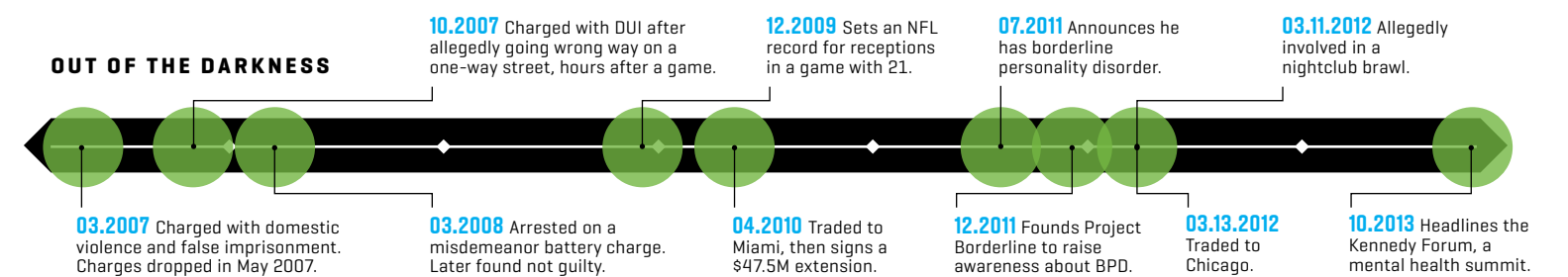


# THE PURSUIT OF RADICAL ACCEPTANCE

BRANDON MARSHALL ISN'T RUNNING FROM HIS VIOLENT PAST. HE'S OWNING UP TO IT IN THE PRESENT TO MEET THE NFL'S MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS HEAD-ON.

WRITTEN BY MARIN COGAN | PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARCUS SMITH

## OUT OF THE DARKNESS





# BRANDON MARSHALL

places a foot on the broken concrete ledge of the old schoolyard and hoists himself up. Two drained Miller Lite cans crunch underfoot. He tucks his thumbs under the straps of his orange backpack and peers up at the Larimer School, a once-grand Italian Renaissance building named after this neighborhood in the east end of Pittsburgh. All of the elders in his neighborhood matriculated here, but it's been closed for 34 years, its terrazzo floors now littered with asbestos. Over the door, letters are

blocked in yellow paint: KNOW THYSELF. Marshall's videographer focuses his lens, framing him in front of the school. Three years ago, when Marshall got out of treatment for borderline personality disorder, he began taping a documentary. The videographer has been with him ever since. In this scene—meeting the property owner to discuss redeveloping the school—Marshall explains why he's been out of touch: "I'm just now getting right." This neighborhood was once home to

myriad shops and bakeries and Italian immigrants, but gradually it lost almost 90 percent of its population, leaving behind empty lots and one of the poorest census tracts in Pittsburgh. Marshall moved to Florida in fourth grade, but most of his extended family is still here. He loves coming home and wants to help transform Larimer into a livable area. But it's not a good place for him to stay for too long. It's not just the risk of getting caught in someone else's trouble. "When we look at how the disorder presented itself in me," he says, "a lot of it comes from here."

Following his diagnosis three years ago, Marshall, now 30 and a Pro Bowl wide receiver for the Bears, set a lofty goal: become for mental health what Magic Johnson is for HIV. He wants to make an off-limits subject commonplace. He's reaching out to players who might need help, teaming with mental health organizations through his charity and raising awareness and cash for early-detection programs. "Where we are now is where the HIV community was 25 years ago," he says. "We can raise all the money in the world, but people might not go get help. They're still going to see it as a taboo topic. So it's important for us to get the conversation started."

In July 2011, Marshall called a news conference to announce the diagnosis of BPD. Three months earlier, his wife, Michi, had been arrested and Marshall had been hospitalized after an argument. Police said Michi had stabbed him with a kitchen knife in self-defense; the two later said he was cut by broken glass. Out of respect for his marriage, he wouldn't share details, he told reporters, but he wanted them to know that his wife was no villain. He remembered her looking up at him from the back of a police car, pain in her eyes, and saying, "Someone

+ READ MORE ABOUT HOW MARSHALL MENTORS FELLOW FOOTBALL PLAYERS AS THEY TACKLE MENTAL ILLNESS AT ESPN.COM/NFL

will learn from this story."

That January, Marshall had started seeing Dr. John Gunderson, director of psychosocial and personality research at McLean Hospital near Boston, but he'd given up on therapy. After the incident, Gunderson emailed him: "I heard, now call me and we can see where we can go from here." Still, Marshall was unmoved until his agent and assistant knocked on his door. "They said, 'Brandon, we really want you to go back,'" he says. "I prayed on it and said, 'OK, I will go.'"

