

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

SAM MIX STEPS UP

“I think Bozeman and the Bobcats, we’re the definition of ‘The Grass Isn’t Always Greener.’”

BY PAUL BURNS

Sports fans are quick to idolize their favorite athletes, from Tom Brady to LeBron James to Troy Andersen. But how many of our favorite players are truly heroes? Sometimes people are quick to turn someone into a hero. Sure, there are heroes in everyday life, but few of us have saved another person’s life.

Sam Mix is currently in the spotlight for Montana State because, this past spring, he was promoted to running back coach. If the Bobcats run the ball well, that spotlight will gradually fade because, well, that’s what the Bobcats are supposed to do: run the ball. If the team struggles with the run game, the spotlight on Mix may get a little more intense, and questions may arise about his coaching ability.

Not to worry, the Bobcats have a stable full of quality runners, even without Isaiah Ifanse, who opted to enter the portal for what he hopes are the greener fields of California. In Mix’s new job, it’s



photo courtesy MSU Athletics

his task to get the likes of Lane Sumner, Elijah Elliot, Jared White, Garrett Coon, or Marqui Johnson racing downhill with the football in their hands. Any one of those guys is going to punish defenses this season and, if they live up to expectations, the spotlight will fade on Sam Mix, the coach.

But Sam Mix, the hero, will always have a special place in the heart of Taylor Woolman—and the spotlight will always shine bright on him. It was over eight years ago in Havre that Mix, Woolman and another person were celebrating the final moments of the academic year at MSU-Northern, where Mix played football, and Woolman played volleyball. It was well past midnight on May 2, 2015, when a drug-addled, knife-wielding teenager broke into the apartment where Woolman lived, and where Mix was visiting. As the new day was about to dawn, Woolman's and Mix's lives were about to change in ways no one could ever imagine. "I was blindsided by him," Woolman says of their attacker. "He took me down and I was fighting against him; when I couldn't get away from him, I remember Sam standing up and engaging with him."

Woolman would receive 26 stab wounds, but the gash that came closest to killing her was the one to her head. "He lunged at me and stabbed me in the head," Woolman says. The knife broke with the blade still in her head, which Woolman pulled out on her own. "Brain damage from a knife is something no one should ever have to go through."

The assailant, who was 17 at the time and is currently serving 140 years at the Crossroads Correctional Center in Shelby, never said what motivated him. But chances are, had he known there was a football player in the house, he wouldn't have entered.

"Sam fought the attacker; Sam kept him away from me," says Woolman, who was 20 at the time of the attack. "Sam saved my life. He stepped in when I was in need of help. I owe him everything and then some," she said, fighting back tears as she remembered that fateful night. "It was fight or flight. We chose to fight our butts off. We had to fight for our lives. We had no choice."

While Woolman was suffering with a knife in her brain, Mix, then 19, had his own troubles. When the siege finally ended and the attacker left as suddenly as he appeared, Mix's adrenaline rush that saved their lives disappeared, and he started to fade. It was no gradual decline. When someone is stabbed over 45 times with a steak knife, as Mix was, a lot of blood is lost. A gashed lung added to Mix's problems; he quickly lost consciousness as he slumped to the floor, ending up in a pool of his own blood. By the time help arrived around 4:30 in the morning, Mix had lost over four liters of blood. His prospects didn't look good.

Both survivors were airlifted to Great Falls. From there, Woolman, who grew up in Belgrade, went on to Billings and, eventually, to Denver for nearly three months of rehab. She had to learn how to walk again; one of her arms still doesn't work, and she's blind in one eye. She's proud of her accomplishments since then; although she was unable to return to college, she's settled in Bozeman with a good job in the insurance business.

"After they decided that I wasn't going to die," Mix says he was flown to Seattle to be closer to his family, who live in nearby Sammamish. From there, he began the long road to recovery. "I started to get my peak of athleticism right before (the attack)," says Mix, who



started at wide receiver as a true freshman in 2014. "That same peak helped me recover the way I did."

And recover he did. "I had an awesome support group," he says. As his wounds healed, Mix pledged that he'd return to the game he loved. He worked and he worked, and he worked. And then he worked some more. He wasn't on campus the fall following the attack, but by January 2016, Mix was re-enrolled at school in Havre, and participated in spring drills. In the fall of 2016, he was back on the field, picking up where he left off, as best he could. "There were times it was pretty bad, but when it started coming back it was pretty instantaneous. The doctors were pretty wild with me. I lost a lot of sensation everywhere," he says. "Getting back into football shape was a different thing."

