

Quitting is not an option

After he almost quit football when he was younger, Mullens is now leading USM to the top.

By Wilton Jackson
Special to PineBeltSPORTS

Before he played under the bright lights at 'The Rock' or shattered records at Spain Park High School, Nick Mullens was just like any other child with an early childhood dream. For Mullens, one simple principle gave him the ultimate blueprint for his success in life: persistence.

Children have big dreams of what they aspire to be in life. Many dream of being a doctor, a lawyer, a firefighter, a police officer, the president of the United States of America or a professional athlete. As kids, dreams come and go just as the days start and end. Luckily for the University of Southern Mississippi, Nick Mullens did not give up on his childhood dream of being a football player.

Mullens grew up in Hoover, Alabama, roughly eight miles outside of Birmingham. He began playing football in the first grade. His parents, Suzanne and Mark Mullens, and his grandfather, Ernie Tabor, threw the ball with him as a child and took him to practice daily.

After finishing the first grade and his first year of playing football, however, Mullens decided to quit all of a sudden. Mullens' father, who was very instrumental in his dream to play football, gave Nick an ultimatum that he would never forget.

"He told me if I ever decided to go back and play football again, I could not quit," Mullens said.

From that moment on, Mullens never quit. He would go on to make only minor adjustments to his ultimate dream in the

years to come.

Before he knew his football destiny, Mullens grew up playing the fullback, line-backer, tight end and wide receiver positions. It was at Berry Middle School where he began to hone in on his skills as a quarterback.

While chasing his dream on the gridiron under the bright lights, it was not uncommon to also find Mullens at the pitcher's mound on the diamond of a baseball field.

"I played baseball growing up," Mullens said. "Not only was I a good pitcher but baseball helped me with my hand-eye coordination. More importantly, playing multiple sports is a good thing for young athletes."

Throughout middle school and up until his sophomore year in high school, Mullens was a two-sport athlete. During his sophomore year, he suffered an arm injury that ultimately made him to choose football over baseball as his main sport.

Young, full of energy and the desire to win at the core of his persona, Mullens dedicated himself to perfecting his craft in football at Spain Park High School, a dominant Class 7A football program in the state of Alabama, under head coach Chip Lindsey.

"Spain Park gave me all the opportunities for success. They helped me develop my work ethic and I made some great relationships," Mullens said. "Chip made me the quarterback I am today. He taught me everything I needed to know."

But unlike other athletes with grand dreams, Mullens did not start off imagining himself playing football or being in the position he is in today.

"I always thought it would be cool to play football, but I never really thought I could do it [at a high level]," Mullens said. "I am proving myself wrong each day."

Mullens went on to write his name in the history books of Alabama high school football, recording over 8,000-plus career yards. He then decided to attend Southern Miss.

Despite the fact that the Golden Eagles finished 0-12 prior to Mullens' arrival in 2013, he knew the team would provide him with a place to be successful.



Matt Bush PHOTO

MULLENS attempts a pass during Southern Miss' game against UTSA last October.

"I knew that USM had a good tradition, so winning was going to come back," Mullens said. "They had a good program and a good business school."

However, with new coach Todd Monken and players wracked with injuries, the Golden Eagles struggled to win games.

Mullens, who played in nine of 12 games, started the final six games of his freshman campaign. As the losses continued to pile up, Mullens and the Golden Eagles grew weary of losing. But they continued their fight to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

A bright spot was indeed on the horizon for Mullens.

In the final game of his freshman year, the 6-foot-1-inch, 196-pound quarterback torched the University of Alabama-Birmingham for 370 passing yards, recording a season-high five touchdowns and a rushing touchdown as the Golden Eagles routed the Blazers 62-27, giving Southern Miss its first win since defeating the University of Nevada in the 2011 Sheraton Hawaii Bowl.

Mullens said his freshman season was a struggle but the team stuck together and it paid off in the end.

"It was relieving to win a game," Mullens said. "We were tired of losing and tired of hearing about the losing streak."

With his first victory under his belt, Mullens survived his first test of remaining persistent through difficult times and gained confidence heading into his sophomore year.

Johnre Goudy, a former teammate of Mullens, said Mullens served as a true testament of someone who stood tall in the face of adversity.

"He is inspiring. He doesn't just talk the talk," Goudy said. "He is a great, hardworking guy who lives what he preaches."

Following spring training and summer camp prior to the 2014 season, USM fans were rejuvenated with school spirit. Students were excited about coming to 'The Rock', as the stadium was dubbed, to watch games again, and the city of Hattiesburg was eager to see its Golden Eagles take the field in 2014.

However, Mullens and the Golden Eagles still faced some growing pains and inexperience issues that kept them from having a winning season.

Despite winning more games - finishing the season 3-9 - injuries and youth limited Southern Miss on the field. Mullens, who would otherwise have played in all 12 games during his sophomore season, missed games against Marshall and the University of Texas at El Paso due to injury.

Mullens said his sophomore season served as a major learning curve for him

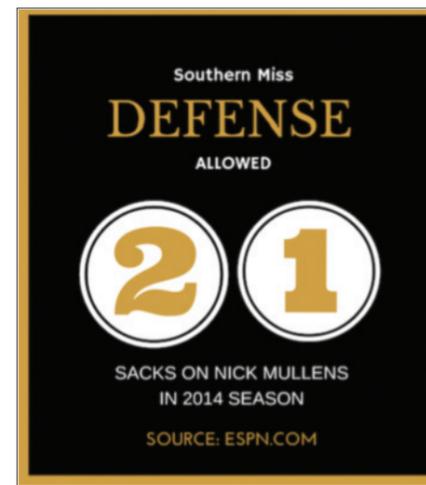
and his teammates.

"Success isn't easy. We realized that we had to work harder," Mullens said. "When you lose a lot, you lose confidence. But being a smart player, I realized that I had to work hard and remain consistent."

Cameron Tom, an offensive lineman who came in with Mullens, said he can still remember what it felt like to block for Mullens during the 2014 season.

"You felt like you had to fight every snap for him. I knew every time he got hit he was going to get back up, so that made me want to block even harder," Tom said. "This was inspiring and it gave me hope for the future."

Frustrated with back-to-back losing seasons for a program that held a streak of 18-straight winning seasons prior to 2012, Mullens geared up for his junior season.



History was about to change, because this season would be a breakout year for him.

"As a team, we worked harder, we believed in ourselves and we made plays that we needed to make," Mullens said in recapping his junior season.

Michael Smith, an outgoing senior defensive lineman, credited Golden Eagles' Strength and Conditioning Coach Zac Woodfin for re-establishing a sense of will and positive morale for him and his teammates.

"It started with Woodfin and the training staff. They brought in a good program and helped us believe that we were the best again," Smith said. "As players, we had not worked that hard in nearly three years and it all paid off in a big way."

Despite losing to Mississippi State in the 2015 season opener, 34-16, losing to another high quality opponent in Nebraska but going 3-3 through the first six games of the season, Mullens knew the Golden Eagles were now onto something great.

SPAIN PARK HIGH SCHOOL
NICK MULLENS
QUARTERBACK

2012 GATORADE PLAYER OF THE YEAR

74th RANKED PRO-STYLE QB NATIONALLY BY 247SPORTS.COM

3,649 FIFTH MOST PASSING YARDS IN ALABAMA HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION

8,605 SEVENTH MOST ALL-TIME IN ALABAMA HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION

40 PASSING TOUCHDOWNS, TIED FOR NINTH ALL-TIME IN A SINGLE SEASON

SOURCE: USM ATHLETICS