

A Bigger Purpose

A difficult journey strengthens a collegiate athlete's faith

Every ostomate has a story. And as we hear those stories, we feel a special connection to someone who has a story like ours. Someone who has faced the same challenges and understands what it's like to walk in our shoes. Or, in the case of an ostomate – change our pouch! I experienced that unique connection on the day I met Alex McPherson and found myself immediately transported back to when my ostomy surgery interrupted my NFL career, and I was convinced that my life was over. While I was often chided by my



Rolf Benirschke was the placekicker for the San Diego Chargers for 10 seasons, but his career nearly ended because of a difficult battle with ulcerative colitis. He would require ileostomy surgery but returned to play in the NFL and has been educating and encouraging ostomy patients and WOC nurses ever since. He recently founded Embracing Ostomy Life, www.embracingostomylife.org, a non-profit dedicated to supporting and offering HOPE to new ostomates and the people who love them.

physician father to “grow up, get a real job and make a difference in the world” while playing in the NFL, Alex has been playing football with his brothers since he was a little boy. His brother, Logan, punted at Louisiana Tech and his older brother, Evan, currently plays in the NFL for the Cincinnati Bengals. What are the chances there would be another young kicker who found his life upended by ostomy surgery just like me?

Alex grew up playing soccer and football. As the top-rated high school kicker in the country, he was recruited by Auburn University. Having grown up healthy and energetic, it took Alex and his family quite by surprise in the spring of 2023 when he suddenly began seeing blood in his stool. After his first colonoscopy, which found inflammation in four inches of his colon, he was diagnosed with ulcerative proctitis. In April of 2024, Alex underwent his second colonoscopy which revealed inflammation

throughout his entire colon and he was diagnosed with UC. He was started on Stelara and in May, although Alex was still so sick, he proposed to Hannah, his high school sweetheart, at their happy place, the beach. While it was a great day, and his family joined in the celebration, Alex was not well. The next day a mobile IV was ordered since he was so weak and dehydrated. By July, Alex was continuing to lose weight and was admitted to the hospital weighing just 110 pounds. He had lost 50 pounds in three months.

To stabilize him, Alex was put on a new therapy regimen; Remicade and fed intravenously with TPN (total parental nutrition) for a week. At the time, the doctor floated the idea of having his colon removed but Alex's incredulous response was, “Oh my goodness, I don't want to do that. In fact, that's the last thing I want!” And then, quite remarkably, within 12 hours of his first dose of Remicade, Alex's body began responding and he quickly began to feel better. It wasn't long before he regained 35 pounds and wasn't having to run to the bathroom fifteen times a day.

He was gaining some muscle back and kicking strong. He felt for sure he had found the answer to his problems and jubilantly announced, “I'm back!!!” The coaches designated him as the starter for the Kentucky game on Saturday, October 26, and Alex was thrilled. But the Monday before the game, he started feeling poorly again and dropping weight. By the day of the game, he had lost seven pounds but played anyway — even though he knew he probably should not have. He just wanted to play and be a part of the team so badly. By Monday he had lost 12 pounds and was deteriorating quickly. Results from a round of bloodwork identified that he was not responding to the Remicade anymore. At that point, while Alex loved playing football, he knew he had to concentrate on his health.

RINVOQ was the next drug in line and, unfortunately, it made no impact on his symptoms. In fact, his weight took another radical drop — down to 114 pounds. He thought back to the many times he had wanted to break down and quit because he was just

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so tired of fighting. His body, that he had trained and mastered was simply exhausted. If he walked up stairs too fast, he would experience shooting pain down his legs. Sleep eluded him. He was worn out. He longed to regain some control of his life and remembers that spirit crushing feeling, "I wasn't living...just existing... and always in pain on top of that. I literally couldn't do

anything. I would just sit there and watch football practice all day. And I was kind of tired of that. Tired of watching, I wanted to get back to playing."

After lengthy discussions with his parents, Hannah, and his medical team, Alex decided he was "done being sick." His mom's initial response to the prospect of ostomy surgery was pure shock as she asked, "How can a 21-year-old live without a colon?" His response was swift and straightforward, "I'm not living with it, mom." Alex certainly understood the gravity of the situation, "I knew it was a big decision. If I had the surgery, I was never going to have a colon again. It's not like you can just put one back in, right?" Alex's mom remembers that as a defining moment because as fearful as she was, she knew he was right.

Alex was relieved when December 20, 2024, arrived so he could finally have the surgery. Looking back, he remembers, "It was a blessing. I don't think I could have gone another month waiting for the surgery.

Did Alex truly feel like he would be able to play football again? "Absolutely!" he emphatically replied. One of the drivers of that conviction was an internet search for "sports" and "ostomy" when he found my story. Alex chuckled as he told me, "It was crazy that you played with two stomas so I thought, heck – if he can play with two, I can play with one!"

Alex's recovery has been remarkable, and much can be attributed to his positive spirit. But like most of us, he certainly had his stint in the "poor me house" when he was so sick. He remembers, "There were times where I was like, screw this. Why is this happening to me? What did I do to deserve this? I've always been a healthy guy. I've never really been sick. This just isn't fair." And while Alex, like most of us, did visit the "poor me house" he was determined not to move in! He never lost sight of a bigger purpose. "I couldn't just sit there and be down about it. It's not me, and that's not the plan God has for me," he explained.

Alex and Hannah were married in June and, after competing with five other kickers, Alex emerged as #1 on the depth chart for the Auburn Tigers. He's looking forward to being healthy, helping his team and seeing if he can turn the heads of NFL scouts as he chases his dream of playing at the next level.

Even though Alex was initially baffled as to how or why this could have happened to his healthy body, he



Opposite page: Alex and Hannah at an Auburn football game. Left and below right: Alex kicking during an Auburn football game. Below left: Alex and Hannah visiting family at Auburn University.



accepts it all now with a whole new perspective. "I wouldn't trade my ostomy for the world with the experiences I'm getting now, the things I have learned about myself, and the chance I have had to meet some extraordinary people." In what will likely be the first of many opportunities, Alex recently spoke to a church in Huntsville, Alabama, about how his journey has strengthened his faith.

And, like many ostomates, Alex has experienced a new depth of gratitude. "In the midst of it all, you realize just how much you take for granted, even the little things. For me, it was going out to eat with my family, not being in constant pain, not having to know where every bathroom was, and just being able to go to church again. And that gave me the perspective to be grateful for everything. Because, you know, it's not for certain, it can all be taken away just like that." 🙏

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