The offers came flooding in. Grant Newsome ’15 was still just a Third Former when college football coaches stopped sniffing around the massive left tackle and started formalizing their courtship with committal, full scholarships. By the end of the next year, Newsome had accumulated more than thirty-five written offers to play for some of the nation’s premier programs – and those were just the ones who believed they had a shot at the multidimensional young star, who was just as adept in the classroom as he was paving the way for the ball carriers running behind him. The truth is, there was not a college football team in the country that wouldn’t have been over the moon to see Grant Newsome don their uniform.

Together with his parents, Kim and Leon, Newsome whittled his list to a handful of options before settling on a final two – the University of Michigan and a powerful rival from the Big Ten conference. He weighed the relative merits of both, trying to balance football with the academic side of the experience. “My mom said, ‘You know, the football’s really close. You need to ask yourself if something happens and you just have to be a normal student at one of these schools, at which school would you rather be?’” Newsome says of a conversation with Kim Newsome P’15. “And I said, ‘It’s not even close; it’s Michigan.’ And she said, ‘Well, there’s your decision.’” At the time, no one in their family quite understood the effect his choice would have on the young student’s life. It may have even saved it.

For Grant Newsome ’15, the University of Michigan’s 110,000-seat “Big House” has always felt like a home.
The University feels like a home.
B

y the time the 2016 campaign began, the 6-foot-7, 318-pound sophomore left tackle was anchoring a punishing offensive line for Michigan. The Wolverines’ cohort of talented running backs frequently found wide-open running lanes behind the blocking of Newsome, his blue-and-maize No. 77 leading their path toward daylight.

Michigan was ranked fourth in the nation by the Associated Press on October 1 when they hosted No. 8 Wisconsin for a noon tilt between undefeated teams at the 110,000-seat Michigan Stadium. All eyes were trained on “the Big House,” as the massive edifice is known in the lore of college football, and as the second quarter began, another seven million viewers were tuned in on ABC. The home team enjoyed a 7-0 lead with 13:15 left in the first half when tailback De’Veon Smith took a pitch from quarterback Wilson Speight and began streaking toward the left sideline on the sweep play. Ahead of Smith, blockers sealed off their defenders, including Newsome, who, at the snap of the ball, pulled from his left-tackle position and sprinted laterally down the line of scrimmage to help clear the way.

Only Wisconsin cornerback Derrick Tindal stood between Smith and a significant gain, but bearing down on the 5-foot-11, 175-pound Tindal was the much larger Newsome. Tindal did as many defensive backs are coached to do against massive blockers on such plays – go low on the massive lineman’s body to negate the significant size disparity. He did, throwing his red-and-white-clad frame toward Newsome’s legs in order to cut down the blocker, while simultaneously reaching his outstretched arms toward the ball carrier. As the crowd rose in anticipation of a big play, Smith hurdled the grasp of Newsome’s legs in order to cut down the blocker, while simultaneously reaching his outstretched arms toward the ball carrier. As the crowd rose in anticipation of a big play, Smith hurdled the grasp of Newsome, his blue-and-maize No. 77 leading their path toward daylight.

Newsome understands now that the sensation he felt in his leg. To the younger Newsome’s way of thinking, the absence of significant pain augured well.

“Initially, I thought that was me tearing my ACL [anterior cruciate ligament],” he says. “I muttered to one of our trainers, ‘I just tore my ACL turning over.’”

From their seats inside the massive stadium, Kim and Leon Newsome made their way to the training room, where their son was still eager to rejoin his teammates on the sidelines while the team orthopedist was asking questions about what he felt in his leg. To the younger Newsome’s way of thinking, the absence of significant pain augured well.

“They asked me if I had any numbness or tingling in my toes. I had never had a serious injury like that before, so I said, ‘Yeah, but that’s probably normal, right?’Newsome recounts. ‘My doctors looked at each other and said, ‘We’re going to take you to the hospital. It’s probably just precaution, but we want to be safe.’”

There, medical staffers put Newsome through a battery of tests, each one seeming to lead to another. “No one would really tell me what the results were”he says. “That’s when I kind of knew I was in for it.”

Newsome’s ACL was torn, but that injury – the one football players typically dread most – merely their walk down to the playing field and into the tunnel that runs toward the training room beneath the stadium.

Newsome balked at the cart often used to help injured players off the field, fearful of worrying his parents. Inside the training room, the medical staff began to probe deeper into the condition of his knee. Above them, Newsome, the trainers, and the doctors could hear the muffled roar of the crowd, once again engaged with the action on the field.

“This was watching but didn’t realize it was him. Then my parents. Inside the training room, the medical staff began to probe deeper into the condition of his knee. Above them, Newsome, the trainers, and the doctors could hear the muffled roar of the crowd, once again engaged with the action on the field.

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represented the start of the trauma his powerful right leg had endured. In addition to the ACL and a full knee dislocation, the grotesque angle to which his knee was forced by Tindal’s dive fractured his tibia, tore his medial collateral ligament and posterior cruciate ligament, and damaged three nerves in his lower leg. More critically, however, Newsome’s popliteal artery — a deeply placed branch of his femoral artery necessary to carry blood to his lower extremities — was ruptured. Suddenly, this wasn’t merely a football injury anymore. Newsome’s limb — perhaps even his life — was in jeopardy.

