**Embracing Your Destiny**

The journey for Jaden Payoute’s athletic career was starting to wound down. He was heading into his senior year at Virginia Tech playing the sport that he loved– football.

“I was preparing myself to play because I was excited to play one more season with my brothers and compete in front of Hokie Nation,” Payoute said.

The four-star wide receiver out of Chesterfield, VA was coming off an injury-riddled season. He was also determining if he wanted to continue playing football, a sport he had been playing since he was six years old.

“I joke around with people that when I was six I picked up a ball and never went back,” Payoute said.

Even from a young age, Payoute had a different mindset than most children his age because of the teachings of his youth football coach.

“Coach [Dante] came from a military background and he taught us from the beginning that we had to have attention to detail when you do things on and off the field and being able to execute them in the right way,” Payoute said.

As he transitioned from playing youth football to high school football, at L.C. Byrd High School, the same discipline he learned from his youth football coach applied to the work he put in at the high school level.

Payoute played multiple positions in high school including wide receiver, quarterback, and defensive back. However, he received no scholarship offers until he started competing in track and field.

“I did not start running until my junior year of high school, and I won a state championship each season I ran track,” Payoute said.

One of Payoute’s friends, Mia Garrett remembers him fondly enjoying track and what winning the state championship meant to him.

“I remember when he told me that after he won the state championship in the 100-meter dash, he received scholarship offers in the span of 48 hours, which seemed crazy to me at the time,” Garrett said. Payoute received scholarship offers from Virginia Tech, Virginia, Tennessee, Ohio State, and Pittsburgh. He ultimately chose to play football at Virginia Tech.

“It just felt like home to me and I wanted to remain in-state,” Payoute said.

One of the coaches responsible for recruiting Payoute to Virginia Tech was Wide Receivers Coach Fontel Mines.

“When we recruited Jaden one of the first things that stood out to me was his mindset,” Mines said,“ He was very disciplined, always looking to get better, and I never heard anybody say a bad thing about Jaden.”

Going into his freshman year at Tech, Payoute struggled to adjust from high school football to college football.

“It was just the terminology that was the most difficult part and completely learning a whole new system, but after I got out of my head the process became easier for me to comprehend,” Payoute said.

The hard work eventually paid off for Payoute as he played four games his freshman year.

He headed into his sophomore year with so much progress until he broke his ankle at fall camp.

“I ended up having to miss the season due to surgery and that was tough because I felt that this was going to be a big year for me,” Payoute said.

As Payoute was rehabbing his ankle injury, he started to develop hamstring issues on the same side that he injured his ankle; As a result, he played sparingly in his junior year and during this process, he took some time to think about what he wanted to do next.

“I got an internship with Student-Athlete Development and so I started helping them plan events where athletes can build on their leadership and career development, while also having opportunities to give back to the Blacksburg community,” Payoute said.

One of the biggest highlights of his junior year was playing in the New Era Pinstripe Bowl game against Maryland.

“I remember that game fondly because most of my family was there and I caught a big pass in the game,” Payoute said.

In the bowl game, Payoute caught a 42-yard pass to put the Hokies in scoring position early in the first quarter. What Payoute remembers most about that catch is that it was his last catch ever playing football.

 

“You know after dealing with the ankle surgeries and the hamstring issues I started to contemplate what I wanted to do with my life,” Payoute said, “Coming back I dealt with bad migraines and headaches, and I saw this as a sign that I had to be done with football at this moment.”

Payoute had many people help him during this difficult process, including Coach Mines and Samm Stewart, who was the Director of Player Engagement for Virginia Tech Football during this time.

“What I saw from Jaden was that he was putting all this work into football, but when he was not playing he was trying to determine what was next for him because it was hard for him to sit and not play the game that he loves,” Stewart said.

Coach Mines also played a role in helping determine what Payoute wanted to do next.

“When determining what he wanted to do next, I told Jaden that you have to find a passion of yours and embrace your new normal because the process of not playing your sport anymore is going to be difficult,” Mines said.

After conversations with Mines, Stewart, and family members, Payoute ultimately decided to medically retire from football.

“When I made that decision I felt at peace with myself because even though that door was closed, another opportunity is opening,” Payoute said.

Right now Payoute is focusing on being a student and looks forward to graduating in May. He hopes to attend graduate school at Virginia Tech, while also keeping his options open for other opportunities that may arise.

Payoute’s journey now is taking him to a place where he hopes to build a safety net and start the process of building generational wealth for his family as an entrepreneur. He also wants to focus on his mental, physical, and spiritual health.

“By gaining these new experiences I want to do different things that positively affect me,” Payoute said.

From a football star, to now a student, to a future entrepreneur, Payoute is now embracing the new journey he has set out for himself.

“You never know what life is going to throw at you,” Payoute said. Everything in life happens for a reason, so you just have to embrace your destiny.”