He underwent a clinical evaluation, followed by a neurological one, then got his diagnosis: borderline personality disorder. BPD is characterized by emotional outbursts, impulsiveness and difficulty maintaining stable relationships. It can cause wild fluctuations between idealization and vilification—loving and hating those closest to a person. "I can't articulate well enough how I've affected the people around me, the No. 1 person being my wife," Marshall said at the news conference announcing his condition.

He told the assembled media about the techniques he'd learned in therapy. One of them, radical acceptance, taught

him to accept the world as it is. Everything bad he'd ever done, everything bad ever done to him, any time he'd hurt someone or been hurt—he learned to practice letting go. To treat himself and others with compassion. To stop trying to change the past. "I'm not saying I'm cured, but I'm confident with the skills that I have learned," he said.

Other NFL players have come forward about mental illness—social anxiety (Ricky Williams), depression (Eric Hipple), bipolar disorder (Erik Ainge)—but Marshall's statement in 2011 was genuinely trailblazing. Other than memoirist Susanna Kaysen (*Girl, Interrupted*), the only public figure to declare a diagnosis of BPD has been Dr. Marsha Linehan, developer of one of its most respected treatments.

Marshall has acknowledged that some see his disclosure of the diagnosis as an attempt to excuse his past behavior. "I'm making myself vulnerable, and I want it to be clear that this is the opposite of damage control," he said in 2011. BPD is far less understood than other disorders, and some therapists won't work with patients who suffer from it, owing to the unpredictable and



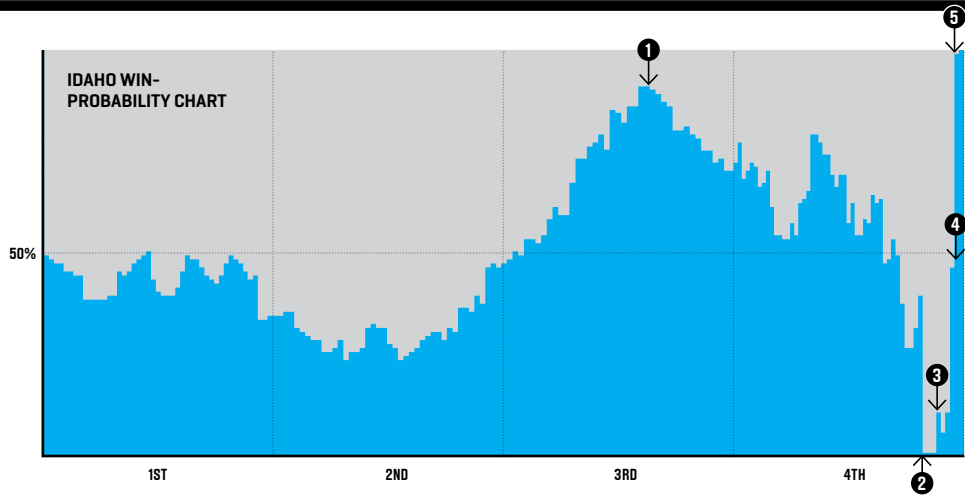
“THIS IS A CIVIL RIGHTS ISSUE. IF THE NFL ALLOWS PLAYERS SECOND CHANCES, WHY CAN'T WALGREENS OR McDONALD'S?”  
BRANDON MARSHALL

challenging behavior that it causes. Marshall's story defies the easy redemption and recovery narrative that can characterize sports stories about mental illness when the primary victim is the sufferer. In his case, others suffered greatly. In 2009, ESPN's *Outside the Lines* detailed at least seven police reports stemming from alleged cases of domestic violence involving Marshall and Rasheedah Watley, his then-girlfriend. They included audio from two 911 calls. In one, Watley phones from a taxi that Marshall is blocking; she screams, "He's crazy, he's attacking the car!" After another altercation in 2007, Watley received stitches for a knife wound. A friend who took Watley to the hospital frantically told a 911 operator that Marshall had rammed her car and was approaching with a brick. She cried for police: "Where are they? He's f---ing crazy!" The stomach-churning stories of violence happened even as Marshall established himself in the NFL, setting a league record with 21 catches in a game as a Bronco in 2009. His teams struggled to work with him too. Denver suspended him in 2009 for his behavior

## 143-1 ODDS CFB'S GREATEST COMEBACK SINCE 2004

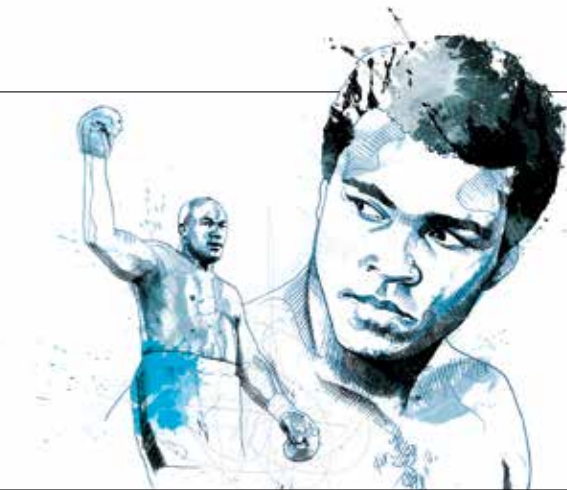
Idaho vs. Bowling Green, 2009 Humanitarian Bowl: On their own 34 with 26 ticks left, the Vandals ignore the writing on the wall.

