

College Football

A Son of Football Calls His Mother

By [DAN BARRY](#) APRIL 26, 2015



A Life on the Gridiron

Credit Karsten Moran for The New York Times

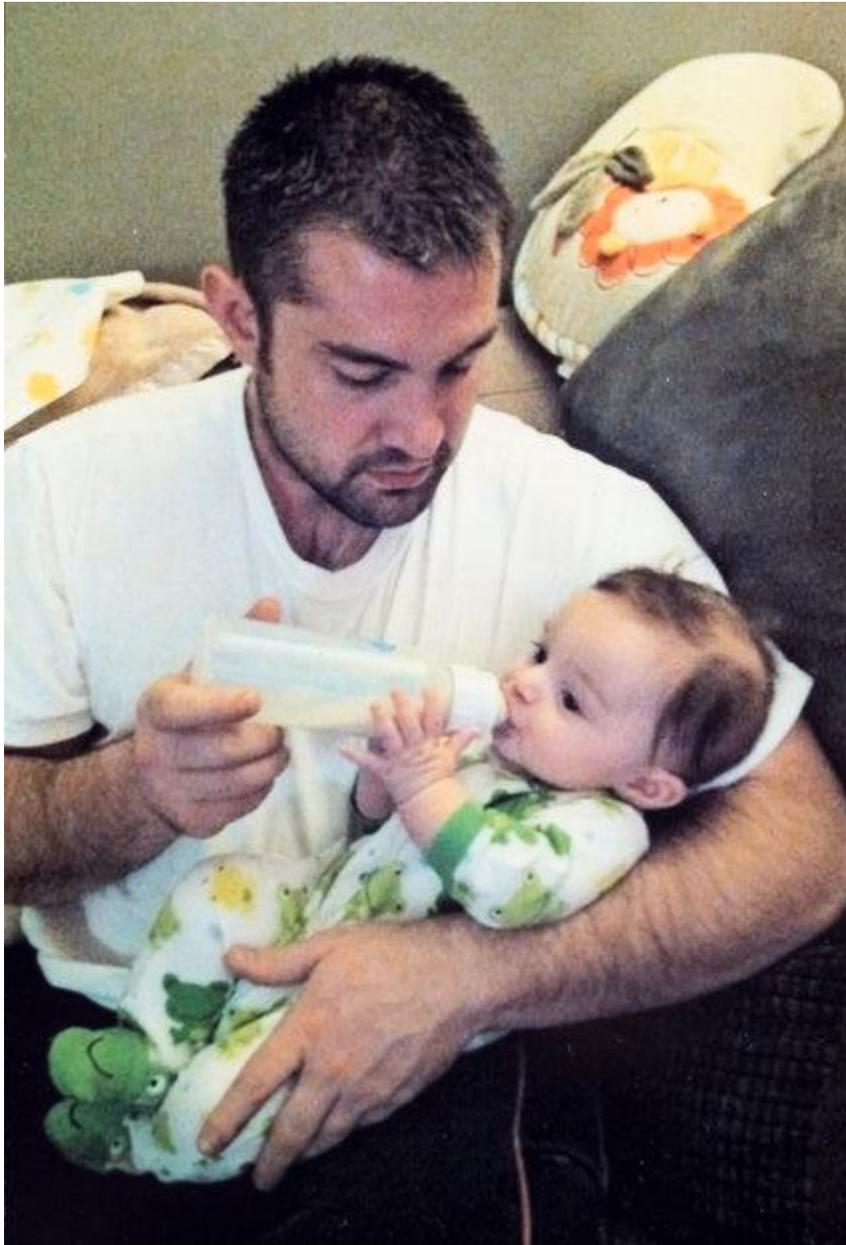
DOYLESTOWN, Pa. — A mother sat at the edge of her bed. Angel figurines gazed down from a shelf, and a wooden sign on the wall offered inspirational words about life and love. They provided no comfort. She was on the edge, cellphone pressed to her ear.

This fraught conversation with her son had started as a quarrel over his scatterbrain ways. A Dartmouth graduate, a decade out of college, should be able to balance his checkbook. But not Patrick, whose troubles in navigating everyday life frustrated everyone. Especially Patrick.

His mother, Karen Kinzle Zegel, sent him a maternal text message to calm down, all will be well. He sent a quick response that, if you knew Patrick Risha at this stage, reflected either bristling anger or unnerving apathy: I am calm.

Now her son was on the phone again, saying disturbing things in a casual tone.

If you look back on that late night last September, their conversation wasn't just about a measly \$400 bank overdraft. It was about football. The word was never uttered, but that's what this was really about. Football.



Patrick Risha in 2010 with his then 1-month-old son Peyton.

Patrick Risha was born into a football family in a football-first community: Pennsylvania's Monongahela Valley, where the pacifiers might as well be mouth guards.

His mountainous father, an educator named Pat Risha, played college football and earned renown in the Mon Valley as the coach at Clairton High School who specialized in motivating disadvantaged students. You'll succeed if you have heart, he'd shout. Players felt honored just to be hit by his saliva.