“My vascular surgeon said that had it been another 30 minutes, they would have had to just amputate my leg,” Newsome says.

Significant, irreversible damage had already taken its toll. For four hours, Newsome’s torn popliteal artery cost the muscle tissue in his leg 50 percent of the blood it needed to survive. Parts of his leg were beginning to die, and doctors removed a section of his calf muscles, which has been starved of oxygenated blood. The situation was growing worse by the moment.

“I remember asking, ‘Am I going to have my leg?’” Newsome recalls of his exchange with the doctor. The response was chilling: “We’re going to do our best.”

Kim Newsome remembers accompanying Grant on his official recruiting visit to Michigan, where the coaching staff did their best to sell the talented student-athlete on their program. One thing that stood out to her were the facilities, but not just those designed to dazzle teenagers.

“It’s so ironic, because when they were giving us a tour, they pointed out the hospital, and they talked about what amazing medical facilities they have,” she says. “They talked about how they have an X-ray machine in the locker room and how that’s not standard at colleges, and I thought, You know, that’s good to know, never knowing, obviously, that it would be so important in Grant’s experience.”

Kim rode in the ambulance with her son on the way to the hospital, trailed by Leon and the Newsomes’ two younger sons, Garrett, then 14, and Gaines, 8. Surgeons would need to take a vein from Grant’s left leg and create an arterial bypass — a graft — in his right to restore blood flow to his lower limb. He was wheeled into surgery at 9 p.m. for a process expected to take about two hours, but did not emerge until 3 a.m. Even then, the situation was far from settled.

‘I came out of that surgery, and I didn’t have any feeling in my lower leg, which they now know was because of the nerve damage,” Newsome says. ‘At the time they feared that the knee was crushing the graft, so the vein they put in to try to fix the blood flow was failing and my foot was no longer getting blood.’

He spent the entire second day in surgery as well, and then the next nine days in the intensive care unit. It would be thirty-eight days before Newsome left the hospital, and only after six surgical procedures.

College football followers are familiar with the trope of the coach who promises parents of blue-chip recruits that ‘we’ll take care of your boy and treat him like family.’ However, the Newsomes are very clear that Michigan lived up to that ideal in every sense, and well beyond the context of mere football. They also agree that as bad as things were, there was also an element of good fortune to the events that unfolded that afternoon in Ann Arbor.

‘Had he been in a less-capable hospital,” Kim says, noting the stellar work of the orthopedic team, “he would have lost his leg. I believe that with a pretty high degree of certainty.”

Her son sees how the hand of good fortune was on his shoulder the entire time.

“There are just so many different scenarios in which if something — even a minute detail — had
been changed,’ Newsome says, ‘it would’ve gone from a horrific accident to a true … I don’t want to say tragedy, but something very different.’

Even as he began the rehabilitation process – one that has now seen him log more than seven-hundred hours, including five hundred with a single therapist – Newsome never lost sight of why he was at the University of Michigan. Despite spending thirty-eight days in the hospital, he was forced to drop just one of his four classes, using a mix of technology and old-fashioned determination to complete the others.

‘I was really fortunate that teachers were great. They worked with me, letting me Skype into class from the hospital,’ Newsome says. ‘It was funny to be writing papers from my hospital bed, but school was ever-present there.’

Undeterred, Newsome finished the year as a 2016 Academic All-Big Ten honoree and a Big Ten Distinguished Scholar, and he won the Arthur D. Robinson Scholarship Award as the football program’s top student-athlete. There were many moments, particularly in that first year, when Newsome drew strength from the classroom while fighting to restore his body.

‘Even though I was in a wheelchair and then on crutches, school allowed me to be a normal student and forget,’ he says. ‘I thought, I’m not able to play with my team, I can’t go out and compete; I was going through all this pain and all this hurt, but for the five hours I was in school, I was able to escape that and just be a normal student.’

All the while, Newsome put in the physical work, too, unsatisfied with the way things seemed to end for him as a football player. Even though his doctors were not completely sure he’d walk properly again, he was determined to return to the Wolverines, even if his NFL hopes – or rather, plans – were seemingly dashed.

Though he spent three weeks in a wheelchair, Newsome was walking again two months after the injury – only five or ten feet at first, but managing to navigate fifty feet within another month. Progress was slow and Newsome struggled with comparisons to more conventional football injuries, such as a torn ACL, from which he might have fully recovered in a year.

‘I lost so much muscle to atrophy from being in the hospital and not working out. It took a solid four months before I could stand for extended periods without just being immediately fatigued,’ he says.

‘That was the biggest adjustment for me, realizing that my injury was not like a teammate’s.’

He kept at it, though, and by the end of summer 2017, Newsome was mobile enough to run in a straight line. In late August, head coach Jim Harbaugh tweeted a 24-second video of Newsome running 50-yard shuttles on the team’s practice field under the watchful eye of a trainer. It was accompanied by the words, ‘The grueling rehab continues for @grant_newsome. A lesser man would have thrown in the towel many moons ago.’