- 1] With 5:30 to go in the third quarter, Idaho scores a third straight touchdown for a 28-14 lead and a 90 percent win probability.
- 2] Bowling Green gets its fourth second-half TD, a 51-yard catch with 32 seconds left, giving it a 42-35 lead—and giving Idaho a win probability of just 0.8 percent.
- 3] Vandals QB Nathan Enderle completes a 50-yard out to Preston Davis to the Falcons' 16 (win probability up to 12.2 percent).
- 4] Idaho's Max Komar makes a sliding catch for a TD with four seconds on the clock.
- 5] Down by one point, with a win probability south of 50 percent, Idaho goes for two. Enderle hits Davis in the end zone for the two-point conversion. A 23-yard kick return later, Idaho wins!



SOURCE: ESPN STATS & INFORMATION





MUHAMMAD ALI VS. GEORGE FOREMAN

MUHAMMAD  
ALI

26-2

In the gauze of history, Ali's comeback has been reduced to myth. But the true tale is all the more amazing. In 1967, at 29-0, Ali was denied a license for opposing the draft. He was exiled for three years before he regained the heavyweight title in 1974 by besting none other than Foreman. Ali defended that belt an absurd 11 times, going 10-1, and was 26-2 overall in his first 28 post-comeback fights. By going 1-3 in his final fights, did he hold on too long? Yes. Like most every other boxer in history. —BERNARDO PILATTI, ESPN INSIDER

45

GEORGE  
FOREMAN

To prefer Ali's comeback over Foreman's is a sentimental reaction clouded in nostalgia. The reality is that Foreman's return, which began at age 38 after a 10-year absence during which he became an ordained minister, of all things, was all the more impressive for how few took it seriously. Ali's comeback featured more iconic wins. But Foreman's come-from-behind KO of Michael Moorer in 1994—making him, at 45, the oldest heavyweight champ ever—was a win for the ages *and* the aged. —BRIAN CAMPBELL, ESPN INSIDER

WHO HAD THE GREATER COMEBACK, ALI OR FOREMAN? VOTE NOW ON ESPN.COM: SEARCH "MAGCOMEBACK"

at practice—walking instead of jogging, knocking down a pass he was supposed to catch. In 2010, he went to the Dolphins, where he butted heads with QB Chad Henne. In 2012, he was traded to the Bears for a pair of third-round picks. No one questioned his talent, but his behavior stretched the limits of understanding or empathy.

“This is the most stigmatized disorder out there,” he said during his news conference. “Please tell this story in a way that will help others.”

“MY BUDDY WHO just got killed, Mich?” Marshall taps a finger on the passenger-side window. “This was where he got killed, right here in this parking lot. Sitting in his car. Two weeks ago.”

They're near Brandon's boyhood home, where he witnessed at a young age the same sorts of domestic disputes that would later surface in his relationships. An hour earlier, they had eaten at

a restaurant in a redeveloped part of Pittsburgh's east end. Michi asked Brandon to say grace. “We are rooted and grounded by our faith,” she says. “We have a story to tell, and we have people to help and work to do. We don't have to prove our hearts are genuine about this. The only thing we need to do is be transparent. That's something that comes naturally—and it gives people an open door to ask for help.”

Not long after he left McLean, Marshall invited his extended family to his grandmother's home in Larimer for a barbecue. The event was part family reunion, part sociology experiment: Marshall wanted to observe how his family interacted. While he believes that his BPD was triggered by the stresses and pressures of a career in the NFL, he also thinks that he's a product of his environment.

“From my grandmother to my aunts and uncles, to me, my cousins and our

children ... I noticed that our temperaments, how we communicated, how we dealt with conflict was the same. There was no such thing as validating.”

A year later, Marshall recounted that reunion in front of 400 attendees at a National Education Alliance for Borderline Personality Disorder conference. The audience offered sympathetic laughs. Mental health care providers know that many people with BPD have experienced some kind of familial or personal trauma. Marshall warmed up the room by displaying the skills he'd learned in therapy to soothe his vulnerability about public speaking: “I can play in front of 70,000 people, but in a small setting—this is small to me—I get butterflies every time. So I'm going to be mindful that I'm nervous right now. I'm going to radically accept it.” He paused a moment to focus on a single point and gather his thoughts, then shared some of his writing from therapy.

