
Today's News

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2 Wins for Myron Rolle—and Florida State

By [SARA LIPKA](#)

College Park, Md.

Myron L. Rolle suited up late for Saturday's game, in a crush of cameramen. One even climbed on a locker room bench, hovering over the star football player for Florida State University as an equipment manager slipped his shoulder pads over his head. With five minutes left in the half, Mr. Rolle, trailed by cameras, jogged out into the frigid night—to resounding cheers. He had yet to make a play, but he had just come from Birmingham, Ala., where he was named a Rhodes scholar.

Florida State's president, T.K. Wetherell, had anticipated this moment. Having made headlines for athletes who cheated and fought, the university was hungry for good press. While the Rhodes Trust considered candidates, the president tried to picture Saturday here at the University of Maryland.

He imagined that the game would stop, and the announcer would declare to the crowd Mr. Rolle's achievement, sparking a sweeping standing ovation. He joked with the shy student about parachuting onto the 50-yard line. He told *The New York Times* that Mr. Rolle, who is also projected to be an early-round pick in the NFL draft, was carrying Florida State's reputation on his back.

When the day came, Mr. Rolle (pronounced "roll") won the prestigious scholarship, which sends 32 American students each year to the University of Oxford, and jetted to the game on a Florida State booster's private plane. Although there was no timeout, no announcement echoing across the stadium, ESPN cut away from the action to Mr. Rolle's arrival in its national broadcast of the game.

Florida State's cheerleaders met him at the locker room door, as did his parents, whom he hugged. In the stands, Seminoles fans chanted "MY-ron RO-ole" and waved signs: "Congratulations, Mr. Rolle" and "All Rhodes Lead to Rolle."

His teammates, who call him "doctor" (or "president" or "governor"), crowded their 6-foot-2 free safety, grinning, clapping him on the back and the helmet. He stepped away to run strides along the sidelines, and the Seminoles scored another touchdown, going up by 21. With a minute and thirty seconds on the clock, the Rhodes scholar, in garnet and gold, trotted onto the field with the defense.

"For any program to have this kind of positive publicity ... it's a great opportunity," said Mr. Wetherell, who played football for Florida State in the 1960s. "Myron's been one of our ambassadors," he said. "Millions of people are watching this kid perform."

Grooming a Superstar

College football isn't known for bookworms. Critics of big-time athletics in higher education blast the sport for low graduation rates, players' clustering in easy majors, and go-to professors who give athletes a break. Just last year, news broke that some 60 athletes at Florida State—including two dozen football players—had cheated in an online course. And a few weeks ago, the football coach sidelined five players after a fight between them and fraternity members left a student hospitalized.

But a program that recruits a student like Mr. Rolle has a good counter to such scandals: Well, look at him.

Mr. Rolle, the son of Bahamian immigrants and the youngest of five brothers, grew up in New Jersey and played football for the Hun School of Princeton. National scouts ranked him first among college recruits, and he got several dozen scholarship offers, but Florida State saw more than a gifted athlete. On his two-day visit to the campus, officials devoted the first to academics. Mr. Rolle talked to professors, the provost, and the president.

Lawrence G. Abele, the provost, said he would have met with Mr. Rolle even if he hadn't played football. "I'm always worried that we're not recruiting enough African-American males. The opportunity to have an African-American male with a very high SAT, very high course performance, is a real plus," he said. "Success encourages success."

Mr. Rolle was also introduced to Garrett Johnson, a standout student and shot putter for the Seminoles who was then applying for the Rhodes.

Mr. Johnson, who is also black, knew Mr. Rolle was "someone that they were very keen to have at Florida State." The two hit it off, chatting about, among other things, the university's Office of National Fellowships. Created five years ago, the office grooms students for postgraduate awards.

"We identify juniors and seniors in high school, new freshmen," said Mr. Wetherell. "They may be a potential Marshall, a Rhodes, a Fulbright, a Truman. We start talking to them about, 'This is what it takes to compete at this level. Do you have an interest?'"

Mr. Rolle did. He started at Florida State with a bevy of Advanced Placement credits, and he kept in touch with Mr. Johnson, who had won the Rhodes. In five semesters, Mr. Rolle completed all his pre-med requirements, earning a degree in exercise science and a 3.75 grade-point average. (He is now working toward a master's in public administration.)

"I wanted to challenge myself academically and really just push the system," he said. "People said it couldn't be done in two and a half years, you know, especially pre-med and playing football, but I've always been a very focused individual." He tends to study in the morning and duck into the library during 30- or 40-minute breaks throughout the day.

But football—especially in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's top division—can be as demanding as a full-time job. Last year, Mr. Rolle's physics lab conflicted with Monday's practice. An associate head coach, Mickey Andrews, publicly criticized him for spending too much time studying.

