

Oher's life story is truly the stuff of movies

Ole Miss offensive tackle's dreams are realized

By Ron Higgins

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Sometimes when he is alone in his thoughts, maybe just before he goes to sleep, maybe even thinking about which NFL team will draft him in the first round on Saturday, Ole Miss offensive tackle Michael Oher pauses.

And he wonders, "What if?"

What if Briarcrest Christian principal Steve Simpson hadn't admitted him to school despite a disastrous academic transcript?

What if national recruiting expert Tom Lemming hadn't sent his private scouting report to hundreds of college football coaches, extolling Oher's physical virtues?

But most of all, what if, that chilly November day in 2002, when Oher was standing wearing shorts and a T-shirt on an East Memphis street corner headed for a gym just to get warm, Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy had not driven by with Leigh Anne asking him if he needed a ride?

And what if the Tuohys, their daughter Collins and son Sean Jr. hadn't ignored the raised eyebrows and snide comments about a comfortably wealthy white couple eventually adopting a shy black teenager from a one-parent home, a boy stuffed into a man's body?

"Who knows where I'd be?" said Oher, who in about 6 1/2 years has gone from someone looking for a place to live and someone to love him, to millionaire-in-waiting. "You always know when somebody is fake or real, and I knew right away we had a connection, that they were real.

"They welcomed me with open arms, taught me a lot and made my road in life a lot easier."

The miracle

Probably very early Saturday evening, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell will announce that Michael Oher is the first-round draft selection of a team badly needing a

6-5, 315-pound refrigerator on roller skates to protect a quarterback's blind side.

Oher will breathe a sigh of relief. All the Tuohys will hug him. Leigh Anne will cry, the same way she did the day she had Sean -- former Ole Miss point guard and now a successful Memphis restaurant owner and TV analyst for the Grizzlies -- make a U-turn and pick him up that first time.

And considering Leigh Anne's gesture led to an adoption, which led to a best-selling book on Oher and the Tuohys called "The Blind Side," which is leading to a movie from the book, it's a good bet Sean will see Michael holding up his future NFL team jersey and think a familiar thought.

"How did I get here?" Sean often says. "How did I get to this point? I tell people, 'You can pooh-pooh this and phooey this, but in our house, we believe in miracles.' There are a lot of miracles I can explain better than this. And the end of the day, all I can say is, 'We found a miracle and didn't run from it.'"

Now, the miracle is a man about to start a new life, one in which Oher is making his own decisions. Some of them have been good, some of them didn't work out well, like his original agent choice.

Oher stunned everyone when he signed with Bus Cook, a Hattiesburg, Miss.-based agent whose clients have included Brett Favre and Steve McNair. Cook had signed some of Oher's friends.

The decision was shocking because the Tuohys had a longtime friendship with Memphis-based agent Jimmy Sexton. Leigh Anne, an interior designer, had many of Sexton's players as her clients.

But as Sean said, he was determined to let Michael make his own choices.

"At the start of last season," Sean said, "Michael said, 'I want to do this agent thing on my own, it's got to be my own decision.' Whether I thought that was a good decision or not, you've got to let your kids make their own decisions. He was no longer in our house. He was 70 miles away at school with his own phone."

Things did not go well for Oher under Cook, and it wasn't necessarily Cook's fault. Oher gave it his best but wasn't comfortable training at the place Cook sent him, a facility outside of Dallas run by former Olympic track gold medalist Michael Johnson.

Johnson seemed to be more of a speed coach than strength expert. And by the time Oher reported for the NFL combine in Indianapolis, he was a mess. So he asked Sean what he should do.

"Michael, people don't know who you are right now," Sean said. "You're complex. You're not an easy story to tell, I don't care if there are 10 books written about you."

Somebody has to really know you to tell that story."

Oher hired Sexton, who sent him to train at a familiar spot -- D1 in Nashville.

"Working out in Dallas, I felt that place was more for a skill position guy, and I'm a power guy who likes the heavy lifting," Oher said. "I got away from that in Dallas, but I got back to that in Nashville. They knew me, knew what I needed and I went right back to work. They got me stronger in three weeks, and I exploded at (Ole Miss') pro day."

Sexton said one scout sat next to him and was dazzled.

"The scout said to me, 'This is one of the best pro days I've ever seen, this is the top tackle on our board, no questions asked,'" Sexton said.

More damage control

The last few weeks, Oher's personal interviews with teams have countered a report by ESPN draft analyst Todd McShay. He labeled Oher as one of the three riskiest picks in the draft based on what McShay termed "character issues."

"Todd claims he's got a copy of two negative reports from a couple of NFL teams," said Sexton, who called McShay. "I said, 'If you get just two negative reports and you go on the air and say Michael one's of the three riskiest picks, that's a mischaracterization.' And also, when you use the words 'character issues,' what's the first thing people think? They think about trouble with the law. It was just crazy some of the stuff out there."

McShay's words angered the Tuohys. Oher's reaction?

"It doesn't bother me," he said. "He (McShay) is probably a nice guy. If I see him at the draft, I'll shake his hand."

There have also been the skeptics who wonder why the Tuohys took in Oher. Pro teams have questioned whether Oher's passion and desire for the game have remained high, as he went to a more affluent lifestyle.

Ole Miss coach Houston Nutt has gotten a few of those calls from NFL teams, and all he can say is that his one season coaching Oher was a joy.

"I've had him for a year and there isn't a better person than Michael," Nutt said. "He never was belligerent, always 'Yes-sir, no-sir,' worked hard in the weight room, voted captain and he played great all season long."

New York, New York

Oher is one of the players invited by the NFL to attend the draft in New York, and he

leaves today.

No doubt he'll be asked about his compelling story. Sometimes, it all gets to be a bit too much, especially when he reads the letters he and the Tuohys receive from other families.

He's beginning to understand what his story means.

"If my story can reach a person every day or two who will help get a kid off the street ... then it's a positive," Oher said. "I got some help from people who care about me and my hard work paid off. Here's someone who came from nothing with a zero chance to make it, and to get drafted by the NFL in any round is just unbelievable."

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