

ZACH BULL:

THE COMPLETE FOOTBALL PLAYER THROUGH PERSEVERANCE AND PERSISTENCE

By: Todd Devlin

Above all else, Zach Bull's career with the Western Mustangs has been a story of perseverance. Considering the slew of injuries he's been forced to deal with along the way, few would have blamed the fifth-year receiver had he hung up his cleats a long time ago.

"It has been a bit of a struggle in that sense," said Bull (Port Colborne, Ont.), who will graduate this year with a criminology degree. "But with the injuries that I've had, I haven't missed as many games as you'd expect. I've been able to rehab them quickly."

He's right, and that's remarkable considering the severity of those injuries. There was the torn ACL in the 2007 Yates Cup. Then there was a re-tear of the same ACL at the beginning of the 2008 Vanier Cup. He rehabbed and returned once again in 2009 to post a solid

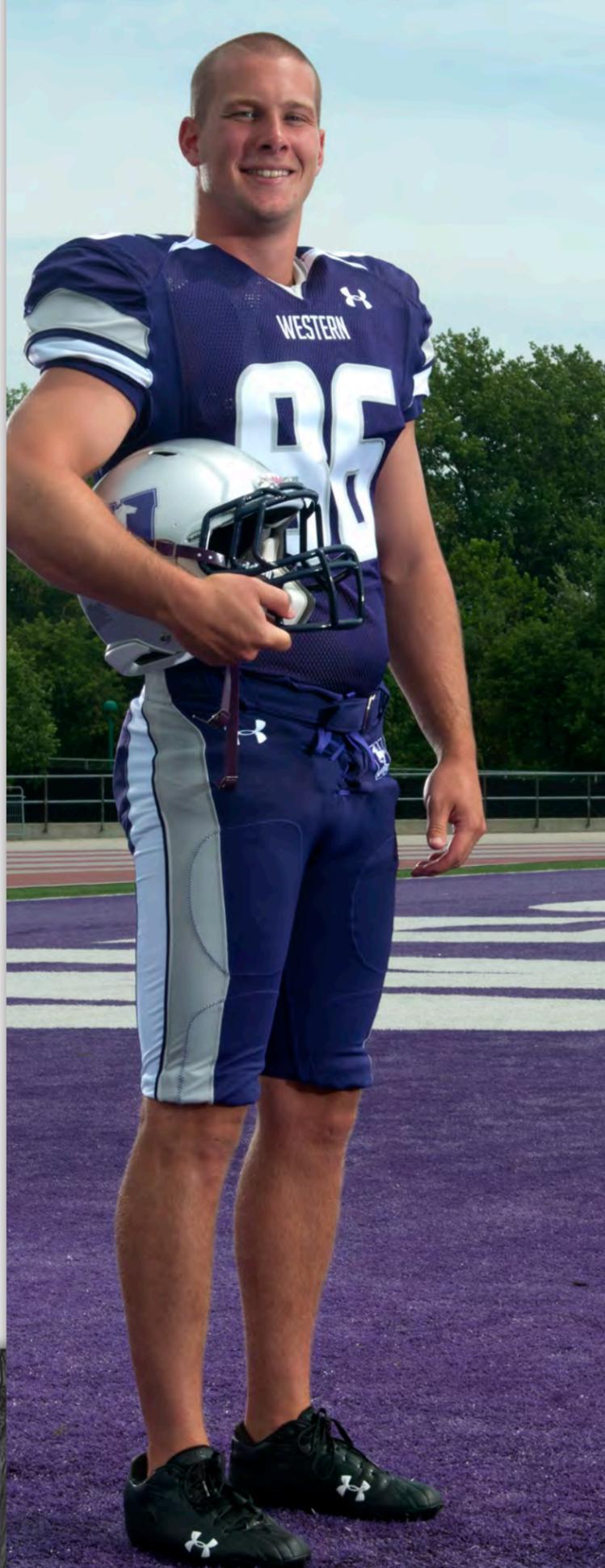
41-catch, 631-yard season. But in 2010, he developed a hamstring injury that only got worse in the playoffs. In fact, Greg Marshall, Western's head coach, called Bull a "warrior" for even suiting up and playing in last year's Yates Cup.

Unfortunately, that injury has carried over into 2011, and Bull's frustrations in not being 100% healthy have continued.

"I've been fighting it for awhile now," he said. "I don't know if it just didn't heal right or what, but it hasn't seemed to come back for me."

But despite the injury hurdles, he continues to do whatever it takes to get back on the field (including spending countless hours in physiotherapy). That resilience and fighting spirit has impressed his teammates and coaches alike, including Nigel Wilson, the Mustangs' receivers coach.

"He's a pretty special kid,"



Wilson said. "He fits the bill in terms of his attitude towards what he's faced, and his ability to handle adversity and the injuries and come back and be a tremendous athlete. He's a great character individual."

And though he's missed a couple of games already this season, Bull has once again shown why he is so valuable to the Mustangs.

Week 3 was a good example of that. During a rematch of the 2010 Yates Cup, the veteran had a huge game against the Ottawa Gee Gees, compiling a team-high seven catches for 144 yards and a touchdown. His score, a 48-yard reception from quarterback Donnie Marshall, came with the game knotted 6-6 in the third quarter and marked the beginning of an offensive explosion for the Mustangs, who went on to win the game 41-13.

"Donnie and I made some good reads together, and Donnie made some good throws," Bull said. "They were stacking the box on us so much trying to stop our run, so we opened them up a little bit and got after their vulnerable areas."

With Western boasting an impressive backfield of Tyler Varga and Nathan Riva, who have combined for an OUA and CIS leading 21 touchdowns through five games this year, Mustang opponents have to be focused on stopping the running game first and foremost.

"I think that helps us out a lot as

receivers," Bull said. "We're going to get a lot of man coverage, and if we can take advantage of that I think we'll be able to do really well against teams in the future."

But catching passes aside, Bull's other responsibility lies in blocking for those talented backs. And that's an area of his game that he's improved since the transition in quarterbacks from Michael Faulds to Marshall.

"It put a lot more significance on me being a better blocker to help our offense," Bull said. "And because our running backs can break one at any time, my blocking becomes so much more important. So I have really concentrated my game on that the past couple of years."

Wilson says that's just one example that shows why Bull is the consummate team player.

"That's part of his personality and a reflection of his character," Wilson said. "Zach is always looking for the team's benefit, and he has found different ways to contribute as a complete football player."

It certainly hasn't been an easy journey for the fifth-year senior, but his coach says one thing is for sure: the Western Mustangs are a better team with Zach Bull on the field.

"He makes a significant impact on the field each and every time he plays a game," Wilson said. "Not only as a receiver, but also for what he brings in leadership to the young kids."