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One year later, Bobby Roundtree continues to push limits

The Illini DE spoke to the media for the first time in over a year Friday.

By [Mariah Guzman](#) | [@MariahLGuzman](#) | May 22, 2020, 7:22pm EDT



Patrick Gorski-USA TODAY Sports

Bobby Roundtree opened up Zoom on his phone, trying to see if his screen was clear enough for the more than 20 members of the media to be able to see him. After wiping it down, he was assured that it was clear enough for him to begin talking about what his life has looked like over the past year.

“This week it didn’t feel like a year actually,” Roundtree said. “My mom said it when I was at therapy, I was just like, ‘Wow, it’s been a long ride.’ And it’s not finished yet.”

Just over a year earlier, in the middle of May 2019, Roundtree’s life changed forever. The Florida native was involved in a swimming accident — one he chose not to detail any further. Roundtree immediately underwent surgery, spending his days rehabilitating ever since.

His past year has included physical therapy, occupational therapy, medical care assistance, a specialty diet, transportation and many things in-between.

But more importantly, this is the most challenging physical — and mental — battle Roundtree has ever faced.

There was a point where he could barely raise his hand and lost 70 pounds after the accident. He said he saw more walls to break down than were being built. Doctors and therapists were doubtful of the physical improvements he would be able to reach — of the life he would one day be able to live.

But Roundtree has had a right-hand man: head football athletic trainer Jeremy Busch.

“I said you better raise your expectations really quick because he’s wired differently,” Busch said he has told doubters over the past year.

He saw the light in Roundtree’s eyes, and the development of his recovery has proven so many to be wrong.

“I had a therapist pull me to the side who said nobody thought I would be moving this quickly,” Roundtree said, “or even in a manual chair moving myself around.”

For many, Roundtree’s tragic injury and transition to recovery has become a source of inspiration.

“[It’s] almost unquantifiable,” said Illinois Director of Athletics Josh Whitman. “Inspiration and hope. It’s remarkable to me to think it’s been a year since his accident. I’ll never forget where I was when I got the call from Lovie [Smith] when the accident occurred.”

Roundtree understands the role he is playing in their lives now — and how to let the light shine through the darkness.

“One door closes and more open,” Roundtree said. “It’s taught me I’m a strong man. I’ve still got goals to reach, and I’ll reach them.”

And behind this strong man is a strong woman.

Roundtree said his mom has been who he leans on during these trying times.

“She’s been here since the beginning. She pushes me. When things get kind of hard, she just tells me, ‘It won’t be forever. It won’t be forever. Look at where you started when you first got hurt.’”

The support has also come from his university.

Illinois set up a GoFundMe page in October, which has now raised \$130,050 and counting. The support continues on to Illinois fans who used the hashtag #97Strong and root for Roundtree every day, following his journey via videos and inspirational posts on Twitter. More intimately, it continues on to the teammates, who went to visit him when he was in Chicago, and never let him spend a night alone in any facility or hospital.

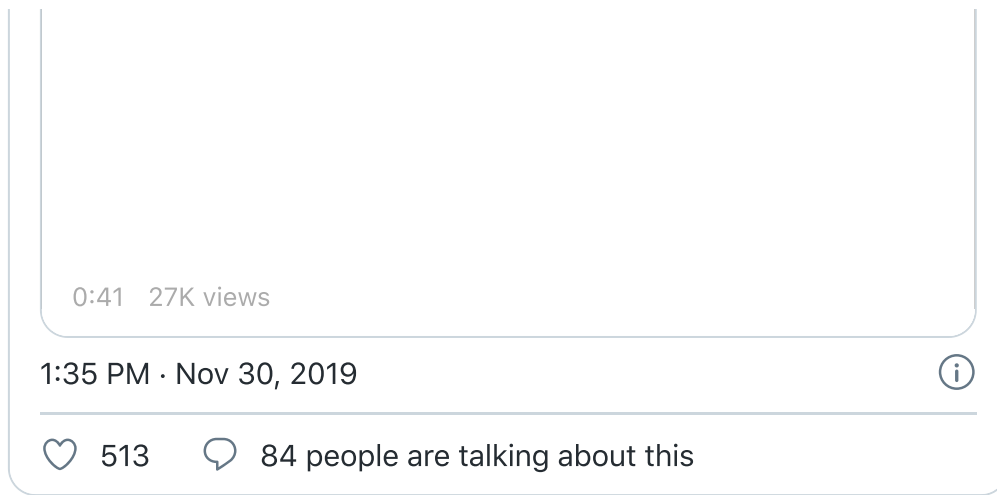
For head coach Lovie Smith, Roundtree’s love and appreciation extends even further. Days after the initial accident, Smith made a point to spend time with him in the hospital.

“He had a lot going on and came and spent some nights with me and was there for my family during this hard time,” Roundtree said. “It felt good.”

While Roundtree will most certainly never step foot as a defensive lineman on the gridiron again, he has had opportunities to still feel like he’s part of the team. Roundtree celebrated the Illini’s Homecoming upset win over No. 6 Wisconsin last October — all over FaceTime.

Just a month later, Roundtree returned to Memorial Stadium, surprising his teammates before Illinois’ Senior Day game against Northwestern.





But now we're a year later, and Roundtree has a better mindset than ever. He weighs 260 pounds and says he will continue breaking down any wall in front of him.

And now Roundtree has more goals for his future, including working to build rehabilitation centers for those who don't have access to state-of-the-art rehab like he has had.

"A business or facility where people with injuries can get that rehab that doesn't cost an arm and a leg...I want to look out for others that need that attention."

And besides helping people, there's one *even bigger* goal.

"Where do you see yourself in five years?" a reporter asked Friday.

"I see myself walking again."

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