“Lately, death seems near,” he wrote. “I'm 27 years old and if that day came soon it'd be marked as a tragedy—not because I'm Brandon Marshall, pro football player, but because I wasted an opportunity to be a shining light on this world, and I spent my time here blowing out flames.”

There is no magic pill that treats BPD and only a few that help symptoms. Marshall never took any of them, choosing instead to undergo a form of psychotherapy that includes meditation and more traditional cognitive behavioral therapy. Most patients condition their brain over time to control the intensity of their emotions. Some may come to see it as a chronic condition that requires periodic or regular care.

In 2012, a woman claimed Marshall punched her during a brawl at a New York club. He says he was trying to get Michi, who'd been struck by a

bottle, away from the melee and denies hitting anyone. Police declined to press charges, citing a lack of evidence. It has been his only reported run-in with the police since his diagnosis. Marshall is still in the process of proving to himself and the world that he's a different man, and that could take a lifetime.

He speaks with the conviction of a man who's had a revelation: This disease, which causes so much pain, can be a gift—a way to reach people, to empathize deeply and maybe prevent others from experiencing what he has.

“I figured it out when I was in the outpatient program at McLean,” Marshall says. “I found that there was more to life, more to me. I went from patient to provider. I was like, ‘This is where I'm supposed to be working.’”

In the year after his diagnosis, Marshall did a PSA for the NEA-BPD and founded Project Borderline to educate the public about the disorder. He started the Brandon Marshall Foundation to raise awareness about broader mental health issues and provide resources to prevention and treatment programs. And he visited Congress to help push for the Mental Health in Schools Act after headlining the first-ever Kennedy Forum, a mental health summit, last fall. Joe Biden spoke, followed by Marshall—who teased the VP about his long-windedness before turning to 450 members of the mental health community and declaring: “This is my team.”

Marshall has also taken his message to the field. Last October he wore lime-green cleats—the color the mental health community uses to promote its cause—during a game. When the league fined him \$10,500, he tweeted the letter with the caption: “Football is my platform not my purpose. This fine is nothing compared to the conversation started & awareness raised.”



From the turf to grassroots events, Brandon [with wife Michi, right] goes green to raise awareness of BPD and erase its stigma.

Marshall has used his platform to talk about how mental health issues play out in the NFL. When the Jonathan Martin–Richie Incognito bullying story dominated headlines last year, Marshall issued a statement commending Martin's strength in coming forward. “This is where we grow. Conflict is where the opportunity lies,” he says.

So it's no surprise that he has become someone whom people around the league turn to when mental illness affects them. A prominent player pulled him away from the cameras at a game to tell him that he too suffered from mental illness; another later told Marshall that he was bipolar; coaches have approached him before games to say their wives or loved ones had suffered.

He believes the NFL can set an example for workplace treatment of mental illness. “This is a civil rights issue,” he says. “If we can break down these barriers and the stigmatization at the highest level, then it's a trickle-down effect. If the NFL allows players second chances to incorporate themselves back into the workforce, then why can't Walgreens or McDonald's?”

In 2012, the league announced a partnership with outside agencies to

establish the Life Line program, a 24/7 hotline for players and their families that connects callers with resources and helps them during crises. It also created the NFL Ambassador program, which trains ex-players to provide peer counseling services. It is part of a broader effort, NFL VP of communications Brian McCarthy says, to refocus attention on what the league calls “total wellness.” He says Marshall's efforts dovetail with that: “He's a success story, not only because he's come back from his own issues but for the fact that he's using his popularity to further drive awareness of this issue.”

Marshall wants the league to work with him to reach out to other players. “I spoke to Commissioner Goodell; he's open to talking through some things,” Marshall says. “It's a conversation that the NFL wants to have, but a 1-800 number is not going to help our guys or our families. Players won't talk about it because of the stigma. They feel that they'll be judged—which they will. But that's why we need them to talk up.”

In his own pursuit of radical acceptance, he knows there may never be an end. The day after he visits the schoolhouse, Marshall is invited to speak at a community celebration in Larimer. Just after 8 p.m., he takes the stage in front of about 100 friends, family and neighbors. He leads them in prayer:

*We pray for revelation, for a renewing of our mind.*

*We pray for a transformation in our heart.*

His prayer is thematically similar to some of the techniques he learned in therapy. It is a paradox: In learning acceptance, one can begin to effect real change. That all change begins within—through the renewing of the mind and the transformation of the heart. He cannot change his past. He can only move forward, and try to do better. ■