"It's difficult to run your practice when one of your key players isn't there," Randy Spetman, Florida State's athletics director, explained. Still, Mr. Rolle said, his coaches have largely supported him academically. Certainly no one has issued a second rebuke.

Professors describe Mr. Rolle as diligent, inquisitive, and unassuming. "I almost would have expected

him at some point to say, 'Hey, can you give me a break?' And he never did," said Mark Kearley, organic lab coordinator in the chemistry and biochemistry department.

Mr. Rolle is also known for going to office hours and asking tough questions. One summer he conducted research on metabolic regulation in stem and cancer cells; another, he took nursing classes in London. During the academic year he developed a health-education curriculum to teach fifth- and sixth-grade students on a Seminole Indian reservation about diabetes and obesity. He served on several committees and represented Florida State at numerous events.

"We use him a lot," Mr. Spetman said. "We have to be careful we don't ask him to do too much because he'll just take it on."

But a speech by the golden boy is tempting. "He's an extremely bright, mature young man that has great character, great integrity," said Mr. Spetman. "That's what you want to have your university known for."

Outback Jet

This fall Mr. Rolle chased wide receivers and the Rhodes. He wrote 17 or 18 drafts of his application and scheduled seven mock interviews at Florida State. By the time he was a finalist—one of 13 in the geographic district including Alabama, Florida, and Tennessee—he was mostly calm and confident. "I think that I might be too prepared for this," he laughed.

Florida State was ready, too. The final interviews, in Birmingham, were slated for the same day as the Seminoles' game in Maryland: last Saturday. The interviews would be over by 5 p.m., Central time; the game would start at either noon, 3:30, or 7:45 p.m., Eastern time. Both Florida State and the Atlantic Coast Conference made their case to ESPN. Luckily for Mr. Rolle, the network already wanted that game for the evening slot.

Then there was the matter of flying the student 681 miles so fast. The NCAA doesn't allow individual athletes to take private charter flights, but it made an exception for Mr. Rolle. "Certainly this was an extraordinary situation," said Erik Christianson, an NCAA spokesman. (The association also approved a charter flight for another Rhodes finalist: a women's volleyball player at the U.S. Military Academy.)

Mr. Spetman, a former Air Force pilot, compared private planes' prices and speed. The fastest model, it turned out, was part of a small fleet owned by one of Florida State's athletics boosters, Bob Basham, a co-founder of Outback Steakhouse. Mr. Basham, off honeymooning, was happy to donate it to the cause.

On Friday morning Bill Shults, Florida State's director of athletic academic support, drove Mr. Rolle from Tallahassee to Birmingham, along with Sally Petersen Karioth, the player's close mentor and a professor of nursing, and Jamie Purcell, director of the national-fellowships office. They peppered him with mock-interview and trivia questions on the ride, as had his family—and Ms. Karioth, each day by text message. Hers tended toward the Crimean War.

Mr. Rolle attended a dinner on Friday night at the home of Drayton Nabers Jr., the scholarship's chairman for that district and a former chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court. The next morning Ms. Karioth fetched Mr. Rolle a handkerchief for the breast pocket of his black pinstripe suit. And she heard him singing through the wall of the Hampton Inn—some Bahamian tunes. He had drawn the 11th interview slot, 20 minutes starting at 12:50 p.m., and his handlers drove him a mile up the road to the cloistered site: the corporate headquarters of Protective Life Corporation, an insurance company Mr.

Nabers once led.

The finalist was resolved. "It's just almost like a game," he said. "You practice, you practice, you practice, and then when the lights come on, you have to show what you're made of." In the lobby of the Hampton Inn, Team Rolle was jumpier.

Ms. Karioth, Mr. Shults, and five members of the news-media sat on couches listening for all-important text messages. Parents and professors of other finalists floated in and out. At 1:42 p.m., Ms. Karioth's cellphone jingled: "interview went well. not as tough as the mocks. laughed. felt relaxed. thanked god for his grace." Mr. Shults responded to frequent calls from the team, already in College Park and eager for updates on Mr. Rolle.

Over at the Protective complex, he was relaxing. He watched Louisiana State University's football game against the University of Mississippi. He ate a ham-and-cheese sandwich. He took the stairs with an Orthodox Jewish finalist who couldn't ride the elevator on the Sabbath. The highlight of the day, he said, was meeting so many interesting people.

After the interviews, the selection committee deliberated for more than two hours. Each time the door opened, Mr. Rolle said, the students snapped to attention. Finally the full committee emerged. Mr. Nabers told the finalists he was sure that they would all go on to do great things. He announced the first winner: Julia Parker Goyer, a 2007 graduate of Duke University. Mr. Rolle waited: "I was like, Say the other name, please!"

