

## Why Football?

I am a living example of what makes football the greatest game out there for a young person to play. This is a game where with discipline, tutelage, and work, a raw unpolished athlete like I was can work and cultivate that athleticism into great skill. That athlete can in turn use that skill to get a top notch education, and in my case - a career. It wasn't until I was 17 years old that I found my way into a football helmet, yet my inexperience was viewed by many college coaches as a positive attribute, in that I had fewer bad habits than someone who had played since youth. I can't think of another sport where this occurs as frequently as football. In my 2 years in Calgary, and 3 years here in Edmonton, I've made it a point to watch as much youth football here in Alberta as possible - and recently been lucky enough to help in the skill development of some of your young players through an initiative that I started called Playmaker U. In that time, I've noticed a number of things about these players, some inciting optimism - others concern.

In speaking to many coaches in the province, one of the central concerns with the state of football here in Alberta is that they feel as if they simply do not get enough quality athletes coming out for football. Hockey being what it is in this province as well as soccer, volleyball and basketball having appeal to young players, many coaches feel that if they could just get those higher calibre athletes out for football, it would create more possibilities for their respective teams. I can certainly understand this point fully as I was one of those athletes that was playing other sports, and came to football mostly out of a need to play something first season when they cut the volleyball team at my school. I think that in most cases, as was the case with me at that age - the more gifted athletes at the high school level, also tend to be the most motivated. Aside from the national and cultural appeal of hockey here in Canada, part of what drives so many athletes to the game is that there is so much available in the way of skill development, which encourages optimistic thinking in the way of the potential opportunities that the game can create for an athlete. In Edmonton alone hockey skill camps, clinics, and training centers seem to rival Tim Horton's for real estate. I see football as a sport on the rise at the amateur level here in Alberta, and the more opportunities and exposure to quality training, and skill development that are available to young football players - the more enticing it will be as a sport option to the elite athletes of those youth levels. Understand as well that football as a sport houses the best athletes of any sport in the world. The range of size, agility, speed, physicality, mental processing, endurance, and coordination is unmatched in any other sport. Because of this, football can be an attractive training tool for athletes in other sports. Basketball players become more physical, baseball and soccer players become more explosive and faster, volleyball players get stronger and more agile, and hockey players benefit in virtually every physical way through football training. These traits can make football an appealing option for any serious athlete, even if not as their primary sport.

I've been encouraged by the Alberta player's excitement and passion for the game, as well as the overall talent level present. I've worked with young football players in virtually every city that I've played in over my 10 year career including New York, Maryland, Denver, Toronto, and Windsor and I find the talent level here to be on par, and better in many positions. The kids playing football here are sponges, and their thirst for knowledge and more football is almost tangible. Football is such an inclusive game holding rosters of over 50 players at every level collegiate and higher which really opens the doors for any and everybody who's willing to put in the time to have some measure of success. The onus falls on us who they look to, to provide the opportunities for them to better themselves in the game. The more these athletes are immersed in the game, and given the tools to cultivate their own skills and knowledge of it - their confidence will grow in leaps and bounds.

The CFL's non-import status is in a state of flux currently due to the general consensus that the quality of the leagues Canadian players is lacking. The CFL provides a truly viable goal for young players in this, and all provinces and the ratio rules in place ensure that places are held solely for homegrown talent. The onus falls on both us as coaches/teachers/mentors and on the athletes themselves to ready the next generation of CIS/NCAA and CFL/NFL talent. We must encourage these players push their limits and take all steps necessary to obtain the highest level available to them. At times this may mean that we need to steer them to other training facilities, coaches, camps, clinics etc. And that we ourselves must extend our range of knowledge to stay on top of the comings and goings of football today. Above all, we must encourage our athletes as confidence is really the biggest difference that I've seen between our athletes and their American counterparts in this sport. At these young ages their egos are as fragile as eggshells and can truly be influenced greatly by those that they look to for guidance in sport, and we must be cognizant of that.

At the age of 15, I came to my coaches seeking their council and guidance in my desire to obtain an athletic scholarship to an American University. I had been very successful in basketball, soccer, volleyball, and track to that point yet out of the 6 coaches present at that meeting - 5 told me that I was crazy, as they assured me that my counterparts across the border were light years beyond me. Undaunted and with a new fuel for my fire, I set out to accomplish what had been my goal for quite some time. I sent out self made profiles to 200 U.S. schools, and film that I had my family shoot for me, and that I edited to 80 schools. I was offered full scholarships in at least one sport by more than 40 schools and accepted an offering from the University of New Hampshire because they were the only school that agreed to let me play three sports - football, basketball and track and field. Those that I looked to for guidance in sport were wrong in their estimation of my ability to compete at a high level. But if I would have listened to them, I wouldn't be in the position to mentor the young players that I do now. Lets learn from their mistakes and give every athlete willing to work the best chance to see how far their potential can actually take them.

**Kamau Peterson**

**Playmaker U**