processed sugar. But in the rush to change, my attitude towards academics shifted; I came to regard learning as more a job than a joy. No matter what talents I possessed, I viewed myself as a failure because I couldn't play.

That view held sway until a conversation with my friend Alex, the fastest receiver on the team. As I told him I wished we could switch places so I could succeed on the gridiron, he stared incredulously. "Dude," he exclaimed, "I wish I was you!" Hearing my friend's voice and their confidence in my abilities prompted me to reflect: I quickly realized I was discounting my academic talents to fit a social construct. Instead of pushing myself to be something I wasn't, I needed to meld my talents and my passions. Instead of playing sports, I recognized, I should coach them.

My goal to coach professionally has already helped me embrace the academic side of the game--my side--rather than sidelining it. I have devoured scouting tomes, analyzed NFL game film, spoken with pros like Dante Scarnecchia, and even joined the American Football Coaches Association. Translating that coach's mentality into practice, I began explaining the concepts behind different plays to my teammates, helping them see the subtleties of strategy (despite Coach Whitcher's complaints that I was trying to steal his job). And I discovered that my intellectual understanding of the game is far more important in determining my success than my athletic tools: with the discipline, adaptability, and drive I had already developed, I've become a better player, student, and friend.

Physically and mentally, I've changed a lot since freshman year, growing 11 inches and gaining newfound confidence in myself and my abilities. Instead of fighting for social acceptance, I'm free to focus on the things I love. Academically, that change re-inspired me. Able to express my full personality without social

pressure, I rededicated myself in the classroom and my community. I still secretly wish to be Tom Brady. But now, I'm happy to settle for Bill Belichick.