He didn't know it at the time, but in some ways the battle in the apartment pushed him into coaching a little quicker than he'd originally planned. He returned to the gridiron partly with the attitude that if he couldn't play, he could help coach. "I was never the same player I was as a freshman," he explains. Instead he became a serious student of the game. Mix still contributed on offense, but at the same time was helping his fellow receivers, and picking the brains of his coaches. "I always knew I wanted



to go into coaching,” he says. “The reason I had success at football was because of my knowledge. I was never genetically a freak. I was a good, coordinated kid.”

When he finished playing at Northern in the fall of 2018, he got a job with the team as an assistant coach. At a small NAIA school like MSU-Northern, each coach is assigned multiple duties. Mix was in charge of special teams, wide receivers, and recruiting, which left little time to complain about the nagging scars that can't be ignored whenever he removes his shirt.

While helping with a camp in Bozeman in the summer of 2021, he caught the eye of Brent Vigen. The new Bobcats' coach was still rounding out his staff; he offered Mix a job as an offensive analyst and recruiting and operations assistant. This past spring, Mix took over the running game, replacing Jimmy Beal, who left for San Diego State. “He has proven in the last two years to be a very hard worker who communicates well and has an excellent understanding of how we want to operate on the field and in recruiting,” Vigen said when he announced Mix's promotion.

Mix appreciates the opportunity to climb the coaching ladder. At a lot of schools, the only way to get promoted is to leave, like Beal did. This spring, the Bobcats didn't skip a beat in the switch from

Beal to Mix. “I think the work I've been doing here, I've been kind of working the trenches, low man on the totem pole, and I think they've seen that,” he says of Vigen and Taylor Housewright, the offensive coordinator Mix works closely with. “The reason the transition has been seamless is, I think the players have seen that too. I think people respect hard work, and I've been doing that since I've been here.”

All coaches are always recruiting, but it's difficult when a great player gets away. Ifanse's choice to explore the Pac-12 for his final season was disappointing. However, Mix and the Bobcats have moved on, and Mix says that even if Ifanse had changed his mind, there was no going back. “For us, once you leave here, you leave here,” he says. “Don't go test the waters. We have a good thing going here. I think Bozeman and the Bobcats, we're the definition of 'the grass isn't always greener.' It depends on how you water it; our guys do a great job of watering it. If you want to chase a bigger logo, a bigger school, feel free. I always say you make the big time where you are.” Losing the program's all-time leading rusher could turn into a setback, but Mix doesn't think so. The runners Ifanse left behind have all proven themselves, and the Bobcats expect to continue to be one of the nation's best rushing teams, a Vigen and Housewright trademark.

With over 700 yards in 2022, Elliott is the team's top returning running back. But he won't carry the load himself. Both Sumner and Johnson gained over 400 yards last season. And then there's Tommy Mellott, the quarterback who rushed for over 1,000 yards last year. “Those guys know that we need to be a three-headed monster, a four-headed monster, a five-headed monster,” Mix says. “Whatever it is, we need to be elite.”

That grisly night in Havre, a different kind of monster entered into his and Woolman's lives. A combination of evil, methamphetamine, marijuana, alcohol and who-knows-what-else triggered the random act of violence. The assailant was already known to the local police, due to his sexual assault of a 13-year old girl the previous year. After fleeing the apartment, he was found not far away, covered in blood he was unable to explain the source of.

As happens in life, time heals most wounds. Both Woolman and Mix will never be able to forget that night. More importantly for their own mental health, both have found it in their hearts to forgive him. “It's year eight and I can actually say his name,” Woolman says of the ironically named Justice Brown. “We ended up getting it (justice) in the end; it just feels that much worse for him. He was failed from the beginning.” Woolman still does physical therapy three times a week, and counseling has helped. “I knew I couldn't hold the hatred in my heart, because that would destroy me, and it wouldn't help my rehab at all.”

Mix has also tried to put the past behind him. Like Woolman, he's completely focused on the current task at hand. “Not to say anything is justified, but he had a pretty tough upbringing,” Mix says. “It's hard to relate to a kid who had his kind of upbringing. Since he was a child, he was exposed to things you shouldn't be exposed to as a child. It was his fault at the end of the day, but at the same time, there were a lot of factors that went into why he did what he did that night.”

Football turned into Mix's escape mechanism. “What happened to me with the stabbing, I don't know what I'd be if I didn't have football, if I didn't have something to drive me, to motivate me.”

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