

# Life of Bryan

Bruce Feldman, ESPN.com

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While doing research for the [recruiting recaps](#) series a few months ago, I became intrigued by one-time Texas blue-chipper Bryan Pickryl.

Five years ago he was a lanky defensive end from Oklahoma, who, along with Vince Young, Rod Wright and about two dozen other touted prospects, made up the nation's top-rated recruiting class. Despite packing only about 215 pounds on his 6-foot-5 frame, Pickryl was still so quick and relentless, he started five games for UT at defensive end, notching 4½ sacks as a true freshman. He did even better in the classroom. He was a biomedical engineering major who earned a 4.0 GPA in his first semester at UT.

But, just as it would seem like his star was set to take off, his football career seemed to fade away.

The short answer, according to some clip searches, was that Pickryl's career was derailed by a series of shoulder injuries. In researching that recruiting series, I'd say about 10 percent of all the recruits from those classes were lost because of injury. Another 10 percent bottomed out due to off-field problems, and probably another 20 percent got washed away by academic trouble.

I didn't think too much more about Pickryl until I headed down to Austin for another story on a Longhorn all-world recruit who had gotten sidelined by his own devastating injury. That story, known by some inside the UT football program, is "the miracle story" about the recovery of Tony Hills, and is in the upcoming issue of ESPN The Magazine. In a way it felt like the flip side of what I thought was the Pickryl story, but turns out it isn't.

Life without football is going pretty well for Pickryl.

The injury problems actually had started long before he arrived at UT. Back in 1998, his right shoulder first popped out of joint. Then, a few games into his senior year at powerful Jenks (Okla.) High School he suffered a torn labrum. Still, Pickryl played the rest of the season trying to keep the shoulder from popping out of its socket, and waited until after the season to have surgery.

When he showed up in Austin that winter, he weighed just 204 pounds. His lack of bulk though, didn't stop him from making an instant impact for the Horns. However, for as well as he played, he kept having trouble with his shoulders. He had another shoulder surgery after his freshman season. Then, in the second game of his sophomore season, he dislocated his left shoulder. This injury was actually even more debilitating than the one to the right side, which was an anterior tear. This one was a posterior tear.

Pickryl spent two months in a brace that kept his arm at a 45-degree angle out to his side. "It looked like I was Robocop," he said. "I couldn't sit down in desks. I actually had to withdraw from class (for a semester.)" Showering with the brace wasn't an option. He was reduced to using a wash cloth.

The series of shoulder injuries made Pickryl wonder if he could last playing football. Genetically, he obviously has been blessed with many of the traits -- the quickness, the balance, the flexibility, the instincts -- needed to be an elite pass rusher. Unfortunately, his tendons might not have been strong enough to withstand the pounding of the sport. Pickryl was unsure about his next move. After sitting out a season, he worked hard to get his strength back. He got up near 250 pounds and estimates he was about 80 percent back. He had a sit down with coach Mack Brown, talking about "long-term stuff."

Brown explained that, for selfish reasons, he wanted Pickryl to come back, but added that he knew the kid didn't need this long-term. He would support him regardless. "We'll treat you like part of the family either way," Brown said.

Pickryl's parents were split on what they wanted him to do. His father, who

told him he loved him unconditionally, voted comeback. "He's so into Texas," Pickryl said. "He was like, 'You gotta play. There's just no other option.'"

His mother, though, didn't want to see him hurt. Ultimately, Pickryl realized there is a lot more he hopes to do in his future. "I want to be able to pick my grandchildren up some day," he said.

Pickryl still was a part of the UT football program, assisting in recruiting. He showed recruits and their families around the UT football complex on gamedays, lending his perspective on life as a student-athlete. He also volunteered to help out on the academic side too, as a tutor, but not many people are taking engineering classes, he said.

The toughest thing about not playing, he said, is that he missed the competition. And of course, he would've loved to have been out there with his old teammates in the Rose Bowl when they won the national title. It fulfilled a vision he had when he signed on with UT as part of that celebrated group. "I knew our class was something special," he said. "We had a lot of competitors. Everybody hated to lose."

While many from that class are headed to the NFL, Pickryl is heading to Lille, France during the first part of the summer in order to take a class called [Biomedical Imaging Modalities](#).

He is scheduled to graduate in the spring of 2007 and is hoping to get a medical internship or research with a faculty member during his senior year of school.

Sounds like this is one blue-chipper who did just fine at the next level.