

Emerson

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Emerson coped by drinking alcohol, which led to an arrest that got him dismissed from the Oregon football team midway through the 2019 season.

With the help of family (he has three siblings), friends and professional therapy, Emerson is now dealing with depression in a healthy way. And he wants to be a role model for other young people who are living with mental health issues. He went on to earn his degree from Oregon in economics and is a sales associate at Parscription Golf in Bend — and he will soon be playing football again as the kicker for the new pro indoor football team in Redmond, the High Desert Storm.

“I’m really excited to continue my football career, especially as a professional, and represent Central Oregon,” Emerson said with confidence outside his workplace at Parscription.

Soccer and concussions

As a high school soccer player, Emerson suffered so many severe concussions that he was told by a doctor that if he got one or two more, he would be done with sports, he recalled.

A number of colleges recruited Emerson for soccer, but he believed it was safer for him to be a kicker on a football team, so he decided to become a walk-on player at Oregon after graduating from Mountain View, he said.

Concussions in soccer are common. Players head the ball, collide with each other while trying to head the ball and occasionally strike the ground with their heads in a fall.

“He had a combination of a couple bad ones from both heading the ball, and colliding heads,” said Zach’s father, Donnie Emerson, a longtime soccer coach at Mountain View. “He struggled and struggled recovering from those concussions. I think that was when the depression started. I don’t think his brain ever healed the way it needed to heal.”

A 2014 study in the Journal of Adolescent Health found that children ages 12 to 17 with a history of concussions were more than three times as likely to suffer from depression than those who have never had a concussion.

“It’s so hard when it’s kind of this invisible enemy,” Donnie Emerson said. “I fully believe that all his demons and battles that he’s had were from his concussions. As a parent you go, ‘If I had to do this all over again, is this the path that I would choose for him?’”

Understanding the long-term impact of these injuries is critical.

“It’s so important for these kids who get concussions, that not only do they sit out and heal properly, but that they get other help, whether it’s talk therapy or some other form of help,” he said.

Kicking at Oregon

Zach Emerson got his chance to shine in his redshirt sophomore year in 2018, making 21 of 22 extra-point attempts for the Ducks and handling kickoff duties.

But “life events,” which he declined to specify, intervened and his depression and anxiety deepened.

Going into the 2019 season, just a few months after his thwarted suicide plan, Emerson believed he had won the kickoff job based on his performance in training camp. But Ducks head coach Mario Cristobal and his staff instead awarded the job to freshman Camden Lewis, who was on a scholarship.

“That was kind of the tipping point for me,” Emerson said of his depression. “I really fell after that. I worked as hard as I could, I won the job, it was my job, and the coaching staff decided to go with the new freshman.”

Emerson recalled being told of the decision just hours before the team left Eugene for the season opener in Arlington, Texas, against Auburn. Oregon lost the game 27-21. The night after the team returned from Auburn, Emerson went out drinking with some



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

Zach Emerson, 23, was a multisport star at Bend’s Mountain View High School who went on to be a walk-on kicker for the University of Oregon football team. “I’m really excited to continue my football career, especially as a professional, and represent Central Oregon,” Emerson said outside his workplace at Parscription.

buddies. He recalled being extremely depressed, at a low point — even suicidal again.

“Instead of self-harming or doing anything like that, I chose to drink a lot,” he said.

Afterward, he stumbled to a friend’s apartment complex. But instead of going into apartment No. 6, he went into No. 7. He fell asleep in the apartment and the resident called the police.

“I reacted poorly,” Emerson said. “I overdrank. I never meant to do anything wrong other than cope with my pain, and I chose to drink.”

Emerson was arrested that morning and charged with criminal mischief and criminal trespass.

He went on to complete a yearlong diversion program and perform 100 hours of community service, which allowed authorities to drop all criminal charges.

But after the incident, Emerson was suspended from the team indefinitely, and six weeks later Cristobal called to tell him he was off the team.

