

Soul Brothers

Aaron Wills finds his way back from the edge

Story by Darren Ivy
Photo by Lane Hickenbottom

On Oct. 24, 1997, Aaron Wills saw his life flash before him. He didn't like what he saw.

It wasn't a near-death experience that caused him to make this realization, but at the time death might have felt better.

It was Aaron's 21st birthday, and he had just been suspended from the Nebraska football team for two months after failing his third drug test.

He would be forced to pay for school, his parents told him, if he were dismissed from the football team. Furthermore he didn't have a solid relationship with his girlfriend, Julia Russell. He also had few friends who he felt would stand by his side.

Most importantly, he was setting a bad example for his younger brother, Colin, whom he loved very much.

"My life pretty much came to a crossroads," said Aaron, the starting senior left rush end. "I had nothing. God pretty much took everything out of my life and showed me that there was nothing in my life."

Rather than let his life deteriorate any further, Aaron dedicated himself to God and decided to change his ways.

Aaron hurt many people, but through it all, Colin and Russell stuck with him and defended his public image.

Colin, now 20, had looked up to his brother from the time he was little. He followed in Aaron's footsteps at Omaha Burke and now at Nebraska.

But Colin didn't completely follow Aaron's ways.

Wrong road

At Omaha Burke High School, Aaron was a 4.0 student, a standout swimmer and star football player.

He was a captain of the football team, and his high school coach, Larry Jacobsen, called him "one of the best offensive and defensive players to ever play at Burke."

Aaron seemed like the ideal role model for younger student athletes. But there was a darker side — one that found him drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana.

It was a side Colin didn't know much about until Aaron's first failed drug test at Nebraska in 1995.

"I didn't know he had carried it with him to Lincoln," Colin said. "Sure, maybe I knew he had done it once or twice, but it was something that we didn't really talk about."

To Jacobsen, Aaron's drug problem came as a big surprise.

"I really didn't see that in high school," said Jacobsen, who retired after Aaron's senior year. "I talked and worked out with him every day. I think a lot of people were surprised."

Colin, although a big supporter of his brother, said the suspension didn't come as a surprise.

"I knew he was going down the wrong path," Colin said. "I knew he wasn't doing the right things. I

just didn't know where that was leading."

It led Aaron to the verge of losing everything important in his life.

Losing focus

Aaron would work hard when he had to in football, but he smoked marijuana heavily in the off season and drank to get drunk on the weekends. He managed to stay eligible by using masking agents to cover the marijuana, he said.

When he was drunk or high, his temper flared. The 6-foot-2, 250-pound player got into fights and did a lot of damage to the other guys.

"When I have gotten into fights in the past I have hurt people bad," he said. "People could hit me, and it wouldn't hurt. I would end up hurting them a lot worse. I broke a couple peoples' jaws in high school."

His temper carried over to the football field, where he would pick up penalties for fighting back and trying to get even.

"I was out of control," Aaron said. "If something went wrong or someone pushed me wrong, I would try to get in a fight."

He described himself at that time as selfish, self-centered and interested in his own welfare.

Because of this attitude, he wouldn't admit he had a problem or listen to people who wanted to help him.

Turning down help

Aaron's reputation as a party animal and drug user got back to Omaha Burke, where Colin was still in school.

The criticism of his brother was hard on Colin, his mother, Linda Wills, said. "He never talked about it too much, but it reflected upon him, too, at school," she said. "He never blamed his brother."

Colin wanted to help his brother, but he was still in high school and didn't know how.

"Either (Aaron) would have said 'it was all under control' or 'mind your own business,'" Colin said. "Back then, I guess he wouldn't have listened or taken my opinion much to heart like I feel he would now."

The one person Aaron did listen to was Russell.

Even before Aaron was suspended Oct. 24, 1997, Russell had been after him to change his ways.

"Things weren't working out the best," said Russell, a world-class swimmer from South Africa. "He lied a lot, and I totally knew. He would tell me he wasn't doing drugs and be high as a kite. My concern was for his health. I told him, 'If you don't do something, you will battle this your whole life.'"

He listened to a point but even on his last failed drug test tried to mask the marijuana.

It wasn't until he received the results Oct. 24, 1997, that he realized he was at rock bottom.

Loving supporter

Russell was the first person Aaron called after the suspension.

"It was devastating for him," Russell said. "I told him there was so much more than football. This was about your life."

"I went over there, and we just prayed. Right at that point, he dedicated himself to God."

And it has been the best decision he has made, Russell said.

"As harsh as it may sound, I am glad that it happened," Russell said. "Otherwise, he would still just be getting by."

An immediate change in Aaron happened that night, Russell said, but it took several months to change many of his bad habits.

Turning it around

During those two months away from football, Aaron spent a lot of time in church praying to God to help him clean up his life.

"There was sin in my life that really needed to be changed," Aaron said. "Smoking weed was the first thing I took out of my life. Quitting drinking took about a month."

While he worked to quit his bad habits, Aaron evaluated himself.

He didn't like some of the things he had done. He had lied to people who loved and trusted him and had been a poor role model for Colin.

Knowing that he may have let his brother down weighed "very heavily" on him, Aaron said.

"I think my heart was right about wanting to show him the ropes, but not everything was the right thing," Aaron said. "Now I pray every day that he didn't do the same things I did."

"When I look back on my life now, there are a lot of things I wish I could change or do differently. All I can do now is pray that he follows in

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