By the time spring practice arrived in 2018, the prevailing narrative had shifted to one in which Newsome had a real chance to contribute to the Wolverines in the fall. As training camp was set to open in late summer, much of the team’s media coverage posed the question: Will Grant Newsome actually return to the field this season? Is it possible?

‘He’s been training hard, and we’re going to see where he’s at in this point in time – go out on the field and look,’ head coach Jim Harbaugh told reporters at Big Ten Media Days in Chicago in late July when asked about Newsome’s possible return when camp opened on August 3. ‘I anticipate that in the next week.’

Football coaches are notorious for playing such subjects close to the vest, but Harbaugh wasn’t being coy. The truth is, Newsome was there. He had done the agonizing rehabilitation work, resumed non-contact football drills, and regained the physical strength and stamina to return to the lineup.

Newsome could have returned to the field this fall. But during his two-year odyssey to recovery, he had many chances to reflect and view his ambitions from a distance. He had opportunities to learn about the world and about himself, to learn more about what he valued and the life he would like to live.

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his body — his colon, for example, as well as several vertebrae and entire muscles. He has endured more than one hundred surgeries. Incredibly, Prout pays little attention to any of it. He just wants to spend time with his teammates. Prout was “drafted” by his beloved Wolverines in 2016 after the nonprofit Team IMPACT connected his family with the Michigan football program.

Prout and Newsome met not long before Newsome’s injury, and they quickly became close, communicating daily. After his own struggles with health, Newsome’s appreciation for his friend’s approach to life only deepened.

“I’ll never stop saying how inspired I am by Larry and by the attitude and the drive that he exhibits every day,” he says. “You know, we were friends prior to my injury, but it’s made us 10 times closer.”

Newsome says Prout’s example has been a guide for him these past two years, but he leaned on him particularly in the early days after being hurt.

“Him reaching out to me right after the injury and talking with him in those first few months of rehab, where it’s really the darkest place of the whole process, really kept my spirits up,” he says. “Having someone who knew what I was experiencing and could relate better than anyone else I knew … it was vital having him there.”

Weeks before players reported for fall camp, Newsome completed the requirements for his bachelor’s degree in American culture with a minor in African American studies. That degree, the one that in many ways had tilted the recruiting battle toward the University of Michigan, was his. Mirroring his approach to football, he attacked it and finished in just over three years.

“We had always said to Grant, ‘You know, football’s an amazing idea. What a dream come true it would be if you were able to play in the NFL,’” Kim Newsome says. “But everybody says NFL stands for Not for Long. You need to get an education.”

To Kim and Leon Newsome, both educated at Princeton, it’s a basic tenet. Kim is the dean of students at The Madeira School, an independent boarding school near their home in McLean, Virginia. Leon, an agent with the U.S. Secret Service, was the Gatorade High School Player of the Year in Maryland for the Gilman School in 1987, but eschewed scholarship offers from several major college football programs in favor of the Ivy League. He, too, knew there were things bigger than the sport. On this, the family remains united.

“You need to go to a place where you’ll be poised to do something beyond football, whenever that ends,” Kim says, “whether it’s at the end of four years, or you never set foot on the field.”

And so it was that after being cleared to return by the medical staff at Michigan, Grant Newsome chose to walk away from the game on August 20 of this year.

“Ultimately, I had a conversation with my doctors, and they were all OK with me moving forward,” Newsome said an hour after announcing his medical retirement from football on Twitter. “But I asked, ‘What’s the plan B? What would we do if something goes wrong?’”

In this case, he means the vascular graft that replaced his popliteal artery. Newsome’s right knee is structurally sound, healthy enough for him to play at a high level. But if he were to sustain a similar type of vascular rupture, it would be virtually impossible to repair the artery in the same way.

“Instead of trying to do another graft, it would likely be what they call a salvage procedure,” Newsome explains, “which would be, basically, an amputation.”

Simply put, it wasn’t a risk he was willing to take.

“Just as I was getting to the point where that goal was attainable and tangible, that was also the moment when I had to take a step back and think about it objectively, and then ultimately,” he says. “That’s when it became clear that as much as I wanted to play football again — more than anything else in the world — it was not the right decision.”

Newsome’s announcement on Twitter was an artfully crafted statement of the challenges he had faced and overcome, punctuated at intervals with the line, ‘Not all stories have a happy ending.’ When he finally reveals his retirement, calling it the most difficult decision he’s made in his life, he punctuates the deflating news, once more, with, “Like I said, not all stories have a happy ending.” Then, the twist: “But mine does.”

After expressing his gratitude to his parents and longtime girlfriend Caroline Doll ’14, as well as the entire Michigan community, including the Prout family, Newsome turns his focus not to what he had lost, but to what he had gained. For now, he remains in the Michigan football program as a student-coach, working with the tight ends. He’s already begun his master’s degree at the university’s prestigious Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, which he hopes to parlay into a means of making this world — his world — a better place.

Inside his new academic building, standing beneath a portrait of its namesake, the 38th president of the United States, Gerald Ford was the leader of the Michigan offensive line, a role assumed by Newsome eighty years later.