“They made it out to seem like I just had to work through stuff, and then I could come back and join the team,” Emerson recalled. “He essentially, said, ‘Look, there’s been a lot

of past stuff, and it’s not a good image for the team if we bring you back.”

Donnie Emerson said he did not agree with Oregon’s dismissal of his son from the team, but he did say the program offered resources to help him deal with his depression.

“We were in close contact with the staff there,” Donnie Emerson said. “They were monitoring it. While I disagreed with how they handled things when it came to a head, I will say that they were helping us in a lot of ways to deal with the mental health piece of it. We had people there that we could call and talk to the whole time. They were pretty good to us through that.”

New football opportunity

Emerson stayed at Oregon and graduated early. He came home and started working, and with college eligibility remaining, he got recruited as a kicker by Sacramento State of the Big Sky Conference. The conference planned to play a spring season this year amid the pandemic, but the season was eventually canceled.

So Emerson signed on with the High Desert Storm, which will start its season May 8 in

Mental health resources

Deschutes County Crisis Line: 541-322-7500, ext. 9

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-8255

Central Oregon Suicide Prevention Alliance’s Resource page: www.preventsuicideco.org

If you are 55 or older and feeling isolated or just want to have a friendly conversation, call the Senior Loneliness Line at 503-200-1633.

If you are 21 or younger and want support for any problem, big or small, text teen2teen to 839863 or call YouthLine at 877-968-8491.

the American West Football Conference, playing home games at the First Interstate Bank Center in Redmond.

“I’m extremely grateful for the opportunity, playing close to home,” Emerson said. “(Storm) coach (Keith) Evans was super supportive of me. I think we’ll be competitive. I think the fan base here will be very supportive, and we’ll always have a good home crowd. I’m just really excited to play back in my hometown.”

Evans said he is excited to have a “local kid” and an accurate kicker on the team. Goal posts in the indoor league are only 9 feet apart, less than half the 18.5-feet in the NCAA and NFL.

“You need to have confidence in your kicker,” Evans said. “It takes a lot more accuracy. A strong leg always helps, but accuracy is a big thing, too.”

Brian Crum, Emerson’s football coach at Mountain View, said he is thrilled Emerson gets another opportunity to extend his football career.

“The ball just explodes off his leg,” Crum said of the 6-foot-3, 235-pound Emerson. “He’s so athletic and so powerful. And who knows where this leads to? There’s lots of possibilities.”

Crum said he never doubted that Emerson would work through his depression and become a role model for other young athletes who could be dealing with similar mental health issues — particularly in light of the isolation challenges presented over the past year by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“He’s a resilient kid, and I think sports help foster that resiliency,” Crum said. “Nobody does this alone. I think a

lot of kids hide it, and I think a lot of kids ignore it. That’s one of the hard things of the last 13 months. Kids have had so many things taken away from them.”

Emerson’s willingness to publicly share his problems has the potential to send a loud message, Crum said.

“I think anytime you can have a teenage boy see a person as a role model and understand there’s no shame involved with (depression), they know they can talk about it, too,” Crum said.

Ongoing battle

Depression and addiction are not struggles that simply end or go away by themselves. Emerson continues to fight his demons with the aid of friends, family and a combination of different therapies. He said he has remained sober “for a while now.”

“Life is full of challenges, and it’s how you respond to those challenges,” Donnie Emerson said. “It’s going to be a long ride for him and it’s not going to be easy. He’s battling depression and he’s battling addiction. It’s what he makes of it from here.”

Zach Emerson said he put so many expectations on himself and took pride in being strong. But things turned around for him because he sought help — he is still here because he sought help.

“At the end of the day, you need to seek help,” he said. “Because it’s a battle that you can’t deal with on your own. For anyone who is struggling with depression, reach out to someone that you trust and seek help, and let them help.”

■ Reporter: 541-383-0318, mmorica@bendbulletin.com

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- No appointment necessary. Interviews on site.
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- April 22 • All Department Positions • 5 - 7 pm
- April 29 • All Department Positions • 5 - 7 pm

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65600 Pronghorn Club Dr., Bend, OR 97701