One day Risha asked Karen Kinzle, a petite school nutritionist, on a date. Then she didn't hear from him for two months, only to find out later the reason: football playoffs.

"I should have known then that the marriage was doomed," she jokes.

Their two children, Patrick and Amanda, grew up midsentence in a never-ending football conversation. It was all about the big game Friday night, then defensive adjustments for the next game, then field conditions for the next, on and on. In the summer they vacationed at football camp; Dad and his assistants in one bunkhouse, Mom and the kids in another.

At 6, Patrick was the Clairton mascot, wearing oversize pads as wide as he was long. At 10, he was a Mighty Mite in the Mon Valley Midget Football League. He was the kid forever asking: Do you think I have heart, Dad?

He became a regional celebrity as a running back at Elizabeth Forward High School. The Horse, he was called, grinding out yardage with his team on his back, then walking off the field helmetless and revealed, a gridiron prince awash in mud, sweat and pride.

Newspapers trumpeted his exploits. "Risha Runs Over Titans." "Warriors, Risha Outlast Cougars." "Warriors Ride Risha Into W.P.I.A.L. Playoffs." "Risha Rolls."

His mother wore his jersey, cheering as he carried the ball like the precious baby he once had been, tucked, secure. His little sister prayed for him to rise from every tackle, unhurt, so that he could keep on banging and spinning like a human top. The family lived for these American nights.

"It was football," Amanda says. "It was what we did."

His mother remembers the external cost of all those games and practices, his entire body, she says, "like a piece of meat."

But at times it seemed something was going on internally as well: the occasional fits of rage over nothing; that day he swallowed a bottle of Tylenol after being grounded for drinking.

All aberrations, it was decided, in the arc of a smart, well-mannered teenager with Ivy League dreams.

After high school, Patrick attended Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts for a year — where he starred, of course, in football — and got accepted to Dartmouth. It looked as if his dedication to the game had paid off, his future secured.

He graduated in 2006 with a degree in government and a lingering disappointment in his up-and-down college career, which included a back injury that introduced him to painkillers. Still, he was known as a solid teammate and an aggressive competitor.

“A pounding running back,” recalls Rich Walton, a teammate who later married Amanda. “He just loved the contact.”

But, again, there were signs that something was off. A gregarious guy who loved to shock preppies with his gritty Pennsylvania persona was now reclusive. A student who could write a lengthy paper with ease now struggled to jot down notes. He began taking Adderall for attention deficit disorder, but no dosage could lock in his focus.

The Horse returned to the Mon Valley, unable to carry himself. He gambled online. He took painkillers. He spent money he didn't have. He had fits of anger that overshadowed his big-hearted nature. Most of all, he seemed overwhelmed by the prospect of paying a bill or updating a cellphone plan.

“It was just hard to relate to,” Amanda says. “I'd think, ‘Is he lazy?’ And I would just end up doing it for him.”

One story in the lore of this new Patrick stands out. In a single week in October 2010, his sister married his former teammate; his longtime girlfriend gave birth to his son, whom they named Peyton (after, yes, Manning); and his father, by then a controversial local power broker, died. It was a lot for anyone to take in.

Several months later, he learned that his sister and brother-in-law never received their prepaid wedding video. His response: to break into the videographer's home with a sledgehammer and reclaim their wedding video and those of several other couples.

The intent behind this criminal act was honorable in a way, even sweet. That video contained his divorced parents together, his little sister's big day and some of his father's last moments. But the break-in also reflected a disregard for consequences. Really, Patrick, a sledgehammer?

His guilty plea to a misdemeanor provided no reawakening of the old Patrick. He seemed even less focused, less aware of consequence. One day he showed his mother a few boxes containing six months of unopened mail.

His family began to wonder: Maybe all this had to do with football. Patrick had been overheard saying he once came off a high school field with no memory of having scored two touchdowns.

But now her Patrick was on the line from the Mon Valley, 300 miles west of her Doylestown bedroom, where she sat on the edge. He was talking flat about standing on a ladder with the leash for Diesel, his black Lab, around his neck. He was dismissing her pleas to see all the good in his life and she was trying to discern between bluff and truth and then. ...

Patrick?

Examinations of the brain of Patrick Risha, 32, at the University of Pittsburgh and Boston University revealed chronic traumatic encephalopathy, or C.T.E., the degenerative disease caused by repeated blows to the head that has been found in the brains of dozens of former football players. C.T.E. has been linked to depression, impulsive actions and short-term memory loss, among other symptoms.

Karen Kinzle Zegel is 61, remarried, and getting on with things; she recently established a website (www.StopCTE.org) for a foundation she has established in Patrick's name. She is fine until she isn't. All those Friday night regrets.

After her final words with Patrick last fall, she would try to lose herself by doing some gardening behind her townhouse, only to hear the resounding cheers of fans at another Central Bucks High School West football game. It was all she could do to keep from hustling over there to sound a warning.

She knows the cheering will return in a few months. This time, she will go. She will go, and talk to the mothers.