

FITCHBURG YOUR STORY: More Than a Game - Devin Lebron

["Saxifrage" choral music plays, performed by the Fitchburg State University Choirs]

Prof. Kisha Tracy (intro): Welcome to the Fitchburg State University Perseverantia Podcast network. This is the Fitchburg Your Story series in which Fitchburg State students tell the stories that make our city and university unique.

["Saxifrage" fades out]

[energetic rock style guitar cuts in and plays over transition before fading out]

Devin Lebron: Hi, welcome to my podcast. And this episode is called More Than a Game. I'm your host, Devin LeBron. And today we're diving into something close to my heart, which is football.

[grunting american football scrum can be heard with "touchdownwwwwwn!" punctuating the end]

Not the FIFA kind. It's the tighten your chin straps. We're going to war. We're fighting for every inch kind. Now, some people think football is just a game. They look at it and think it's so simple. It's just pads, points, a few touchdowns if you're lucky.

And then we shake hands and go home.

[grunting american football scrum can be heard with whistle punctuating the end]

But for those of us who've live, played, and experienced it, we know better. Football is culture. Football is identity. Football is a community.

I've been playing this sport for 13 years of my life with the helmet on. And the truth is, I don't plan on stopping anytime soon. I have aspirations to grind and work my way up as a coach someday. And that's all because of values I've gotten every time I stepped onto the field.

You learn to embrace those moments, knowing that the person who hung up the pads would do anything for one more play in a jersey. Anyways, I've been on multiple teams, some that have clicked instantly, others that struggled to even say hi and hello, but each one taught me something and it's made me into the person I am today.

I'm using a couple of outside sources to help me back up my perspective on how football is more than a game. The first one is called "Building Culture, Community, and Morality" by Mark Tankersley. He wrote about this exact kind of journey. In his study, he followed a junior high football team that wasn't just focusing on winning games. They were building values and identity. It wasn't just about PE credit. It was about school pride, leadership, and creating a real sense of community.

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Devin Lebron (cont'd): And let me tell you, I've lived that. I felt what it means to go from a bunch of kids wearing the same jersey to a real team. One that knows each one's strengths, weaknesses, and the small things to get under each other's skin.

Sometimes coaches and players clash hard. Believe me, I've been there. There are moments when a coach pushes too hard or when you feel like no one sees your effort, which causes emotions to run high. Especially when being on a team feels like the only place where people actually expect you to step up and be your best. Where you're not just another kid, but someone who matters. And sometimes that pressure explodes.

But that's where trust is built and the uncomfortable moments when things get messy. Those moments might feel small, but in the big picture, they really aren't.

[light music fades in and takes us through the transition]

In Cecilia Woods article, "Honoring Cultural Traditions through School Athletics," explains that football is more than just a sport. It's a way for schools and communities to hold on to their culture. And honestly, I've seen that firsthand. Football isn't just what happens under the lights on Friday night. It's everything around it. It's the smell of the grills at the tailgates, –

[football crowd sounds, cheering]

– the parents in the stands cheering, even the chants in the school songs passed down through the years.

Football becomes a living tradition. It captures who we are, where we've been, and what we want to pass on. I remember hearing our fight song in the locker room before kickoff. It hits differently. It's like a reminder that we're playing for more than just stats. We're playing for the name on our backs and the teammates next to us.

We're carrying a legacy, and it wasn't just about looking back. It was about knowing who we are. In communities where things might feel divided or uncertain, football has a way of bringing people together. For a few hours, you're all on the same team, even if you're just watching. You're a part of something bigger. That's the kind of culture Woods is talking about. And for a lot of us who've played, that type of glue sticks to you for life.

[light music fades in and takes us through the transition]

Now, let me be real for a second.

It's not like I've been real this whole episode.

Anyways, my senior year, first game, –

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[football scrum, intense plays in the background]

Devin Lebron (cont'd): – I was ready, the team was ready, and as the clock clicks, third quarter comes around, things are going smoothly. We're winning, and bam,

[football scrum intensifies, cuts out – ref's whistle – then silence]

I tore two ligaments in my knee, and just like that, everything stopped. At first, it didn't feel real. I still had hope, thinking maybe it was just a sore knee, so I got up, and snapped the ball for the next play.

I took three steps and as I planted on my leg, I collapsed. It felt like the stadium went silent. I slowly limped over to the sidelines trying to shake it off, but when the trainer started checking in on me, cracking jokes trying to comfort me while my knee was moving in different directions, the silence spoke everything. No one had to say it out loud. I knew something was wrong.

After the game and for a while after that, I went into a spiral, mentally and emotionally. I was lost. You give your whole identity to a sport and suddenly it's gone. It shakes you.

But this is where I learned what football really is. Because of the support around me - family, coaches, and even my teammates - I didn't give up. My family stuck with me through the countless hours of rehab, the late nights thinking give up and quit all the way to the breakdowns.

And in the end, it reminded me I wasn't just an athlete.

I was a person worth supporting, and eventually they guided me, and soon after, I found my way back. I healed, I got stronger, and I eventually fell in love with the game again, all thanks to those who supported me and even those who didn't.

Today, I'm playing college ball, and I carry every scar, every setback, and every lesson with me.

That brings me to another powerful insight from Donald Kamaski. He looked at a small college football team made up mostly of low income, racially diverse students, and he studied how they fit into the wider culture of school.

Spoiler alert, they didn't always feel like they did. But football gave them space. It let them show up with their culture, their experiences, and how to find a way to belong, even if they were different. It didn't erase who they were. It just gave them room to breathe, room to compete, room to matter.

I've seen that too. I've lined up next to guys who are nothing like me off the field. But the second the whistle blew, we were like family. Truly, that's the magic of the game. That's why we keep showing up.

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Devin Lebron (cont'd): So yeah, football is more than a game.

[light music fades in and plays under the rest of the narration]

It's a story to tell. It creates struggle and even a place to grow. It's where cultures live and evolve, where young people find purpose, and overall, where traditions are made and carried on to the next.

So I'll catch you next time, where we'll get into how coaches and players clash, crash, and sometimes flat out lose it on each other. It's all in the name of the sport, and spoilers, there will be yelling, eye rolls, and maybe a few clipboards broken.

Until then, I'm Devin LeBron, and this has been More Than a Game.

Stay strong, stay rooted, and stay in the game.

[light music fades out]

[Perseverantia Network theme fades in]

Matt Baier: You're listening to Perseverantia, the Fitchburg State Podcast Network.

[Perseverantia Network theme fades out]