

UI recruit gets shot at carrying on legacy

Ben Handel/Moscow-Pullman Daily News

When Jaden Gardner received a scholarship offer to play football for the the University of Idaho on June 18, it should have been one of the happiest, most thrilling days of his life.

Instead, the 16-year-old linebacker was handed a sobering reminder that some things are more important than sports when his father, former Idaho standout Bryson Gardner, suddenly and unexpectedly passed away that very same afternoon.

“It as a big honor and was such a crazy day, but for my dad to not be there to experience it with me, it was really hard for me,” Jaden said. “My dad had told me he wanted to help me achieve my goals, and when I decided I wanted to play college football, he was right there helping me. For him not being able to be there when I got the offer was very hard.

“It’s a big deal, getting your first offer from a college, but the importance of it was really weighed down. Not having my dad there showed what really matters in life.”

Bryson was an athlete all of his life and earned a full-ride scholarship at the University of Idaho in 1995. By his junior season, he was the starting free safety and team captain for the Vandals. While attending school he also met his wife, Laura.

“We ended up meeting in the fall of ‘96 when we had a speech class together,” Laura said. “We started dating the next year and in ‘98 we had Jaden when we were both still going to school at Idaho.

“When Jaden was just a few months old, Idaho went down and beat Boise State in the ‘98 Humanitarian Bowl on the blue turf. That was a high point in our lives, just so exciting.”

Bryson graduated with degrees in business administration and sociology and was drafted into the Canadian Football League by the British Columbia Lions. When an injury cut his CFL career short, the gritty defensive back turned down an offer to play in NFL Europe and the Gardner family moved to southern California to begin the next chapter of their lives.

Bryson landed a job as a Nike combine trainer and quickly became passionate about helping underprivileged children participate in sports.

“Families pay hundreds of dollars to send their kids to speed and agility camps during the summer, but Bryson recognized lots of families can’t afford to pay that,” Laura said. “He helped start a foundation called PUSH — that stands for purpose, unity, service, humility — and basically it was just helping train the youth of Southern California. It’s not just about sports either, they help kids with their grades, help them put together highlight reels and look at colleges.”

It wasn't long before the Gardners welcomed two more children into the family. Their second son, Braylen, is now an ambitious 7-year-old gymnast, while their 4-year-old daughter, Jaycie, is an avid soccer player.

Jaden, however, preferred the same sport his father loved.

"Playing football is in my blood, really," Jaden said. "I started playing in seventh grade — that's when my dad thought I was old enough physically and mentally to handle the stress football puts on you. From then, I just fell in love with it."

In his first year of high school football, however, Jaden encountered hardships. During the first game of the season, an opposing player stomped on his right leg after the whistle had blown, breaking his tibia and fibula.

"He had to have surgery and couldn't walk for eight months," Laura recalled. "He spent a lot of time at home, doing school work here, and he had to relearn how to walk, how to run when his leg healed."

Perhaps it was the eight months where he was unable to walk that motivated him, or perhaps it was simply part of his DNA. Regardless of the reason, it was then that Jaden decided he wanted to become a Division I athlete like his father had been.

"Just last summer, he and his dad sat down and had a heart-to-heart, and that was the first time he verbalized to us that he wanted to play college football," Laura said. "We told him that grades need to come first, that he needs to work towards getting a college education, but if he wants to play football, it's going to take extra work, extra dedication."

In his sophomore year, Jaden transferred to Riverside County's Notre Dame High School. The nagging injuries, however, weren't quite done. Jaden suffered a sprained left foot, likely an after-effect from being on crutches for so long. He missed the first five games of the season before starting the last five, recording 48 tackles, five sacks, two forced fumbles and an interception.

Bryson helped out with his son's football team whenever he could, leaning on his experience to help the younger players develop.

"Jaden told us there was a kid who played football at his school who always came to practice without cleats," Laura said. "When they asked him about it, he would say he had just forgotten them and left them at home, but Jaden thought he was just too embarrassed to say he didn't have any."

"My husband would help out with Jaden's football team too, filling in where he could, and one day he came home and told me, 'this boy still doesn't have the right shoes.' So he went out and bought some cleats and gave them to the coaches but told them to say they had found an extra pair or something — he didn't want the kid to know he had bought him a pair of cleats. That's just the kind of man Bryson was. He always wanted to help but didn't want the recognition."

Former 49ers defensive back Derek Johnson is one of Jaden's high school football coaches. Johnson was impressed by the raw talent he saw in Jaden, but advised him to run track to develop his speed and help rehab his injuries. The oldest Gardner son wasn't too keen on the idea, but he followed his coach's advice and wound up being quite successful.

Equipped with extra speed from track, the 6-foot, 210-pound Jaden attended several mini-camps and quickly distinguished himself from his peers, earning several awards recognizing him as one of the best underclassmen in California. He landed invites to several college camps, including USC and Arizona State, but decided he wanted to go to the one coach Paul Petrino was hosting at Idaho.

The whole Gardner family was planning on coming to Moscow for the football camp, but shortly before it began, a nasty flu hit the family, forcing them to cancel their road trip and instead fly just Jaden to Moscow.

"I went up to Idaho's football camp because it was where my dad had played and it was a full-contact camp so it gave me a chance to showcase my abilities," Jaden said. "The defensive coordinator liked me, the linebacker coach liked me and coach Petrino pulled me aside a couple times and during the camp and talked to me."

In the meantime, the rest of the Gardners were still laid up sick. Bryson, who had never taken a sick day in the 18 years he had known his wife, stayed home that Monday before returning to work the following day.

"Wednesday morning Jaden calls me at like 6:30 and says, 'Hey mom, just touching base with you. I'm doing a really good job and I think the coaches here are going to offer me,'" Laura said. "The same day, at about noon, Jaden calls me back and tells me coach Petrino wants to talk to dad. I say, 'Dad can't talk right now, he's too sick.' Five minutes later, Jaden calls me back and tells me coach Petrino had offered him."

Bryson passed away that afternoon, just shy of his 37th birthday.

"The coaching staff up there didn't know. Jaden didn't know. I chose to not tell him until I could get him here," Laura said. "So I put him on a plane, flew him back home early, and had to tell him. Jaden just wanted to know if his dad had known that he had been offered at the same school his dad had played at and that the coaches there had really liked him. He knew.

"It's the best day of his life and the worst day of his life all in the same day."

The unexpected twist of fate gave Jaden extra motivation to carry on his father's legacy after he wraps up his last two years of high school.

"We were best friends, always laughing together and doing something fun — whether we were working out, watching TV or playing football, he was always there for me," Jaden said. "A lot of people in Moscow remember my dad and his playing days with the Vandals. To get to walk around the Kibbie Dome with that legacy, it's quite an honor."

For now, Bryson's death leaves his family with unanswered questions and an uncertain future.

"We have to wait 20 weeks for the autopsy report and we truly don't know what happened to him — I was sicker than he was," Laura said. "Now we're up in the air — he had no life insurance, the salary he had from his job is gone, and I've got kids to take care of. Kids who miss their dad. All we can do is pray."

Friends of the Gardner family have set up a fund for them online. People wishing to help the family out during these trying times can donate at <http://www.gofundme.com/ake5f0>.

Ben Handel can be reached at (208) 883-4629, or by email to bhandel@news.com.