Mad Dash

At 4:22 p.m., he sent Ms. Karioth another text message: "i won!!"

Everyone jumped up. She started to cry. Mr. Shults opened a sealed manila envelope and fumbled with press releases. The two sped off to pick up Mr. Rolle. He quickly traded his suit, wire-rimmed glasses, and shiny wristwatch for garnet and gold warmups and a knit hat. In the back seat of a red Ford Excursion, he fielded nonstop questions as the driver—with a University of Alabama at Birmingham police escort, using full lights and sirens—raced him to the airport and onto the tarmac.

Mr. Rolle was patient and poised. His interview, he said, had touched on health-care reform and the 2008 election, the Bible and *The Great Gatsby*. Yes, he had maintained his usual pre-game routine: stretching, praying, taking a long shower, visualizing himself intercepting passes. He had shared the good news with his family and team chaplain and had already received a slew of congratulatory text messages from teammates.

"These are guys who, a lot of them, don't know anything about the Rhodes scholarship," Mr. Rolle said. "They even spell it wrong during the texts"—R-o-a-d-s. "But they're just so happy for me," he said. "The best thing about this whole experience is to be able to share it with my teammates."

Outside, the last hints of light disappeared from the sky. Mr. Rolle was hungry. Despite the speculation that steak and Bloomin' Onion would be served on the flight, the six-passenger WestWind jet had only Doritos and almonds. *The Chronicle's* photographer offered Mr. Rolle her Greek chicken pita, uneaten because of the hasty departure. He politely declined. She pressed him. No, thank you, he said. He'd be OK. Everyone pressed him, and he eventually ate the wrap, neatly packing up the trash to take off the plane.

He chatted and laughed with his fellow passengers, all but one of whom were from the news media. But after a while, with the jet at a cruising altitude of 34,000 feet, he asked a reporter, "Is it all right if I listen to my iPod now?"

Mr. Rolle closed his eyes, sank into the tan leather seat, and bobbed his head to Ice Cube, Frank Sinatra, and Whitney Houston. The photographer snapped a few shots; he didn't flinch. On the initial descent, he leaned back and stretched his palms over his knees. He checked his cellphone for more texts. As the plane approached the runway, he broke into a smile. "I'm starting to feel it—I'm not gonna lie," he said. "I'm starting to feel good."

The touchdown was a bit rough, and the co-pilot teased the pilot, but there was a more serious problem: Florida State's videographer, assigned to record the momentous landing, wasn't there. Mr. Rolle sat in the terminal and waited, and when the cameraman arrived a few minutes later, they returned to the tarmac to recreate the arrival. Then, a police pickup truck with the game on the radio sped Mr. Rolle from Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport to Byrd Stadium, running red lights all the way.

'Two Wins'

One victory led to another, and the underdog Seminoles crushed the Terps, 37-3. Mr. Rolle recorded two solo tackles. On the sidelines, as the clock wound down, a few of his teammates sneaked up and doused the "doctor" with ice water. ESPN interviewed him on the field, soaking wet.

"This is going to be one of the most memorable days of my life," he told reporters.

Bobby Bowden, Florida State's head coach for more than three decades, also took pride in his player's feat. "It was like two wins, to be honest with you," Mr. Bowden said in his Alabama drawl. "When we found out he won that Rhodes scholar, to me it was like, well, we got one already. Now can we win this other."

Outside the stadium, a throng of relatives and friends greeted Mr. Rolle, who was carrying a pizza box, and draped a plaid blanket around his shoulders. When he hugged and kissed them goodbye and started climbing toward the team buses, a woman yelled, "Myron, you taking that?"

He held up the box, confused. "The pizza?"

"No!" she answered, laughing, and ran up to peel the blanket off him.

The player joined his team and flew back to Tallahassee that night. On Sunday afternoon, he was studying in a common spot: Ms. Karioth's office. "He has a pathophysiology test tomorrow," she wrote in an e-mail message. "Not much time for him to savor the win."

Mr. Rolle has not said whether he'll enter the draft or accept the Rhodes, but Florida State's press release makes it sound as if he's going to Oxford. And Mr. Rolle, who hopes to become a neurosurgeon, has hinted at his fascination with medical anthropology. That's just a one-year master's degree at Oxford, which could give him another shot at professional football.

Timothy M. Logan, who taught Mr. Rolle human biochemistry and supervised his research, hopes he ships off for England.

"I would love to see what he would be able to do when he doesn't have all of the commitments of football," said Mr. Logan, a professor of chemistry and biochemistry at Florida State.

The experience would have another benefit, too. "There's something to be said about being anonymous," Mr. Logan said. "I don't know that Myron's had that chance yet."

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